

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ART THERAPY IN FACILITATING THE EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND SOCIAL REGULATION IN STUDENTS WITH ASD

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the effectiveness of art therapy in facilitating emotional expression and social regulation among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The target population included teachers from both public and private schools teaching in special education institutes. Therapists, psychologists, and parents were excluded. Data were collected using an opinionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale, focusing on the domain of emotional expression and regulation. The sample size comprised of 70 teachers by using simple random sampling technique. Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings revealed that a majority of teachers agreed that art therapy provides a safe and supportive space for children with ASD to express emotions that are otherwise difficult to verbalize, enhances their ability to identify emotions, and supports emotional regulation during stressful situations. The results further indicated that consistent participation in art therapy contributes to a reduction in emotional outbursts and fosters socially acceptable emotional expression. The inferential statistic further reveals that the gender and qualification significantly impact on the perception of respondents about the effectiveness of art therapy. Based on these findings, it was concluded that art therapy is an effective intervention to improve emotional well-being and social adjustment in children with ASD. The study recommends the integration of structured art therapy sessions into special education curricula and teacher training programs to better support emotional growth and social regulation in children with ASD.

Keywords: *Art therapy, Emotional regulation, Autism Spectrum, Disorder, Social skills, Emotional expression*

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Introduction

Autism being a disorder in the form a spectrum constitutes many shades of challenges which are both identical and repetitive on assessment. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition is characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication, restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, and challenges in emotional regulation (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). The qualitative limitation is stereotypical and repetitive patterns in their behaviors interest and activities. Although there may be other challenges casting upon the academic success of such children, emotional dysregulation and challenges in social reciprocity are among the most significant difficulties that a person with autism face, which usually interfere with their ability to engage successfully in learning and other non-formal environments (Samson et al., 2012; Mazefsky et al., 2013). Since the earlier age of language development and social bonding is the key in future success of a child this very adolescence is marred by a deviant social competence and emotional expression are particularly critical, interventions that support these areas are essential for promoting the overall well-being and integration of students with ASD (Carter et al., 2014).

Among many different solutions towards the challenges faced by such group of students art therapy has gained recognition more recently. When it comes to art based intervention, literature is indicative of therapeutic interventions that provide a comprehensive and reliable evidence to challenge the symptoms involving tactile, sensory, regulatory as well as social skills. Further to that the conformability of students with autism in arts based intervention such as drawing, painting; coloring etc. is well acknowledged in expressing their minds.

The therapy is recognized as a promising intervention approach for addressing emotional and social difficulties in individuals with ASD. The technique envisages an intentional use of visual art materials within a therapeutic focus to foster self-expression, communication, and psychological growth (Malchiodi, 2012). Because many individuals with ASD experience challenges with verbal communication, art therapy provides a nonverbal and symbolic medium through which emotions can be externalized and processed (Martin, 2009). Benefitting from the nonverbal channel help facilitate emotional expression and also benefits to access the inner world of individuals with ASD, unlike other traditional interventions (Schweizer et al., 2014). Haeyen et al. (2018) found that art therapy interventions significantly improved emotional regulation by providing structured opportunities for self-exploration and the modulation of affect. Similarly, Koo and Thomas (2019) reported that art therapy fosters joint attention, shared meaning making, and improved

communication skills in children with ASD. Systematic reviews further confirm that art therapy and other creative arts interventions contribute to reductions in anxiety, improvements in self-concept, and enhanced peer relationships among children and adolescents with ASD (Van Lith, 2016; Liu et al., 2020).

Besides these promising findings mentioned, literature reveals that most research has focused on traditional focus on early childhood or clinical settings. The phenomenon has left a narrow window to look for evidence to talk of the effectiveness of art therapy within school contexts (Jia, 2023). On contrary to it research has also evidenced the efficacy of art therapy in comparison to the grade of autism itself. A study of similar sort established art-based intervention as less effective in terms of social variables including, awareness, cognition, communication, motivation and mannerism in children with ASD level 2 and 3, Abdulah et. al (2023) Adolescents with ASD often face unique developmental and social challenges, making it crucial to examine the potential of art therapy in educational environments where emotional expression and social regulation are directly tied to academic and social success.

Considering the same this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of art therapy in facilitating emotional expression and enhancing social regulation in students with ASD. It is believed that by focusing on the school context, this research will embark on elements that could bridge in the gap in literature and provide evidence for integrating art therapy as a supportive practice in educational settings.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale of the study is to address the challenges faced by children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in emotional expressions and social communication, which can affect their emotional well-being and social development. Though traditional therapies may offer a solution to it, however the significance of art therapy is attempted to provide a promising alternative. This study aims to fill this gap and provide empirical evidence about the effectiveness of art therapy.

