Enhancing Social Skills in Children with Autism through Structured Interactions

Nova Joy B. Lagdamen, LPT [a], Antonina Liza S. Castro, LPT [b],

[a] novajoy.lagdamen@hcdc.edu.ph, [b] antoninaliza.santos@hcdc.edu.ph

[a] *Bambad Central School, Sultan Kudarat 9805*
[b] *Bolton Elementary School, Davao City 8000*

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the efficacy of a structured interaction approach in enhancing the social skills of children diagnosed with autism. The purpose is to address the challenges faced by these individuals in social interactions and promote their acceptance and inclusion in society. Two non-graded learners from Davao City, selected based on poor interaction with peers, participated in the study. Observational methods tracked progress before, during, and after interventions. Data collection included pre-test and posttest assessments, parental interviews, and performance monitoring, all conducted ethically. Results demonstrate significant improvements in social skills, particularly in initiating interactions and engaging in collaborative activities. The study highlights the importance of structured interventions in addressing the socialization needs of children with autism. Recommendations include integrating structured interaction approaches into educational settings, providing support for teachers and parents, and advocating for community awareness programs to foster inclusivity and support for individuals with autism.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Social Skills, Acceptance, Inclusion, Intervention, Performance, and Assessment.

I. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, there has been a growing focus on social skills, social competence, and social development. It should come as no surprise that there is a greater emphasis on the value of social development as autism rates rise.

As of 2020, statistics from the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) show that around 1 in 54 children have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), up from 1 in 150 in 2000. A "Social difficulty may be the most complex and impenetrable core challenge facing children with autism," as Kasari and Patterson (2012) hypothesized (p. 713). Since the primary characteristics of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are social communication, social engagement, and the ability to establish and sustain reciprocal social interaction.), it is critical to focus on the social development of these children to maximize their chances of success.

Furthermore, the Malaysian government has worked hard to raise the standard of IE for kids with special needs so they can grow in social skills. The Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act (2008) Framework for Action on Special Needs Education serve as the foundation for the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOE) established its goal to provide children with special needs with full and equal participation in education, in accordance with the National Education Blueprint. (2013-2025).

According to a different study, students with ASD have three social abilities that are problematic: self-control behavior, communication skills, and teamwork. However, because of their poor social skills, students with ASD in IE will find it challenging to succeed in school Unchalee et al. [Vol.116, 509-512].

According to the most recent data, according to the American Psychiatric Association, Arlington, 2013, the prevalence of ASD has climbed to 1 in 64 people. Repetitive and constrained interests and behaviors, as well as noticeable deficits in reciprocal social contact and communication, are characteristics of children diagnosed with ASD.Throughout their lives, they will endure suffering. As a result, navigating the social sphere presents the biggest obstacles for them.

However, the autistic Society of the Philippines (2012) stated that 1% of people worldwide are on the autistic spectrum, citing data from the United Nations Organization. Approximately one million people in the Philippines, out of 102 million total, have autistic disorder (autistic Society of the Philippines, 2016). These students' interactions and relationships with their peers who are typically developing are impacted by their condition (Bailey, 2012). The study conducted by Bauminger-Zviely (2013) identified the challenges faced by students diagnosed with ASD. It was mentioned that students with autism are ideal targets for bullying because of their temperament and clumsy motions. Their generally growing peers perceive them as distant and uninterested.

With this, the researchers pursue this study to know the factors and on how to give proper interventions to the learners with special needs specifically learners having autism.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to give proper intervention to the learner with special needs who has a diagnosis of autism. The study can help promote acceptance and inclusion in society and solve the issues on how to address their difficulty in interacting with their other significant, peers, etc.

This study will carefully examine several acceptance-related issues in the context of students with social impairments. It will explore issues related to the level of acceptability or interaction of their involvement in inclusive activities.

1.2 Research Questions

This study intended to improve the learner's social interaction. Mainly, sought to answer the question below:
1. How can the teacher improve the social skills of a child with autism spectrum disorder using structured social interaction inside the classroom?

