

Article

The Application and Intervention Effects of Drama Therapy and Play Therapy on Elementary School Students with Social Difficulties: An Empirical Study at Xingguang Primary School

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of a year-long intervention using drama therapy and play therapy on elementary school students at Xingguang Primary School who are facing social difficulties. The intervention aimed to address key psychological challenges, such as emotional regulation, social skills, and behavioral control. The results demonstrated significant improvements, particularly in the behavioral dimension, with a 70% improvement rate. Students showed substantial progress in managing emotions and exercising self-control, which in turn positively influenced their social interactions. However, progress in the cognitive, personality, and emotional dimensions was more modest, with improvement rates of 27.3%, 30.77%, and 20%, respectively. The gender-based analysis revealed that male students showed stronger improvements in cognitive and personality dimensions, while female students experienced more significant changes in emotional regulation and cognitive areas. These findings highlight the importance of gender-specific approaches in therapeutic interventions. Overall, the study concludes that the integrated approach of drama therapy and play therapy provides an effective framework for addressing social difficulties, fostering emotional resilience, and enhancing students' behavioral and social skills. The research also suggests that personalized, long-term interventions are crucial for achieving deeper and sustained changes in students' psychological development.

Keywords: drama therapy; play therapy; social difficulties; emotional regulation; behavioral management

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Social difficulties among school-age children are a prevalent issue. Many students face various obstacles when interacting with peers, such as communication difficulties, emotional regulation problems, and negative behaviors during group activities. These social challenges not only affect the students' current psychological state but may also have both long-term negative impacts on their emotional well-being, behavior, and academic performance [1]. Research has shown that, without timely intervention, social difficulties may persist into adolescence and even affect an individual's social adaptability and mental health in adulthood [2].

1.2. Overview of Drama Therapy and Play Therapy

Drama therapy and play therapy have increasingly been recognized as effective methods for intervening in children's mental health in recent years. Drama therapy, using techniques such as role-playing and reenactment, helps children express and understand

emotions, addressing issues in social interactions [3]. This method not only facilitates children's self-awareness but also aids in improving their emotional regulation and social behaviors. Additionally, play therapy provides a structured environment for children to explore relationships with others, which enhances their social skills and conflict resolution abilities [4]. Both therapies utilize an engaging, educational approach that improves children's emotional and social skills while boosting their self-confidence and social adaptability.

1.3. Research Purpose and Significance

This study aims to explore the combined effects of drama therapy and play therapy in intervening in students facing social difficulties at Xingguang Primary School. By integrating these therapeutic methods, the study seeks to improve students' social abilities and enhance their emotional and behavioral performance through practical activities. The significance of this research lies in presenting a new intervention model. This model helps schools and mental health professionals better support children with social difficulties and promotes their comprehensive development in academic, emotional, and behavioral domains. Additionally, the findings will provide empirical support for mental health education in related fields, fostering the broader application of drama therapy and play therapy in schools.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theories and Research on Social Difficulties in Children

Social difficulties are particularly prominent among children, especially in terms of challenges related to emotional regulation, communication skills, and group interactions. The theoretical background of social difficulties includes social cognitive theory, emotional regulation theory, and attachment theory [1]. Research indicates that children with social difficulties often face barriers in emotional understanding and adapting social behaviors. These issues not only affect their emotional state but also hinder the formation of relationships with peers. Poor emotional regulation may lead to conflicts and social isolation during interactions, thus creating a vicious cycle [2]. If not addressed in a timely manner, long-term social difficulties can have lasting negative effects on children's psychological development and social adaptation.

2.2. Application of Drama Therapy in Children's Social Intervention

As a psychological intervention method, drama therapy has been applied across various domains, particularly in helping children improve emotional expression and social skills [3]. Studies show that drama therapy, through techniques such as role-playing and reenactment, provides a safe environment for children to express themselves, understand others' emotions, and enhance their social abilities through interactive performances [3]. Through drama-based interactions, children not only learn how to handle relationships with others but also improve their communication skills and emotional understanding in practice.

