

Comparing the Effects of Group Play Therapy and Painting Therapy on Social Adjustment and Alienation among Children with Specific Learning Disabilities in Kermanshah, Iran

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Abstract

Background

Most children with learning disorders suffer from anxiety, depression, alienation, and social adjustment difficulties, which must be taken into account in the treatment process. This study compared group play therapy and painting therapy's effectiveness on social adjustment and alienation among Iranian children with specific learning disabilities.

Materials and Methods: The research method was quasi-experimental with a pre-test, post-test, follow-up design, and a control group. The statistical population included all the girl students with learning disabilities in Kermanshah, Iran, in 2019. The sample consisted of 45 children with specific learning disabilities selected by convenience sampling and divided into two experimental groups (group plays therapy & painting therapy, n = 15 per group), and a control group (n = 15). The research instruments included the Social Adjustment Scale and the Children's Loneliness Scale. The first experimental group underwent eight sessions (45-minute sessions per week) of group play therapy and the second experimental group underwent eight sessions (45-minute sessions per week) of painting therapy. The follow-up was performed after 45 days. Data analysis was done using SPSS software version 21.0.

Results: The participants included 45 girl students with specific learning disabilities, aged 11.20 ± 1.22 years old. The results indicated that play therapy and painting therapy interventions alleviated alienation and improved social adjustment among students with learning disabilities ($P=0.001$). There was no significant difference between play therapy's effectiveness and that of painting therapy on social adjustment and alienation.

Conclusion

This intervention method can be employed to mitigate alienation and enhance social adjustment among children with learning disabilities.

Key Words: Alienation, Learning disabilities, Painting therapy, Play therapy, Social adjustment.

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1- INTRODUCTION

Despite the lack of physical or emotional problems, children with learning disorders suffer from severe learning difficulties. Under nearly identical education conditions, and normal students academically outperform these children. Although they participate in appropriate education environments and have no prominent biological anomalies or severe social or psychological problems, they could not learn specific skills (learning, writing, and mathematics) (1, 2). Children with learning disabilities are characterized by defects in social adjustment. Social adjustment is one of the most critical signs of mental health among students (3). Researchers have been studying the determinants of adjustment for a long time. For instance, such variables as a sociocultural class, parenting styles, perceived social support, institutional factors, personality traits, social and academic progress goals, and academic performance have been identified as factors affecting social adjustment (4–6).

Alienation is a psychological problem and trauma, which itself can be the onset of other social traumas. A comprehensive and diverse range of social pains such as psychological disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, fear, schizophrenia, and paranoia), social perversions (violence, aggression, delinquency, and addiction), and suicides are somehow related to deviation from norms, isolation, and reactionary social alienation (7, 8). Painting therapy is a projection method in which an individual is asked to paint a person, an object, or a subject to evaluate their cognitive, interpersonal, or psychological functions (9). Painting and drawing are among the essential ways of expressing intentions, thoughts, beliefs, and innate needs for humans. Helpful information about children's personality traits, mental capacities, emotional characteristics, failures, pressures, and innate desires can

be obtained from their paintings. Paintings provide you with new ways of looking at the world, yourself, and your status quo and help you solve problems that need flexible thinking and innovative solutions. They also help to break free from vicious cycles (10). Ghadampour et al. (11) showed that painting therapy intervention alleviated alienation and enhanced social adjustment among students. Karami et al. (10) indicated that painting therapy decreased aggressive behavior among female students with dyslexia. In recent decades, play therapy has drawn particular interest as a treatment method for children. A game could be used as an expressive and communicative tool by children. According to some researchers, it can constitute an essential phase of every therapeutic process. Known as a combination of play therapy and group therapy, group play therapy establishes an effective link between the two treatment methods. Group play therapy is a social-psychological process by which every child learns how to play with other children in a room. Group play therapy helps therapists teach children how to solve problems (12, 13).

Findings of different studies indicate the impact of play therapy on the reduction of problematic behavior among children with mental disabilities, social-emotional development of children with autism, the academic achievement of children prone to academic failure, improvement of boys with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, stress reduction of parent-child relationships, reduction of emotional, anxiety, and social problems of children and their aggressive behavior (14–18). Lavasani et al. (19) indicated that play therapy would affect children's academic performance and social adjustment with reading disorder. Amin Nasab et al. (20) reported that perceptual-motor games had positive effects on the reduction of attention deficit symptoms and

improvement of social adjustment among children. Barimani et al. (21) showed that play therapy could be an effective method for improving the social and communicative status of deaf children. Ray et al. (22) indicated that child-centered play therapy had significant effects on various variables such as self-efficacy and academic problems. Accordingly, this study aimed to compare the effects of group play therapy and painting therapy on social adjustment and alienation among children with specific learning disabilities in Kermanshah city, Iran.

2- MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research method was quasi-experimental with a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design and a control group. This study's statistical population included all the girl students with learning disabilities from learning disorder-training centers affiliated with the Special Needs Education Organization (SNEO) in Kermanshah city in 2019. The sample consisted of 45 children with specific learning disabilities selected by convenience sampling and divided into two experimental groups (group play therapy & painting therapy) and a control group (n = 15 per groups). Fifteen participants were included in each group using G*power statistical software with an effect size of 1.8. The inclusion criteria included the Fifth and sixth-grade students, 10–12 years old, and having a learning disability. The exclusion criteria included the absence of more than two sessions from treatment and reluctance to continue the treatment process. Pre-tests were performed on all three groups under the same conditions before the intervention programs. The first experimental group underwent eight sessions (45-minute sessions per week) of group play therapy and the second experimental group underwent eight sessions (45-minute sessions per week) of painting therapy.

The control group did not receive an intervention program. After the training sessions, the post-test was done in the experimental and control groups. Also, the follow-up was done in the three groups after 45 days.

2.1. Research instruments

2-1-1. Social Adjustment Scale: The social adjustment scale for elementary school children was developed by Dokhanchi (23). This 37-item questionnaire was scored on a four-point Likert scale (never= 0, seldom=1, sometimes=2, and often=3). Items 1, 3, 7, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 32, 35, 36, and 37 measure adjustment, and other items (2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33, 34, and 37) measure incompatibility and are scored in reverse. In the questionnaire, the minimum and maximum scores are 37 and 185, respectively. A low score on this scale represents an acceptable level of social adjustment, whereas a high score indicates a poor adjustment level. The reliability of the social adjustment scale was reported 0.81, through the alpha Cronbach coefficient (23). Kiarasi et al. (24) reported an alpha Cronbach coefficient of 0.77 for the scale.

2-1-2. The Children's Loneliness Scale: This 24-item scale was developed to assess children's feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction (25). It was designed for use with children in grades 3–6 or ages 8–12. The 16 primary items focus on student's feelings of loneliness (e.g., "I am lonely"), feelings of social adequacy very inadequacy (e.g., "I am good at working with other children"), or subjective estimations of peer state (e.g., "I have many friends"). The other eight items focus on children's hobbies or preferred activities (e.g., "I like to paint and draw"; "I watch TV a lot"). These eight "filler" items are included to help children feel more open and relaxed about indicating

their attitudes about various topics (items 2, 5, 7, 13, 15, 19, 23). Vellymalay (26) reported an alpha Cronbach coefficient of 0.88 for the scale. Persian version of the questionnaire was desired according to Rezaei et al. (27), and the total test reliability was 0.84. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.79 for the scale.

2-2. Intervention program

2-2-1. Group Play Therapy: Including group play therapy training in compliance with play therapy principles (28), this intervention was implemented in eight 45-minute sessions per week in the first experimental group. The intervention program was performed in the exceptional children education center by the first author. The group play therapy sessions consisted of different activities. In the first session, the therapist communicated with the children and explained game rules and every member's tasks. In the second session, the children were admitted, and their feelings were identified. The third session helped them identify their negative and positive feelings. In the fourth session,

the children were taught to identify negative thoughts such as aggression. The fifth session included teaching anger management through compliance with respect for children. In the sixth session, the children were made aware of acceptable behavior (do's) and unacceptable behavior (don'ts). The seventh session included teaching cooperation and establishing social relationships among children. Finally, the conclusion was drawn in the eighth session by reviewing and practicing the previous teachings. After the intervention sessions, post-test was performed. Also, the follow-up was done in the three groups after 45 days.

2-2-2. Painting Therapy: In this study, painting therapy included topic-based painting activities in eight 45-minute sessions per week. This therapeutic packet was adopted from painting therapy (29). **Table.1** presents the activities of the painting therapy sessions. After the intervention sessions, a post-test was performed. Also, the follow-up was done in the three groups after 45 days.

Table-1: Structure of the painting therapy sessions (29).