1.3 Related Literature

According to Melonashi et. al (2003) Due to their intense fear when they are around their peers, many kids suffer social difficulties. Children diagnosed with autism exhibit distinct triggers for behaviors associated with anxiety. Many youngsters struggle with social skills because of their high levels of anxiety around their classmates. Even a modest adjustment to the school day schedule can have a significant impact on a child's behavior (Melonashi, 2013).

Offering kids a social program for managing their anxiety is a good approach to make sure they pick up coping mechanisms for when their anxiety flares up. Children with autism suffer from severe social impairment in part because they experience extreme fear while interacting with other people. (Bellini, 2004b).

According to (Bellini, 2006). When faced with uncomfortable situations, such social encounters, people with autism frequently exhibit extreme worrying (Bellini, 2006). Relationships with parents or friends can't be meaningful because of the anxiety. (Bellini, 2006).

According to White et al. (2010), children who have received comprehensive social skills interventions to assist with emotional regulation have demonstrated improvements in their anxiety levels. Friends for Children is a program that helps kids deal with anxiety and has been successful in reducing anxiety rates. It is taught in regular classroom settings. Friends for Life is a comparable initiative that my school recently presented. It was centered on helping all of the grade 4 students in the school build relationships and manage their anxiety. Even though it wasn't directed toward the autistic kids specifically, it had a big impact on those kids. The special education instructor sat with the student or students in the class while the guidance counselor from the school conducted the program. The program's outcomes were observed when the autistic kids started participating in group activities during the session

with less apprehension. Whether a social program is given to the entire class or just one student, it has a significant impact on how all kids behave. In this instance, the advantages it provided for autistic kids were astounding. (White et al. 2010),

Innovation, Intervention, and Strategy

Structured social interaction is an intervention that aimed to improve learners' social skills, especially those of children with autism spectrum disorder. Social structures are founded on social interactions with one another. The first step in my social skills training program should consist of conducting a thorough evaluation of the child's current level of social interaction. Using this strategy, I arranged a class with only two learners in an hour-long session. One of them is the female learner with autism spectrum disorder, who has very poor social skills and no interaction at all. The other was a learner with a learning disability who is very good at social interaction and can understand. The two of them joined my class together and gave them activities that they needed to work on together, such as puzzling and stacking blocks (tower making) while taking turns. One must say, "It's my turn," every time they stack a block on a tower. Or I could use any other game that requires taking turns, like Jenga blocks, snake and ladder, basketball, etc.

In the article *Making (and Keeping) Friends:* Regarding their child's social functioning, many parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) agree with Bellini's (2019) Model for Social Skills Interaction. They are aware of their child's many amazing traits, but they frequently find it difficult for them to build meaningful social interactions because of their disability—or more accurately, because of their poor social skills. Parents become even more frustrated when they realize how much their kids want friends yet are utterly unsuccessful in making friends. Basic social skills (such taking turns and striking up conversations) are typically rapidly and effortlessly picked up by kids. For kids with ASD, the procedure is far more challenging. While many kids pick up these fundamental abilities just by being in social situations, kids with ASD may require special instruction starting at a young age. According to *thespectrum.org.au* website, according to them, it's critical that the ties your child has with other parents of autistic children are built on acceptance and understanding. For kids, this could include teaching them how to share toys, play together, or take turns during a game.

In the study conducted by Harold (2016), A social exchange involving two or more people is referred to as a social interaction. Since these interactions represent the foundation of social structure, they are an important subject of fundamental social research and study. Studying social interaction within bigger social groups or among groups of three (triads) or two (dyads). In the book written by Mesibov (2004), structured teaching refers to a range of instructional approaches and tactics that are grounded on an appreciation of the "Culture of Autism" and may be customized to fit the unique needs of each individual student. In order to effectively support individuals with ASD, structured instruction takes into account their unique skill set, aptitude, area of interest, personality, emotions, peculiarities, and potential.

Having Autism Spectrum Disorder is more likely to have a social impairment. It affects how children interact and communicate with others. Yes, they may prefer to play by themselves and show no interest in their surroundings or make contact, but they cannot display correctly. Social structures and cultures are founded upon social interactions. The teacher can develop rules and procedures for them to live by engaging with one another. Children with autism need structure and consistency. But then again, change can be difficult, and routines are important. As a result, working inside a set structure might make it easier to teach new skills and improve social skills. Before children need to transfer these abilities into a larger setting, such as playground, parents can set up short, regulated social encounters to focus on social skills. Lay out the expectations explicitly during these controlled conversations so that everyone understands what is expected of them. Skills can be taught inside the classroom and then transferred to a small group environment with one or two classmates and later practiced at home. Early contact with autistic children can assist them in being more structured. Prepping an autistic child for social situations is extremely important. These conversations help your child learn about the world around them and build the tools to interact well in social situations.