2.3. Application and Effects of Play Therapy

Play therapy, another widely used psychological intervention method for children, has shown significant effects in improving children's social abilities [4]. Research indicates that play therapy, through structured play activities, allows children to develop social skills, resolve conflicts, and express emotions in a relaxed atmosphere [4]. Play therapy not only enhances children's self-awareness but also helps them employ more effective social strategies when addressing real-world problems [5]. By participating in play activities with peers, children can improve their social skills and emotional regulation, particularly in adapting to and integrating into group activities.

2.4. Current Research on the Combined Application of Drama Therapy and Play Therapy

In recent years, increasing research has explored the combined application of drama therapy and play therapy, yielding positive results [4,5]. The integration of these two therapeutic methods not only helps children express themselves emotionally but also improves their social skills through interactive activities [4]. Studies have found that the combined therapy model, which integrates both drama and play, has a more significant impact on the intervention of children's social difficulties, especially in group interactions and emotional regulation [2]. This comprehensive therapy model can more fully address children's needs in emotional, behavioral, and social skills, achieving positive outcomes in various programs [2]. However, while some studies show significant effects in improving children's social abilities through combined therapies, further empirical research is needed to verify their long-term effectiveness and applicability [4,5].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a quasi-experimental design, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods, to evaluate the intervention effects of a combined drama therapy and play therapy model on elementary school students with social difficulties [6]. A pre-test and post-test design was adopted, with psychological health assessments conducted before and after the intervention, focusing particularly on changes in students' emotional, behavioral, and social abilities. The experimental group participated in a comprehensive intervention program, including both drama therapy and play therapy, while the control group received conventional psychological health courses.

3.2. Participants and Sample

The study involved 24 students from grades 3 to 5 at Xingguang Primary School. All students were assessed using the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Scale (MHS-CA) to identify those with significant social difficulties [7]. Participation was voluntary, and strict measures, including confidentiality agreements, were taken to protect the students' privacy and psychological safety throughout the study. The experimental group received the combined intervention, including drama therapy, role-playing, team activities, and creative games, while the control group participated in regular classroom-based psychological health courses [8].

3.3. Intervention Measures

The intervention measures included the integrated application of drama therapy and play therapy. Drama therapy employed techniques such as role-playing and situational simulation to help students explore and express their inner emotions and needs, improving their social communication skills. Play therapy, through creative and interactive group games, fostered cooperation and trust among students, enhancing their teamwork and emotional regulation abilities. The entire intervention process was organized and implemented by professional counselors and the club coordinators, with dynamic adjustments based on student feedback [9]. The intervention started on June 16, 2023, and lasted for one year, consisting of 13 group counseling sessions, held twice a month (with no sessions during the winter break and only one summer camp during the summer break). The program concluded in June 2024 with a drama performance.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection in this study relied primarily on pre- and post-test results from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Scale (MHS-CA). The scale covers multiple dimensions, including social skills, emotional regulation, and behavioral performance, enabling a comprehensive assessment of the students' mental health. Data analysis was conducted

using SPSS software, with paired t-tests used to compare pre- and post-intervention data between the experimental and control groups to evaluate the intervention effects. Additionally, qualitative analysis based on interviews and observational records was used to assess changes in students' social behaviors and emotional states, providing a more holistic understanding of the intervention outcomes.

4. Data Analysis and Factor Changes

4.1. Completion Status

A total of 25 students participated in the intervention activities, with 16 students considered effective participants, yielding a participation rate of 64%. These students came from the Xingguang Primary School Happy Elf Club. Over the one-year intervention period, they participated in various group counseling activities, drama therapy, and play therapy.

4.2. Early Warning Status

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Scale (MHS-CA) provided an early warning analysis of the participants' mental health. Overall, five students were categorized under the red warning status, one student under yellow warning, and no students were categorized under orange warning.

4.2.1. Overall Early Warning Status

Out of the 25 participants, nine students did not undergo the mental health assessment, and thus were excluded from the analysis. Among the remaining 16 participants, 10 were classified as having normal mental health, while five were marked with a red warning, indicating significant mental health issues prior to the intervention. One student was classified under yellow warning, indicating mild social or emotional difficulties that required special attention and further intervention [10].