Session	Topics
First	Becoming acquainted with art therapy processes, making introductions, drawing irregular lines, playing with colors, making introductions on paper, making personal paintings.
Second	A safe place: paint a safe place for living or hiding; what makes you relax in this place?
Third	Drawing a lifeline: draw your life on a line and record specific events and moments along that line; paint the story as to how you ended up in a hospital.
Fourth	How do you see yourself? What do others think about you? How do you like to be?
Fifth	Participants are asked to imagine themselves in different roles such as a mother, a child, a housewife, and a driver and draw all of them together in a community.
Sixth	Paint one of the hard and long-lasting problems that you are dealing with now, and then paint yourself conquering that problem.
Seventh	Paint one of your dreams or nightmares. If you remember none of your dreams, paint one of your daydreams. Make a good ending out of a sad dream that you have had.
Eighth	Group painting of anger symptoms: The outlines of a person's body are drawn on a large sheet of paper. Then the participants are asked in turn to point out from the drawings the physical signs of anger that they noticed in themselves or others.

2-3. Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, such as mean, standard deviation, and covariance analysis. The normality of the data distribution was checked and approved by the Shapiro-Wilk test. Levene's test approved the homogeneity of variances in the experimental and control groups. The effectiveness of group play therapy and painting therapy on social adjustment and alienation among children with specific learning disabilities was studied by analyzing covariance (ANCOVA) and multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). SPSS V.21.0 was employed to analyze the data. The significance level of the research was considered $\alpha=0.05$.

2-4. Ethical consideration

For ethical considerations, the researchers received written consent from the participants' parents for participation in the research. The Ethics Review Board of Islamic Azad University Ahvaz Branch approved this study with the following number: IR.IAU.AHVAZ.REC.1399.030.

3- RESULTS

The participants included 45 girl students with specific learning disabilities, aged 11.20 ± 1.22 years old. **Table.2** presents the mean and standard deviation (SD) of study variables in the experimental and control groups in the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up.

Table-2: Mean and standard deviation of the studied variables in experimental and control groups in pre-test, post-test, and follow-up.

Variables	Phases	Group play therapy	Painting therapy	Control
		Mean \pm SD	Mean \pm SD	Mean \pm SD
Social adjustment	Pre-test	63.73 \pm 9.12	68.80 \pm 12.91	74.66 \pm 9.41
	Post-test	105.80 \pm 12.80	110.06 \pm 12.05	65.33 \pm 5.25
	Follow-up	101.93 \pm 14.02	107.80 \pm 14.19	65.86 \pm 11.38
Alienation	Pre-test	57.80 \pm 5.72	58.86 \pm 5.86	62.73 \pm 4.21
	Post-test	37.60 \pm 5.38	40.66 \pm 5.42	60.00 \pm 5.84
	Follow-up	40.20 \pm 5.00	42.33 \pm 4.09	59.73 \pm 5.40

SD: Standard deviation.

According to **Table.3**, the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) indicated a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in at

least one of the dependent variables. Table 3 shows the results of ANCOVA for post-test scores for dependent variables.

Table-3: The results of multivariate analysis of covariance in the post-test phase.

Variables	Value	df	Error df	F	P-value	η^2	Power
Pillais Trace	1.028	8	72	9.51	0.001	0.51	1.00
Wilks Lambda	0.054	8	70	28.28	0.001	0.76	1.00
Hotelling's Trace	15.41	8	68	65.49	0.001	0.88	1.00
Roy's Largest Root	15.31	4	36	137.81	0.001	0.94	1.00

df: Degrees of freedom; Error df: The Error degree of freedom; F: F-distribution; η^2 : Eta-Squared.

Table.4 reports the F ratio of ANCOVA for social adjustment (F=80.53, P<0.01) and for alienation (F=60.69, P<0.01). These findings indicated a significant

difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of social adjustment and alienation, used as dependent variables.

Table-4: The results of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in the post-test phase

Dependent variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	η ²	Power
Social adjustment	Group	13943.97	2	6971.98	80.53	0.001	0.14	1.00
Alienation	Group	3145.24	2	1572.62	60.69	0.001	0.16	1.00

SS: Sum of squares; df: Degrees of freedom; MS: Mean square; F: F-distribution; η²: Eta-Squared.