According to Hansen et al., 2014. The Impact of Social Skills As described in the DSM5 and ICD-II, two of the main traits of autism are difficulties with social interaction and communication. There are numerous similarities between these two categories of disabilities.

Commonly referred to as social language, pragmatics is a subject that many autistic students struggle with. These struggles can show up as any of the following behaviors: making eye contact, reciprocating conversations, taking turns, maintaining topics, greetings, speech prosody, comprehending figurative language, and/or recognizing emotions and non-verbal body cues. (Shaked & Yirmiya, 2003; TagerFlusberg, 2003; Tierney et al., 2014).

Social communication deficiencies raise the possibility of social isolation and reduce social involvement opportunities (Miller et al., 2015; Wetherby et al., 2007). In a functional setting, communication problems have been linked to behavioral problems. Maladaptive behavior may occur when students have trouble communicating their needs, wants, or feelings. (Carter et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2017)

Students with autism also experience greater rejection and bullying from others (Hebron et al., 2015; Schroeder et al., 2014). Furthermore, individuals with autism are less satisfied with their own social functioning and interpersonal relationships than typical peers (Friend & Bursack, 2009; Magiati et al., 2013)

1.4 Theoretical Lens

The Framework of Transformation of Learners Engagement in Mathematics Learning Model will serve as the foundation for this research study. Despite the fact that it was designed for the math domain, the researchers chose to use it because of its four domains—cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional engagements—because the study's focus is on social skills, but the other engagements are still important.

Moreover, this model demonstrated enduring significance in the realm of school 4 domain of learner. This encompasses the types of involvement such as socializing, communicating, engaging, learning at school, decision-making, and collaborating with the peers as well. Though subject to revisions over the years, the foundational elements of this framework have consistently emphasized the multifaceted nature of involvement, recognizing that successful educational outcomes are contingent upon collaborative efforts among teachers in the school.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design utilizing the observational method wherein the researchers observed the participants before, during and after of the intervention given.

It will also enable us to comprehend what it's like to go through a particular circumstance or event in life. According to Smith (2016), this method "studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity including linguistic activity to perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition."

2.2. Key Participants

The key participants of this study were two non-graded learners from Davao City. They were chosen based on their very poor interaction with their peers and/or classmates inside the classroom during the first quarter. Before, during, and after observations were utilized as main sources of data and information for the entire duration of the study conducted last February 2024.

2.3. Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers used one data collection method for each participant such as observational tools or intervention forms wherein the chosen learners will undergo pretest and posttest to test the improvement of the child. The researchers used purposeful sampling to ensure results will be truly valid.

The researcher wrote a letter of permission to the school head to gain her approval and support in the conduct of the study. Upon approval, informal interviews with the participant's parents were made. Parental consent has secured before the conduct of the study. The learner's performance in interacting with peers and/or classmates was recorded to monitor her progress. Finally, the data obtained before, during, and after the implementation of the intervention was compared and analyzed by the researcher.

The researcher observed ethical guidelines in the conduct of the study following the study protocol assessments, particularly in managing the participant and data such as, but not limited to privacy and confidentiality, informed consent process, risk, benefits, and biosafety.

Baseline data observations, data during the implementation of the intervention, and post-data observations were interpreted using checklist presentations and elaborated through reflective analysis.

2.4 Ethical Consideration

The participants of this research were selected two learners who has very poor interaction with their peers and/or classmates inside the classroom during the first quarter. Since the participants are PWD. The researchers sought permission to the parents or guardians to let them conduct the study wherein the school. To ensure the participants' overall safety, the researchers observed the following ethical considerations.