Research Objective

The main objective of the study was to find the effectiveness of art therapy in facilitating the emotional expression and social regulation in students with ASD.

Hypotheses of the Study

- H_{o1}**- The perception of teachers about effectiveness of art therapy has no significant difference in terms of gender.
- H_{o2}**- The perception of teachers about effectiveness of art therapy has no significant difference in terms of qualification.

Research Methodology

The study titled finding the Effectiveness of Art Therapy in Facilitating Emotional Expression and Social Regulation in Students with ASD, employed a quantitative and descriptive research design. This design was chosen to systematically gather and analyze teachers' opinions using statistical methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research population included special education teachers from both public and private institutes in Lahore. Teachers of any gender, qualification, and experience were included in the sample, provided they worked directly with children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Therapists, psychologists, and parents and other stake holders were excluded to as the study focused only the teaching fraternity.

Instrument of the Study

The research instrument was a structured opinionnaire comprising 28 items. The tool was developed considering domains of social and emotional regulation in children with ASD. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The Opinionnaire was designed to establish teachers' perception on how art therapy facilitates emotional expression and social regulation. Its closed-ended structure ensured ease of analysis and consistency across responses.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected from a total of 70 special education teachers working in autism centers and special education schools in Lahore. Among these participants, 18 completed the opinionnaire online through Google Forms, while 52 were surveyed in person at their schools. This method of distribution helped ensure accessibility and increased the response rate. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistical techniques, such as frequency tables and percentages, were applied to summarize and interpret the teachers' responses. Inferential statistics were employed to test the hypotheses and determine whether significant differences existed

in teachers' perceptions based on demographic variables. Specifically, a one-sample t-test was applied to assess whether teachers' responses significantly differed with respect to gender and academic qualification.

Data Analysis

The data was collected through an opinionnaire having five-point Likert's scale. The descriptive statistics involved percentages and frequencies. The t-test was applied as an inferential option, whereby the researcher has assumed Likert's scale as interval data and has used parametric statistics.

Table 1

Art therapy provides a safe space for children with ASD to express emotions they cannot verbalize.

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	19	27.1	27.1
Agree	37	52.9	80.0
Neutral	13	18.6	98.6
Disagree	1	1.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	

Referring to Table 1, 27 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, 53 percent agreed, 19 percent remained neutral while 1 percent disagreed that art therapy provides a safe space for children with ASD to express emotions they cannot verbalize.

Table 2

Children with ASD show improved ability to identify their own emotions after engaging in art therapy.

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	13	18.6	18.6
Agree	39	55.7	74.3
Neutral	12	17.1	91.4
Disagree	4	5.7	97.1

Strongly disagree	2	2.9	100.0
Total	70	100.0	

Referring to table 2, 18.6 percent of the respondents strongly agreed ,55.7 percent agreed, 17 percent remained neutral, 5.7 percent disagreed while 2.9 strongly disagreed that children with ASD show improved ability to identify their own emotions after engaging in art therapy.

Table 3

Art therapy supports emotional regulation in children with ASD, particularly during moments of stress.

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	12	17.1	17.1
Agree	41	58.6	75.7
Neutral	10	14.3	90.0
Disagree	6	8.6	98.6
Strongly disagree	1	1.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	

Referring to table 3, 17 percent of the respondents strongly agreed ,58.6 percent agreed, 14.3 percent remained neutral, 8.6 percent disagreed while 1.4 percent strongly disagreed that art therapy supports emotional regulation in children with ASD, particularly during moments of stress.

Table 4

Emotional outbursts in children with ASD decrease after consistent participation in art therapy.

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	14	20.0	20.0
Agree	36	51.4	71.4
Neutral	19	27.1	98.6

Strongly disagree	1	1.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	

Referring to table 4, 20 percent of the respondents strongly agreed ,51.4 percent agreed, 27.1 percent remained neutral while 1.4 percent strongly disagreed that emotional outbursts in children with ASD decrease after consistent participation in art therapy.

Table 5

Art activities enable children with ASD to express sadness, anger, or joy in socially acceptable ways.

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	9	12.9	12.9
Agree	32	45.7	58.6
Neutral	21	30.0	88.6
Disagree	8	11.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	

Referring to table 5, 12.9 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, 45.7 percent agreed, 30 percent remained neutral while 11.4 percent disagreed that art activities enable children with ASD to express sadness, anger, or joy in socially acceptable ways.

Table 6

Children with ASD become more comfortable sharing feelings through artistic expression.

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	14	20.0	20.0
Agree	30	42.9	62.9
Neutral	15	21.4	84.3
Disagree	9	12.9	97.1

Strongly disagree	2	2.9	100.0
Total	70	100.0	

Referring to table 6, 20 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, 42.9 percent agreed, 21.4 percent remained neutral, 12.9 percent disagreed while 2.9 percent strongly disagreed that children with ASD become more comfortable sharing feelings through artistic expression.