Table.5 presents the results of the Bonferroni post hoc test for the comparison of social adjustment and alienation mean variables in the experimental and control groups. The mean difference in social adjustment was 45.38 between the group play therapy group and the control group. This finding indicated that the group play therapy affected social adjustment (P<0.01). The mean difference in social adjustment was 46.45 between the painting therapy group and the control group, which showed that the painting therapy affected social adjustment (P<0.01). Moreover, the mean difference of social adjustment was 1.01 between the group play therapy group and the painting therapy group, indicating no significant difference between social adjustment in the group play therapy group

and the painting therapy group (P>0.05). The mean difference in alienation was 23.09 between the group play therapy group and the control group. It was significant at 0.01; therefore, the group play therapy affected alienation. Moreover, the mean difference in alienation was obtained by 20.36 between the painting therapy group and control groups. It was significant at 0.01; thus, the painting therapy affected alienation. Furthermore, the mean difference in alienation was 2.74 between the group play therapy group and the painting therapy group. It was not significant at 0.05; hence, there was no significant difference between the group play therapy group and the painting therapy groups in terms of alienation (**Table.5**).

Table-5: Bonferroni post-hoc test for paired comparison of the social adjustment and alienation in the post-test phase.

Variables	Groups	Mean difference	SE	P-value
Social adjustment	Group play therapy - Control	45.38	4.07	0.001
	Painting therapy - Control	46.45	3.97	0.007
	Group play therapy - Painting therapy	1.01	3.50	0.370
Alienation	Group play therapy - Control	23.09	2.23	0.001
	Painting therapy - Control	20.36	2.17	0.001
	Group play therapy - Painting therapy	2.74	0.92	0.484

SE: Standard error.

Table.6 shows MANCOVA results in the follow-up phase. Accordingly, there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in at least

one dependent variable. Table 7 indicates ANCOVA results for the follow-up scores for dependent variables.

Table-6: The results of multivariate analysis of covariance in the follow-up phase.

Variables	P-value	df	Error df	F	P-value	η^2	Power
Pillais Trace	0.915	8	72	7.59	0.001	0.46	1.00
Wilks Lambda	0.159	8	70	13.22	0.001	0.60	1.00
Hotelling's Trace	4.838	8	68	20.56	0.001	0.71	1.00
Roy's Largest Root	4.740	4	36	42.66	0.001	0.83	1.00

df: Degrees of freedom; Error df: The Error degree of freedom; F: F-distribution; η^2 : Eta-Squared.

Table.7 reports the F ratio of ANCOVA for social adjustment ($F=34.65$, $P<0.01$) and for alienation ($F=47.08$, $P<0.01$). These findings indicated a significant

difference between the experimental and control groups regarding social adjustment and alienation in the follow-up phase.

Table-7: The results of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) in the follow-up phase.

Dependent variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	η^2	Power
Social adjustment	Group	11209.46	2	5604.73	34.65	0.001	0.65	1.00
Alienation	Group	2065.66	2	1032.83	47.08	0.001	0.71	1.00

SS: Sum of squares; df: Degrees of freedom; MS: Mean square; F: F-distribution; η^2 : Eta-Squared.

Table.8 presents the results of the Bonferroni post hoc test for the comparison of social adjustment and alienation mean variables in the experimental and control groups in the follow-up phase. The mean difference in social adjustment was 39.25 between the group play therapy group and the control group; therefore, the group play therapy affected social adjustment in the follow-up period ($P<0.01$). The mean difference in social adjustment was 42.61 between the painting therapy group and the control group, which showed that the painting therapy affected social adjustment in the follow-up period ($P<0.01$). Moreover, the mean difference in social adjustment was 3.36 between the group play therapy group and the painting therapy group, indicating no significant difference between social adjustment in the group play therapy group

and the painting therapy group in the follow-up period ($P>0.05$). The mean difference in alienation was reported at 18.65 between the group play therapy group and the control group in the follow-up period ($P<0.01$); therefore, the group play therapy affected alienation in the follow-up period. Moreover, the mean difference in alienation was 16.59 between the painting therapy and control groups. It was significant at 0.01; thus, the painting therapy affected alienation in the follow-up period. Furthermore, the mean difference in alienation was 5.57 between the group play therapy group and the painting therapy group in the follow-up period ($P>0.05$); hence, there was no significant difference between the group play therapy group and the painting therapy groups in terms of alienation (**Table.8**).

Table-8: Bonferroni post-hoc test for paired comparison of the social adjustment and alienation in the follow-up phase.

