



Harnessing the power of storytelling: A play therapy intervention to reduce disruptive classroom behaviours

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Abstract

Managing behavior in the classroom is a common challenge worldwide. Disruptive actions, such as speaking out of turn or disturbing classmates, can hinder both teaching and learning. Traditional discipline methods often fail to resolve these issues and may even worsen the behaviors they are meant to correct. This study introduces a novel approach: storytelling-based play therapy, designed to reduce specific disruptive behaviors within the classroom. Focusing on an 8-year-old child identified as frequently disruptive, the intervention involved four consecutive days of 30-minute storytelling sessions, each crafted to enhance social skills, empathy, and self-regulation. The results show 25% reduction in Disruptive talking and a dramatic 62.5% decrease in Disruptive physical behavior. These findings suggest that storytelling is not only an engaging and non-punitive strategy but also one that can bring about significant behavioral improvements. While the study's single-subject design limits generalizability, the promising outcomes open the door for further research across diverse educational settings. This research underscores the potential of storytelling as a transformative tool in classroom management, offering educators a creative and effective alternative to conventional disciplinary practices. By fostering a more positive and inclusive environment, storytelling could become a cornerstone of modern behavior management strategies in schools.

Keywords: *Disruptive Classroom Behaviours; Elementary Student; Play Therapy; Storytelling*

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Introduction

Classroom Behaviour management is a critical issue in educational systems around the world. Disruptive Behaviours, such as Disruptive Talking, Disruptive physical behavior, and other forms of misbehaviour and can become delinquency behavior (Ernawati, 2023), can undermine the effectiveness of teaching and create an environment that is not conducive to learning. These Behaviours not only impede the academic progress of the students involved but also disrupt the learning experience of their peers, challenging educators to find effective strategies to address such issues (Bidell & Deacon, 2010; Khasinah, 2017). Recent research continues to emphasize the need for positive behavior management approaches that focus on strengthening teacher-student relationships and utilizing specific strategies like behavior-specific praise (Lawson et al., 2023).

The prevalence of disruptive Behaviours in classrooms has been well-documented across various educational contexts. According to Kaplan et al. (2002), classroom misbehaviour can manifest in multiple ways, including speaking out of turn, teasing peers, and leaving one's seat without permission. Such Behaviours are often linked to underlying issues such as impulsivity, difficulty focusing, or a lack of social skills (Burns et al., 1995; Vongvilay et al., 2021). Addressing these Behaviours is not merely about discipline, it is about understanding the root causes and employing strategies that promote positive Behavioural changes while supporting the overall development of the child.

Traditional disciplinary approaches, such as reprimands or punitive measures, often fail to address the underlying issues that contribute to disruptive Behaviours. In some cases, these methods may even exacerbate the problem by fostering negative emotional responses or reinforcing the Behaviours they seek to diminish (Wiggers & Paas, 2022). Therefore, there is a growing recognition of the need for alternative, more positive interventions that can engage students in a constructive manner (Welsh & Little, 2018). Play therapy has recently been shown to foster these changes, with evidence supporting its role in reducing impulsive actions and enhancing emotional development (Koukourikos et al., 2021).

One such approach that has gained attention in recent years is the use of play therapy, particularly through the method of storytelling. Storytelling is a powerful tool that has been used for centuries to teach values, convey cultural norms, and stimulate imagination (Maharaj-Sharma, 2024). In the context of play therapy, storytelling can be an engaging way to help children understand social cues, develop empathy, and reflect on their own Behaviour in a non-threatening environment. According to Derosier & Mercer (2007), storytelling can significantly improve social Behaviours in children and reduce impulsive actions, making it an effective strategy for managing disruptive Behaviour in educational settings.

Despite the promising potential of storytelling as a therapeutic intervention, there is a notable gap in the research concerning its application specifically within the classroom environment. While studies have explored its effectiveness in clinical or home settings, the impact of storytelling on classroom Behaviour, particularly in reducing disruptive actions, remains under-researched. Furthermore, much of the existing literature focuses on general Behavioural improvements without sufficiently examining the specific types of disruptive Behaviours that can be mitigated through this approach (Mokhtar et al., 2011; Rafiola et al., 2022).

This research aims to address this gap by investigating the effects of a storytelling-based play therapy intervention on reducing specific disruptive Behaviours namely, disruptive talking and disruptive physical behaviour in a classroom setting. The study examines a subject who exhibited frequent disruptions during lessons, using a pre-test and post-test design to measure changes in Behaviour following the intervention. The focus on specific disruptive Behaviours allows for a more detailed understanding of how storytelling can be utilized as a targeted intervention in educational environments.