Table 7

Teachers observe greater emotional awareness in students with ASD following art therapy sessions.

Responses	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly agree	13	18.6	18.6
Agree	34	48.6	67.1
Neutral	16	22.9	90.0
Disagree	5	7.1	97.1
Strongly disagree	2	2.9	100.0
Total	70	100.0	

Referring to table 7, 18.6 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, 48.6 percent agreed, 22.9 percent remained neutral, 7 percent disagreed while 2.9 percent strongly agreed that teachers observe greater emotional awareness in students with ASD following art therapy sessions.

Hypothesis Testing

H₀₁- The perception of teachers about effectiveness of art therapy has no significant difference in term of gender.

Table 8: One Sample t-Test

Variable	t	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Value = 0 Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	
Gender of respondent	33.124	69	.000	1.743	1.64	1.85
Effectiveness of art therapy	22.590	69	.000	56.800	51.78	61.82

Referring to Table 8, one-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions based on gender ($t = 33.124$, $df = 69$, $p = .000$). Since the p-values are less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that gender significantly affects teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of art therapy.

Hypothesis Testing

H₀₂- The perception of teachers about effectiveness of art therapy has no significant difference in term of qualification.

Table 9
One Sample t-Test Results

Variable	t	df	Value = 0 Mean Sig. (2tailed) Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper	
Effectiveness of art therapy	22.590	69	.000	56.800	51.78 61.82
qualification of respondent	23.565	69	.000	1.300	1.19 1.41

Referring to Table 9, one-sample t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions based on qualification ($t = 23.565$, $df = 69$, $p = .000$). Since the p-values are less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that qualification significantly affects teachers' perceptions about the effectiveness of art therapy.

Findings

The findings of the study revealed strong support for the role of art therapy in facilitating emotional expression and regulation in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A large majority of respondents (80%) agreed to varying extents that art therapy provides a safe space for children with ASD to express emotions they are unable to verbalize. Similarly, 74.3% of the teachers observed that children demonstrated an improved ability to identify their own emotions after engaging in art therapy. Furthermore, 75.7% of respondents reported that art therapy supports emotional regulation, particularly during stressful situations. Notably, 71.4% agreed that consistent participation in art therapy led to a decrease in emotional outbursts among children with ASD. In addition, 58.6% of teachers stated that art activities enabled children to express feelings such as sadness, anger, or joy in more socially acceptable ways. Likewise, 62.9% indicated that students became more comfortable sharing emotions through artistic expression. Finally, 67.2% of the teachers observed greater emotional awareness in students with ASD following art therapy sessions. The results showed that male and female teachers do not think the same way about the effectiveness of art therapy. Since the difference in their views was statistically significant, it means that gender does play an important role in shaping teachers' perceptions. The results showed that teachers with different qualifications had different opinions about effectiveness of art therapy. This difference was statistically significant, which means that a teacher's qualification strongly affects how they view about art therapy. Overall, these findings highlight the significant role of art therapy in creating supportive spaces where children with ASD can enhance their emotional expression and social regulation.

Conclusion

The results of this study conclude that art therapy is an effective intervention for children with ASD, particularly in the domains of emotional expression and social regulation. Teachers reported that art therapy not only provides safe and supportive spaces for children to express unspoken emotions but also helps them identify, regulate, and communicate their feelings more appropriately. It may also be concluded that consistent participation in art therapy sessions reduces the frequency of emotional outbursts and fosters improved emotional awareness. These outcomes are in line with existing research that highlights the therapeutic

benefits of art-based interventions for children with developmental disorders (Bosgraaf et al., 2020; Wilkinson & Chilton, 2013). Therefore, the study affirms that integrating art therapy into special education programs can meaningfully contribute to the emotional well-being and social development of children with ASD. The study concluded that teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of art therapy are influenced by both gender and qualification. Male and female teachers hold different views, and teachers with higher or different qualifications also perceive art therapy differently. This shows that demographic factors play an important role in shaping how teachers understand and value art therapy.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, it is recommended that art therapy interventions be systematically integrated into the educational programs of children with ASD in special education schools. Teachers may be encouraged and trained to use creative approaches in their classrooms, making artistic activities a regular practice for emotional development. Furthermore, schools and autism centers can benefit by collaborating with professional art therapists to develop structured programs that focus on emotional expression and social skills. Policy makers and administrators are also advised to recognize the positive outcomes of art therapy and allocate sufficient resources for its implementation in both public and private institutions.

Finally, future research is encouraged to investigate the long-term effects of art therapy on children's emotional growth on a bigger sample and to explore its application across diverse cultural and educational contexts. The evidence in the form of previous studies have reported that art-based interventions foster resilience, social competence, and overall well-being in children with ASD

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