Variables	Groups	Mean difference	SE	P-value
Social adjustment	Group play therapy - Control	39.25	5.57	0.001
	Painting therapy - Control	42.61	5.43	0.007
	Group play therapy - Painting therapy	3.36	4.79	0.412
Alienation	Group play therapy - Control	18.65	2.05	0.001
	Painting therapy - Control	16.59	1.99	0.001
	Group play therapy - Painting therapy	5.57	2.07	0.753

SE: Standard error.

4- DISCUSSION

This study aimed to compare group play therapy and painting therapy's effectiveness on social adjustment and alienation among children with specific learning disabilities in Kermanshah city, Iran. The research results indicated that group play therapy and painting therapy had significant social adjustment effects among children with specific learning disabilities. The painting therapy and play therapy intervention improved social adjustment in the post-test phase. This finding is consistent with the research results of Ghadampour et al. (11), Barimani et al. (21), Heshmati et al. (30), Chinekesh et al. (31), and Khodabakhshi-Koolae et al. (32). The results also showed no significant difference between the group play therapy group and the painting group in terms of social adjustment. Play therapy and painting therapy can be used as practical tools for communicating with children, treating adjustment problems, and preventing potential adulthood issues. In other words, play therapy and painting therapy can increase flexibility in children with learning disabilities and improve the adjustment and positive feelings as a result. The play therapy program includes different training steps such as communications, different kinds of verbal and motor deterrence, and cognitive problem-solving to teach more adaptive behavior to the children who are weak in social, communicative, and emotional

skills. In total, group play therapy benefits from a collection of structured and purposive activities. It could be expressed in a game of significant emotional experiences in the highest security and peace level through imaginary symbols and toys. A game is a method in which children express their feelings, expand their relationships, show their experiences, expose their wishes and flourish. As a result, play therapy improves children's social adjustment by enhancing their social and communicative skills. In a group play process, children learn to exchange information, sympathize, become aware of other children's inner worlds, cooperate, and even make sacrifices sometimes to support others. These processes increase the cognitive ability to perceive others, result in cognitive flexibility, increase adaptability and develop positive feelings among children with learning disabilities. Painting therapy focuses directly and indirectly on emotions and leads to awareness and insight through the socioemotional exploration to better understand their problems. Studies have shown that receiving one hour of art therapy a week and supplementary education can have better results in social, emotional, and academic adjustment of children with learning disorders than only receiving supplementary education per se (33). According to the results, group play therapy and painting therapy had significant impacts on children's alienation. The painting therapy and play

therapy intervention alleviated alienation in the post-test phase. This finding is consistent with the research results of Ghadampour et al. (11), Toren et al. (34), Ebrahimi et al. (35), and Shahri et al. (36). The results also indicated no significant difference between the group play therapy group and the painting therapy groups in terms of alienation. In group play therapy and painting therapy, children participate in fun activities and daydream about what they like by playing games and painting. Therefore, they can overcome alienation and negative thoughts of their appearances, mental abilities, or misbehavior that might bring mockery. This way, they practice positive characteristics and try to cope with and improve their defects in not-so-real situations. In this study, children cooperatively participated in group play therapy and painting therapy sessions and talked about their feelings and emotions. These sessions helped them develop a sense of cooperation, sympathy, and responsibility to accept all of their existential aspects and alleviate alienation.

4-1. Study Limitations

This study was conducted on children with specific learning disabilities in Kermanshah city, caution should be observed in generalizing the results to other communities in different time and place situations due to different cultural conditions. The intervention program's interference in this study, self-report questionnaires were used to collect data, limiting their limitations.

5- CONCLUSION

This study indicated that the group play therapy and painting therapy intervention alleviated alienation and improved social adjustment among children with learning disabilities. Learning disabilities make children feel that they are different from their peers. This could worsen the sense of alienation, decrease social adjustment, interfere with

social relationships, and result in social problems. Group play therapy and painting therapy are among the correct and effective treatment methods because most children have problems expressing their feelings verbally. Through games and painting, children can lift obstacles and know their feelings better. According to this study's findings, painting therapy can serve as a tool for expressing innate emotions and thoughts by playing a unique role in identifying intelligence and emotions. Using painting therapy and group play therapy as effective interventions, this study emphasized the importance of these methods in alleviating alienation and improving social adjustment among students.

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7- CONFLICT OF INTEREST: None.

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