4.2.2. Red Warning Factor Analysis

Among the five students in the red warning group, the most prominent issues were in the cognitive, emotional, and volitional-behavioral dimensions. Specifically, two students exhibited significant disturbances in the cognitive dimension, three experienced substantial difficulties in emotional regulation, and one had severe barriers in the volitional-behavioral dimension. Based on these early warning factors, The intervention focused on providing personalized support and guidance in these areas.

4.3. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on all participants, yielding the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation for each dimension. The detailed results are as follows:

4.3.1. Overall Descriptive Statistics

The Table 1 below presents the minimum, maximum, average, and standard deviation values for each dimension in the pre-test. The distribution of scores across all dimensions indicates some variation in the students' psychological health levels.

Table 1. Pre-Test Score Statistics.

Dimension	Minimum Value	Maximum Value	Average Score	Standard Deviation
Cognitive Dimension	5.00	21.00	12.88	4.19

Emotional Dimension	5.00	20.00	16.62	4.43
Emotional Regulation	4.00	18.00	7.50	0.31
Social Skills	3.00	16.00	8.63	4.41
Behavioral Regulation	9.00	23.00	16.31	4.41

The results above indicate that, prior to the intervention, there was variation in the scores across dimensions, showing differences in the students' psychological health levels.

4.3.2. Gender-based Analysis

By dividing the participants by gender, we found that male and female students showed differences in each dimension. Specifically, male students exhibited higher scores in the cognitive and personality dimensions, while female students scored higher in the emotional regulation and social skills dimensions. These differences may reflect gender variations in social behavior and emotional regulation (Table 2).

Table 2. Male and Female Dimension Score Statistics.

Dimension	Male Average Score	Male Standard Deviation	Female Average Score	Female Standard Deviation
Cognitive Dimension	10.00	5.67	12.88	4.88
Emotional Dimension	9.50	5.45	16.62	4.43
Emotional Regulation	5.55	4.57	9.00	3.10
Social Skills	8.35	5.22	8.88	4.02
Behavioral Regulation	10.00	4.19	10.81	5.02

4.4. Results and Analysis of Differences

Independent t-tests were used to analyze the post-intervention data, assessing the statistical significance of the differences in the students' scores. The following are the details of the t-test results (Table 3).

Table 3. Dimension-wise t-test Analysis.

Dimension	Mean Difference	t-value	Significance (Two-tailed)
Cognitive Dimension	15.00	4.35	$p < 0.05$
Emotional Dimension	11.81	3.59	$p < 0.05$
Emotional Regulation	7.00	4.12	$p < 0.05$
Social Skills	6.25	4.25	$p < 0.05$
Behavioral Regulation	15.00	4.69	$p < 0.05$

The t-test results suggest that, following the intervention, significant improvements were observed across all dimensions, particularly in emotional regulation and cognition ($p < 0.05$). These findings support the effectiveness of the intervention activities in enhancing the students' psychological health.

5. Discussion

5.1. Significance and Interpretation of Results

The results of this intervention study show improvements across various dimensions, though the effects were not uniform. The most notable improvement was observed in the behavioral dimension, with a 70% improvement rate, indicating significant progress in emotional management and behavioral control. The intervention activities, particularly elements from play therapy and drama therapy such as role-playing and situational simulations, were effective in helping students understand and regulate their emotions and behaviors. This helped reduce anxiety, impulsivity, and other behavioral issues.

However, the improvements in cognitive, personality, and emotional dimensions were relatively limited, with improvement rates of 27.3%, 30.77%, and 20%, respectively. This suggests that while the intervention had a positive impact on students' social skills and emotional management, challenges remain in enhancing cognitive flexibility, personality development, and deeper emotional regulation. These dimensions are likely influenced by deeper cognitive and emotional factors, requiring more time and personalized support for effective change.

Additionally, gender differences were apparent in the data. In the gender-based analysis, male students scored higher in cognitive and personality dimensions, while female students showed more significant improvements in emotional and cognitive dimensions. These gender differences may be related to varying tendencies in emotional expression, social interactions, and problem-solving strategies. Future research may explore how interventions can be tailored to gender characteristics to further enhance their effectiveness.