Moreover, this study contributes to the broader discourse on classroom management by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of storytelling as a Behavioural intervention. By

demonstrating a significant reduction in disruptive Behaviours following the intervention, this research offers valuable insights for educators, therapists, and policymakers seeking innovative and evidence-based strategies to enhance classroom Behaviour and create a more positive learning environment.

In summary, while storytelling has been recognized for its broader psychological and educational benefits, its application as a specific intervention for reducing disruptive classroom Behaviours represents a novel area of inquiry. This study seeks to fill this research gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the effects of storytelling-based play therapy on student Behaviour, with the aim of contributing to more effective classroom management practices that are both empathetic and impactful.

Method

Participants

The study involved a single subject, an 8-year-old boy, identified by the classroom teacher as exhibiting frequent disruptive Behaviours. These Behaviours included Disruptive Talking and Disruptive physical behavior during lessons. The selection criteria for the participant included a baseline frequency of these disruptive Behaviours observed consistently over a period of four days. Informed consent was obtained from the child's parents, who were also involved in supporting the intervention process.

Design

This study utilized a single-subject, pre-test, post-test design to assess the effectiveness of a storytelling-based play therapy intervention in reducing disruptive classroom Behaviours. The design allowed for an in-depth examination of the Behavioural changes in the subject over a defined period.

Setting

The intervention took place in a regular classroom setting within an elementary school. The classroom environment remained consistent throughout the study, with the 8-year-old boy attending the same classes and interacting with the same 32 peers and teacher before, during, and after the intervention. The storytelling intervention was conducted daily at 9:30 a.m., a time identified as optimal based on the teacher's observations of student engagement and the boy's attentiveness during the morning hours

Procedure

Baseline Measurement: Before the intervention, the subject's disruptive Behaviours were monitored and recorded over a period of four consecutive school days. These Behaviours were categorized as (1) Disruptive Talking and (2) Disruptive physical behaviour. The frequency of each Behaviour was noted during classroom activities, providing a baseline for comparison.

Intervention Implementation: The storytelling-based play therapy intervention was conducted over four consecutive school days, following the baseline measurement period. Each day, the subject participated in a 30-minute storytelling session integrated into the classroom's regular activities. The stories selected were age-appropriate and contained themes related to social interaction, empathy, and self-control.

Day 1: The subject was introduced to a story centred around teamwork and listening to others. This session aimed to capture the subject's interest and encourage reflection on the consequences of Disruptive Talking.

Day 2: The story focused on the value of respecting others' personal space, addressing the subject's tendency to physically disturb peers. Interactive elements were included, allowing the subject to engage with the story's characters and scenarios.

Day 3: A follow-up story reinforced the themes from the previous sessions, emphasizing consistency in Behaviour and self-regulation. The subject was encouraged to discuss how the story's characters handled situations similar to those the subject faced in class.

Day 4: The final story integrated all the themes discussed during the intervention. The subject was asked to reflect on the story and relate it to their own experiences in the classroom, reinforcing the lessons learned.

Post-Test Measurement: Following the intervention, the subject's disruptive Behaviours were monitored and recorded for another four-day period. The same criteria and categories were used as in the baseline measurement. The frequency of Disruptive Talking and Disruptive physical behaviour was compared with the baseline data to assess the impact of the intervention.

Data Collection and Analysis

Behavioural data were collected using direct observation and frequency counting by the classroom teacher. The pre-test and post-test data were analysed to determine the percentage decrease in each type of disruptive Behaviour. The results were presented in graphical form to illustrate the changes observed over the course of the intervention.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving minors. Parental consent was obtained, and the subject was informed in an age-appropriate manner about the study's purpose and their role in it. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, with all identifying information anonymized in the reporting of results.

Results

The storytelling-based play therapy intervention had a notable impact on reducing the subject's disruptive Behaviours in the classroom. The intervention was designed to target two specific Behaviours: Disruptive Talking and Disruptive physical behavior. The results were analysed across multiple dimensions, including frequency, observation, context, and daily patterns of Behaviour.