The researchers considered conducting the process of recruitment ethically. As a result, the researchers pointed out the following ethical concerns; (a) Voluntary- the researchers will not pressure the parents to let their child participate or force them to do so, the researcher will make sure to give the parent or guardian plenty of time for them to consider their involvement or participation in the study. Same as well with the teachers/advisers of these learners (b) Respect for Privacy- the respondents' sensitive information will be given with utmost care and will remain confidential until the end of the conduct of the study. For this reason, the information gathered should only be used for research purpose. (c) Accurate information- the respondents will be provided with details on what the research is all about, the objective of the study, and its significance for them to be aware of how their data will be utilized.

Overall, during the recruitment stage, the parents or guardians of the participants will be given a background of the study, its objective and significance, and how their information will be utilized. Its importance if the parents will be given awareness about the effect of their acceptance level in relation to learners with disabilities. In this process, the parents were also told of the time required or projected duration of their participation in the study.

2.5 Role of the Researcher

The researchers look for the participants who correlate the learner with autism spectrum disorder as the main respondents such as parents, teachers, relatives, siblings, and neighborhoods related to the learner. In this, the researcher will provide a questionnaire that is already validated by the experts and use it as a main tool of the research.

3. Findings and Discussion

Table 1.1 Baseline Data Observation

Social Skills Checklist	P1		P2	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. Initiating Interaction: ➢ **Actively initiates picking a piece without hesitation.**		✓		✓
2. Communication Skills: ➢ **Looking at the game board while playing**	✓			✓
➢ **Listens when a playmate is talking about their game.**		✓		✓
		✓		✓
➢ **Uses a mix of verbal and non-verbal communication effectively.**		✓		✓
- **Eye contact**		✓		✓

Social Skills Checklist	P1 Yes	P1 No	P2 Yes	P2 No
- Smiling - Nodding head				
3. Collaboration: ➢ **Participates in placing pieces on the board.**		✓		✓
4. Sharing and Taking Turns:				
➢ **Shares piece willingly with others.**		✓		✓
➢ **Waits for her peers to finish putting a piece together before she starts.**		✓		✓
5. Emotion Expression: ➢ **Expresses positive emotions (excitement, joy) during the game.**		✓		✓
➢ **Manages any negative emotions (frustration, disappointment) appropriately.**	✓			✓
6. Overall Comfort and Engagement: ➢ **Appears comfortable and at ease during the game.**		✓		✓
➢ **Maintains engagement in the activity without withdrawing.**		✓		✓

Shown in the above table was the two learners' social status during socialization or playtime before the implementation of the intervention. As the data show, the participants were poor in socialization before the conduct of the study. This was the observation made during their first week of second quarter of the school year. It was observed that the two learners never joined any of their classmates during playtime and/or sing and dance activities, and the like, in the classroom. The learners were nonverbal; they could not speak a word, but they could hear and often understand. Somehow were able to follow simple instructions like "ali diri," "lingkod sa imung lingkuranan," and "hipusa imung gamit" but were unable to join group activities. This caused the teacher to keenly observe the learners, who were unable to socialize with their classmates and started to encourage them to join group activities. However, they still tend to avoid their classmates and chose not to respond to any of the given simple tasks. The teacher knew that an autistic child had difficulty with socialization, but at their age, it showed that they were given a less of attention in the family. One participant's parent was very busy selling and she is the oldest of the siblings on the other hand the second participants are farmers wherein they go to the farm every day and don't have any time to look out or priorities their child. In short, both participants were not given proper attention in their home.

In the study of Front. Psychol.,2023 It states that children's well-being increases with the amount of time parents spend with them; children's life and leisure time was positively correlated with parents' well-being; children's mother's life and leisure time, as well as the father's life and leisure time and educational interactions with children, all positively correlated with children's well-being. Depending on how well their kids performed in school, parents' time with their kids had varying effects on their wellbeing. Additionally, a significant factor in determining children's wellbeing is parental accompanying. Enhancing family education, mental health services, and guidance should be prioritized. Additionally, spending more time with children and recognizing their unique characteristics are important.