5.2. Challenges and Limitations in Implementation

Several challenges and limitations were encountered during the intervention, primarily in the following areas:

5.2.1. Intervention Duration and Frequency

Although the intervention was planned for one year with two group sessions per month, limitations in student participation and uneven activity scheduling during holidays led to some students experiencing interrupted intervention periods. This may have impacted improvements in cognitive and personality dimensions, particularly in areas requiring long-term accumulation and repetitive practice.

5.2.2. Gender Differences and Intervention Design

Gender differences in intervention effects were observed, despite the balanced activity design. Notably, differences persisted in emotional and cognitive dimensions. Future interventions could incorporate more gender-sensitive activities, developing personalized and targeted content to ensure optimal outcomes for each gender group.

5.2.3. Individual Differences and Intervention Methods

In case analyses, we noticed some students showed slower progress in emotional and cognitive dimensions, particularly in self-regulation and social adaptation. This suggests that while group activities and counseling help most students, those with significant individual differences may require more personalized interventions or one-on-one counseling.

5.2.4. Data Integrity and Representativeness

The data analysis was primarily based on the responses of 16 effective participants, a small sample size. Moreover, due to the specific nature of the sample (students from the same school club), the representativeness of the findings may be limited. Future research could expand the sample size and include students from different schools and regions to enhance generalizability.

Despite these challenges and limitations, the study demonstrates the effectiveness of the combined drama therapy and play therapy model in improving elementary students' emotional, behavioral, and social skills. Future interventions should be more detailed and consider factors such as gender differences, individual variations, and the continuity of the intervention to further enhance effectiveness.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

This study, involving a year-long intervention using drama therapy and play therapy for students at Xingguang Primary School with social difficulties, yielded significant results. The findings indicate that the most notable improvement was in the behavioral dimension, with a 70% improvement rate. Notably, students showed substantial improvement in emotional management and self-control, providing a stronger foundation for their social interactions. However, improvements in cognitive, personality, and emotional dimensions were modest, with rates of 27.3%, 30.77%, and 20%, respectively. This suggests that more personalized interventions are needed for deeper changes in cognitive flexibility, personality development, and emotional regulation. Gender analysis revealed differences in the intervention effects, with male students performing better in cognitive and personality dimensions, while female students showed more significant changes in emotional and cognitive areas.

Overall, the combined model of drama therapy and play therapy has proven to be a powerful support for addressing social difficulties in elementary school students, particularly in behavioral management and emotional regulation.

6.2. Recommendations for Educational Practice

6.2.1. Personalized Interventions

While most students benefitted from group counseling and collective activities, those with individual differences require more personalized interventions. Particularly in cognitive and emotional dimensions, teachers and counselors should develop tailored intervention plans based on each student's specific needs. This will maximize the effectiveness of the intervention.

6.2.2. Ensuring Continuity of Intervention

Intervention frequency and scheduling significantly impact student outcomes. Future interventions should ensure continuity, avoid interruptions caused by holidays, and encourage parental involvement to help students apply emotional regulation and social skills at home.

6.2.3. Gender-Sensitive Intervention Design

Gender differences significantly influenced the intervention outcomes. Future designs should incorporate gender-sensitive activities, tailoring interventions to differences in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions to ensure each gender group receives optimal support.

6.2.4. Expanding Intervention Formats and Content

Future interventions could incorporate more creative activities and real-life simulations, increasing the diversity and interactivity of student participation, thus further enhancing their social and emotional abilities.

6.3. Future Research Directions

6.3.1. Long-Term Follow-Up on Intervention Effects

This study only evaluated the immediate effects at the end of the intervention. Future research should include long-term follow-up to assess students' behavioral and emotional development 6 months, 1 year, or more after the intervention to validate the sustained impact.

6.3.2. Large-Scale, Multi-School Experiments

The study was conducted at Xingguang Primary School with a small sample size. Future research could expand to multiple schools and larger sample sizes to verify the universal applicability and relevance of this intervention model.

6.3.3. Comparative Studies of Integrated Intervention Models

While the combined drama therapy and play therapy model showed significant effects, future research could compare it with other psychological therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and art therapy, to evaluate their relative advantages in addressing social difficulties.

6.3.4. In-Depth Study of Gender Differences

The influence of gender differences on intervention outcomes was prominent in this study. Future research should further explore how different genders exhibit differences in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions and how gender-specific strategies can enhance intervention effectiveness.

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