Frequency of Disruptive Behaviours

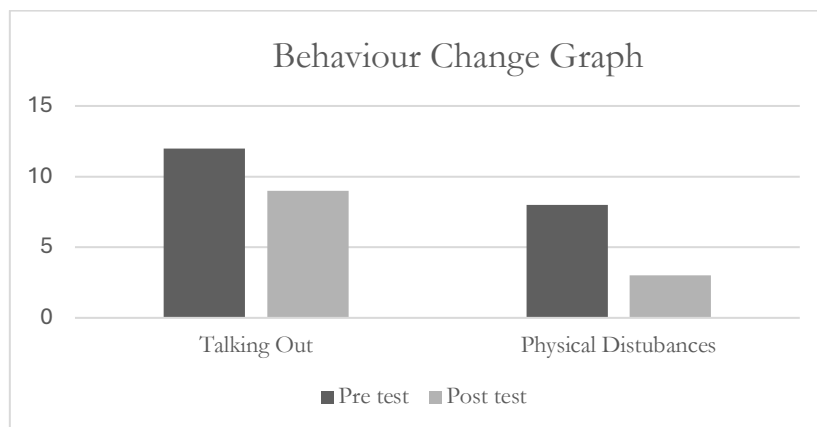


Figure 1. Behaviours Frequency Change Graph

Disruptive Talking:

- a. Baseline Measurement: During the four-day pre-test period, the subject was observed Disruptive Talking 12 times. This Behaviour typically occurred during lessons that required sustained attention, such as mathematics and science.
- b. Post-Test Measurement: After the intervention, the subject's Disruptive Talking decreased to 9 times over four days. This represents a 25% reduction, indicating that the storytelling intervention had a moderate impact on the subject's ability to control verbal impulses during class.

Physical Disturbances:

- a. Baseline Measurement: The subject physically disturbed peers (e.g., poking or nudging) 8 times during the four-day pre-test period. These disturbances were often observed during more interactive or group-based lessons, where physical proximity to peers might have triggered such Behaviours.
- b. Post-Test Measurement: Post-intervention, the frequency of physical disturbances decreased significantly to 3 instances over four days, showing a 62.5% reduction. This substantial decrease suggests that the intervention was particularly effective in helping the subject respect personal boundaries and reduce physical impulsivity.

Observation During Intervention

The storytelling intervention revealed significant observations regarding the boy's engagement and responses while listening to the stories. From the initial storytelling sessions, he displayed high enthusiasm and attentiveness, as evidenced by his posture and interaction. During the first session, which utilized a character he admired, the boy eagerly followed along, occasionally finishing the practitioner's sentences and asking insightful questions about the story. His questions, such as "What if Darui was there?" and "Why does Sakura talk to Sasuke during class?" reflected his connection to the narrative and his understanding of appropriate behaviours within a classroom context.

In the subsequent session, where characters from the Ice Age were introduced, the boy maintained his interest. He engaged with the story by holding and interacting with a dinosaur toy, representing characters in the narrative. His inquiries—such as "Why does Sid act like that?" and "Why is Diego upset with Sid?"—demonstrated his grasp of the story's social dynamics and the implications of disruptive behaviours.

Through these sessions, the boy showed a notable improvement in recognizing and discussing behaviours considered disruptive or undesirable, and he began associating them with real-life situations. His active participation and growing insight into positive behaviours suggest that the storytelling intervention effectively engaged him while promoting reflective thinking about his actions and their impact on others.

Contextual Analysis of Disruptive Behaviours

The data revealed that the subject's disruptive Behaviours were not evenly distributed across different types of lessons or times of day. For example, the subject was more prone to Disruptive Talking during mathematics and science lessons, which typically require higher concentration levels. Conversely, physical disturbances were more frequent during less structured, group-based activities.

The intervention appeared to have a differential impact depending on the context:

- a. Structured Lessons (Mathematics and Science): The reduction in Disruptive Talking was more pronounced during structured lessons, suggesting that the storytelling intervention helped the subject improve focus and self-regulation in more demanding academic settings.
- b. Interactive Lessons (Group Activities): The sharp decline in physical disturbances during group activities indicates that the stories may have provided the subject with alternative ways to interact with peers, reducing the need to resort to physical contact.

Daily Patterns of Behaviour

A closer examination of daily Behaviour patterns revealed a gradual but consistent decline in both disruptive Behaviours throughout the intervention period:

Day 1: The subject exhibited 4 instances of Disruptive Talking and 2 instances of physical disturbances. This initial high frequency of Behaviours is consistent with the baseline, as the subject was just beginning to engage with the intervention.

Day 2: A noticeable reduction occurred, with the subject Disruptive Talking 2 times and no physical disturbances recorded. This suggests early engagement with the storytelling content, particularly during the English lesson, which might have been more engaging or relatable for the subject.