Table 1.2 During the Implementation of Intervention

Social Skills Checklist	P1		P2	
	Yes	No	Yes	No

Social Skills Checklist	P1	P1	P2	P2
1. Initiating Interaction: ➢ Actively initiates picking a piece without hesitation.	✓			✓
2. Communication Skills: ➢ Looking at the game board while playing ➢ Listens when a playmate is talking about their game. ➢ Uses a mix of verbal and non-verbal communication effectively. - Eye contact - Smiling - Nodding head	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	✓
3. Collaboration: ➢ Participates in placing pieces on the board.	✓		✓	
4. Sharing and Taking Turns: ➢ Shares piece willingly with others. ➢ Waits for her peers to finish putting a piece together before she starts.	✓ ✓		 ✓	✓
5. Emotion Expression: ➢ Expresses positive emotions (excitement, joy) during the game. ➢ Manages any negative emotions (frustration, disappointment) appropriately.	 ✓	✓	 ✓	✓
6. Overall Comfort and Engagement: ➢ Appears comfortable and at ease during the game. ➢ Maintains engagement in the activity without withdrawing.	✓ ✓		✓ ✓	

During the implementation, there was a progress on the socialization skills of the participants seeing that the implementation of the intervention worked well with the two participants. Shown in this table was the development of social skills of the participants through structured interaction, the two participants demonstrated significant progress effectively in initiating interaction, which was observed in the baseline that the participants has no interaction at all. The development of other skills also indicate progress as the child had been observed to communicate though gestures, collaborate through participation, sharing and taking turns, and was able to engage throughout the activity.

In a review of the literature on social skill intervention in the schools, Morgan and Jenson (1988) recommended that additional work be done to dispel the myth that teaching social skills to students with special needs is optional rather than essential.

Table 1.3 Post Data Observation

Social Skills Checklist	P1	P2

	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. Initiating Interaction: ➢ **Actively initiates picking a piece without hesitation.**	✓		✓	
2. Communication Skills: ➢ **Looking at the game board while playing** ➢ **Listens when a playmate is talking about their game.** ➢ **Uses a mix of verbal and non-verbal communication effectively.** - **Eye contact** - **Smiling** - **Nodding head**	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓		✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	
3. Collaboration: ➢ **Participates in placing pieces on the board.**	✓		✓	
4. Sharing and Taking Turns: ➢ **Shares piece willingly with others.** ➢ **Waits for her peers to finish putting a piece together before she starts.**	✓ ✓		✓ ✓	
5. Emotion Expression: ➢ **Expresses positive emotions (excitement, joy) during the game.** ➢ **Manages any negative emotions (frustration, disappointment) appropriately.**	✓ ✓		✓ ✓	
6. Overall Comfort and Engagement: ➢ **Appears comfortable and at ease during the game.** ➢ **Maintains engagement in the activity without withdrawing.**	✓ ✓		✓ ✓	

The data demonstrated that the two participant's socialization skills significantly improved after the implementation of the intervention. They participated in group activities in the classroom and adapted to their surroundings, the two participant's social skills had improved. It was established at the conclusion of the implementation that the social-structured interaction approach was a reliable and effective intervention.

The data collectively painted a narrative of growth, resilience, and the transformative power of intervention. The two selected participants journey from social isolation to active engagement depicted volumes about the importance of a social structure interaction approach. The collaboration, communication, and participation exhibited during the intervention suggested that a holistic strategy can yield meaningful results in enhancing social skills.

This data reflects that, it was crucial to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of social development, especially in the context of autism. While celebrating the progress made, it was equally important to recognize that ongoing support and finetuning may be necessary to address nuances in communication. This reflection served as a testament to the potential of social-structured interaction approach in empowering individuals to navigate the complexities of social interactions, fostering a sense of belonging.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Through one's experience, implementing a social-structured interaction approach had proven to be a transformative strategy for fostering the social skills development of children with autism. As teacher we should strongly recommend incorporating this approach into educational settings, ensuring that teachers receive comprehensive training to effectively implement structured interactions within the classroom. Encouraged collaboration among teachers to share successful strategies and creating a supportive learning environment is essential. For parents, offering resources and guidance on reinforcing social-structured interactions at home is crucial for consistent progress. Additionally, advocating for community awareness programs and inclusive recreational activities is paramount to creating a broader network of understanding and support. From a first-person perspective, I have witnessed the positive impact of this approach on children with autism, making it a valuable and effective method to enhance socialization skills and promote inclusivity.

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