Day 3: The subject maintained the reduced frequency of Disruptive Talking (2 instances) and continued to exhibit no physical disturbances. The sustained improvement indicates that the intervention's effects were beginning to solidify.

Day 4: The subject showed the lowest levels of disruptive Behaviour, with only 1 instance of Disruptive Talking and 1 physical disturbance. This final day reflects the cumulative impact of the intervention, as the subject demonstrated significant Behavioural control compared to the baseline.

Discussion

The results of this study provide compelling evidence that storytelling-based play therapy can effectively reduce disruptive Behaviours in a classroom setting. The significant reductions observed in both Disruptive Talking and physical disturbances suggest that this intervention can play a crucial role in promoting a more conducive learning environment. This study reinforces previous research, which suggests that play therapy or storytelling can reduce other impulsive behaviors such as aggression in children and adolescents (Dillman Taylor et al., 2019, 2021; Fauziah & Mulia, 2022; Miswartiningsi, 2022).

Effectiveness of Storytelling as an Intervention

The success of the storytelling intervention can be attributed to its unique combination of cognitive engagement, emotional resonance, and consistent reinforcement. Unlike traditional disciplinary approaches that often rely on punitive measures, storytelling actively engages children's cognitive faculties by requiring them to listen, imagine, and process narratives that mirror their own experiences. This cognitive engagement shifts the child's focus away from impulsive behaviors and provides a mental framework that encourages the rehearsal and internalization of socially appropriate behaviors (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015; Ma et al., 2023; Yabe et al., 2018). Additionally, the stories are designed to resonate emotionally by featuring relatable characters and scenarios, which fosters empathy and self-reflection in a way that punitive approaches cannot (Bower & Clark, 2024; Murphy et al., 2021). By evoking empathy, storytelling enables children to emotionally connect with the lessons, facilitating deeper internalization. The four-day structure of the intervention reinforces key themes through repetition, allowing multiple opportunities to practice and apply the lessons from the stories, which is crucial for behavior change in children (Sari et al., 2017). This approach not only reduces disruptive behaviors in the short term but also shows potential for long-term behavior

modification, as evidenced by the sustained reduction in disruptive behaviors over multiple days (Cummings et al., 2022). Compared to traditional disciplinary methods like time-outs or verbal reprimands, storytelling provides a non-punitive, supportive environment where children feel safe to explore and correct their behaviors, making it a promising alternative for developing social-emotional skills (Agosto, 2016)

Implications for Educational Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for educators, school psychologists, and policymakers. Given its effectiveness, storytelling could be integrated into regular classroom management practices, particularly for students who exhibit disruptive Behaviours. Teachers can use storytelling sessions as a preventive measure to promote positive Behaviours before disruptions occur. The success of the intervention underscores the importance of tailoring story content to the specific needs of the child. Stories closely aligned with the child's experiences and challenges are more likely to resonate and lead to meaningful Behaviour change. To maximize the benefits of storytelling as an intervention, educators may need training on how to select and deliver stories effectively. Understanding the psychological underpinnings of storytelling can help teachers craft stories that entertain, educate, and reform Behaviour.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

While the results are promising, there are several limitations to consider: (a) This study focused on a single subject, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include a larger sample size to determine whether the effects of storytelling can be replicated across different children and educational contexts, (b) The study was conducted over a relatively short period (eight days total). Longer-term studies are needed to assess the sustainability of the Behaviour changes observed and to explore whether periodic storytelling sessions can maintain or further improve Behaviour over time, (c) The subject in this study was a typically developing child. Future research could explore the effectiveness of storytelling-based interventions across a more diverse population, including children with developmental disorders or those from different cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

This study highlights the potential of storytelling-based play therapy as an effective intervention for reducing disruptive Behaviours in the classroom. The subject showed a marked decrease in both Disruptive Talking and Disruptive physical behaviour, demonstrating the intervention's capacity to promote positive Behavioural changes.

The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on non-punitive Behaviour management strategies and suggest that storytelling can be a valuable tool for educators. By engaging children cognitively and emotionally, storytelling can reduce disruptive Behaviors and foster a more positive and inclusive classroom environment.

Future research should continue to explore the broader applications of storytelling in educational settings, particularly in diverse populations and over longer periods. With further validation, storytelling could become a standard component of classroom management, offering a creative and effective alternative to traditional disciplinary approaches.

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