



Short Research Report

The effect of traditional play on the emotional intelligence, social ability, and self-esteem of children in Korean child welfare centers: A mixed-methods study

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This mixed-methods study investigated the effects of a traditional play program (TPP) on 48 children's emotional intelligence (EQ), social ability (SA), and self-esteem (SE), important skills for children's overall well-being and development. The participants were recruited from two child welfare centers (CCs) and divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group participated in a 13-week, biweekly 40-minute TPP designed to improve these skills. The analysis revealed TPP's efficacy in improving EQ, SA, and SE, with consequent implications for child welfare centers' interventions. Future research should focus on understanding underlying mechanisms and generalizability to other groups.

keywords: traditional play, emotional intelligence, social competence, self-esteem, child welfare centers, South Korea

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Introduction

Korean child welfare centers (CCs) offer a range of services to support the well-being of vulnerable children and families (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2021). Disadvantaged children attend CCs after school for food, education, and care due to poverty, lack of resources, or family instability (Lim & Park, 2022). These children may have emotional or socio-behavioral issues hindering their social development and adaptation (Lim, 2022). Yet, CCs' recreational/educational programs neither use traditional games nor target children's emotional intelligence (EQ), social abilities (SA), or self-esteem (SE) (Lim & Park, 2022).

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Programs involving traditional play/games (TPP) teaching cultural values, were found to have positive effects on children's EQ, SA, and SE (Kim & Choi, 2015; Lim & Park, 2022). TPPs also allow children to engage in imaginative and creative play, improving their EQ, sociality, and SE as they learn to respect others, feel a sense of belonging and bonding with their peers, and be proud of their participation in the play activity (Lim & Park, 2022).

Few studies on the impact of traditional play on children's EQ, SA, and SE were conducted in Korea (Lim, 2022). We hypothesized that traditional play might have a positive impact on these skills in children attending Korean CCs. We conducted a mixed-methods study to investigate the potential benefits of TPP on children's EQ, SA, and SE in Korean CCs, inspired by previous research and theories on play-based child development, as well as our expertise in traditional Korean games and the recent shift towards play-based education in Korea.

Method

Participants

After obtaining the approval of the Institutional Review Board (Dongguk University [DGUIRB-20210010]) and parental and CCs directors' consent, 48 children (grades 1-6) were divided into control and experimental groups. Each group consisted of 11 male and 13 female participants from grades 1-6. The CCs were selected for their similar regional, educational, and socioeconomic characteristics. The number of children attending each year varies, which explains the difference in the child-per-grade distribution. Twenty-six traditional Korean games (Table I) were implemented by CC teachers, a TP-certified assistant teacher, and two volunteers.

Measures

EQ, SA, and SE were measured using the Korean versions of Mayer and Salovey's EQ ($\alpha=.858$), Park's Social Skills ($\alpha=.835$), and Goreyshi et al.'s SE scales ($\alpha=.855$) (Table III, IV). Qualitative data were collected through observations and interviews. The children's transformations and stories were recorded and analyzed in each session. Structured interviews were conducted after the program to evaluate changes in sub-domains/themes covered by the scales (Table II).

Analysis

A concurrent embedded design was used to analyse the data. Chi-square and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used to compare the groups' characteristics and check variable normality and their results showed that the data followed normal distribution in both groups. EQ and SE were analysed using independent sample *t*-test, and SA with the Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (Table III, IV). Inductive coding and qualitative analysis of 22 children's observations and interviews were conducted by the researcher and an external coder blinded researcher (95% match). The resulting sub-themes were categorized following the sub-domains of the variables.

Table I. Content of the TPP (2-26).

| Sessions | Goals | Content |
|----------|--|---|
| 1 | Establishing rapport | Preliminary questionnaire, OT |
| 2 | Increasing intimacy, arousing interest | Chilgyonol-i/Tangram |
| 3 | | kkamagjabgi/Blind-man's buff |
| 4 | | Sseolmaetagi/Sledding |
| 5 | | Gong-ginol-i/Pebble |
| 6 | | Expressing the body through traditional play |
| 7 | Encouraging mutual support and cooperation | Mugunghwa-kkoch-i-pieosseubnida/Red-light green-light |
| 8 | | Jegichagi/Shuttlecock kicking-juggling |
| 9 | | Ssireum/Korean folk wrestling |
| 10 | | Balamgaebi/Pinwheel |
| 11 | | Hwalssogi/Archery |
| 12 | | Yunnori/yut game |
| 13 | Expressing oneself, understanding others | Paeng-ichigi/Top spinning |
| 14 | | Sangaji/Counting rods |
| 15 | | Sangajihcigi/Knocking counting rods |
| 16 | | Ddakjichigi/Ddakji |
| 17 | | Ddakji-nalligi/Throwing Ddakji |
| 18 | Experiencing a sense of accomplishment and collaboration | Sabangchigi/Hopscotch |
| 19 | | Daemunnol-i/London bridge |
| 20 | | Sumbakkogjil/Hide-and-seek |
| 21 | | Daemaltagi/Horseback-riding |
| 22 | Experiencing a sense of accomplishment | Biseokchigi/Pebble throwing-kicking |
| 23 | | Group Biseokchigi |
| 24 | | Tuhonol-i/Pitch-pot |
| 25 | | Jachigi/Tip-cat |
| 26 | | Juldaligi/Tug-of-war |
| 27 | | Subagchigi/Pat-a-cake |
| 28 | Follow-up questionnaire, 20 questions. | |

Table II. Results of the process analysis (PA) and interview analysis (IA) of the TPP

| Factor | Theme | Sub-theme | PA | IA |
|--------|----------------------------------|--|---|---|
| EQ | Self-awareness | Expressing emotions well when having fun | “I was so excited when I hit the Ddakji, I screamed.” ([S]ession 16) | “The seeker couldn’t find me. My friends hid and giggled.” (Sunhee/F4) |
| | | Self-management | Admitting defeat without getting angry | When the counting rods kept falling, some children said “even if they fall, let’s do it until the end.” (S14) |
| | Waiting patiently for one’s turn | | After playing Yunnori, each group applauded the friends who arrived first and patiently waited for their turn. (S12) | “I really wanna do it, but it’s hard because someone else’s taking their time. Still, I wait.” (Soohee/F1) |
| | Social awareness | Feeling sorry for a hurt friend | “Ah~Sukchul(M6) is being dragged away. Be strong!” mourned one student. (S26) | “When my friends fall, I think ‘that must hurt.’” (Minchul/M1) |
| | | Relationship management | Expressing gratitude for help | “Miss! Bumchul’s really good. We had a really hard time, but our team worked hard and won” and gave her friend a thumbs-up.(S26) |
| | Welcoming and greeting friends | | NA | “I like friends who play well with me.” (Jungchul/M2) |
| SA | Sociability | Making friends easily | “Even if they’re not my favorite friends, I still play games with the teacher and my other friends, and we all become a team.” (S2) | “I play games with random friends, whether they’re good at them or not. It’s fun just playing with friends, and I don’t care if I win or lose. Playing games with friends is more fun than trying to win.” (Sukchul/M6) |
| | | Playing with friends without fighting | After shooting the arrows, they picked them up and gave them to the others to use. (S11) | “When deciding which game to play with my friends, we vote.” (Jongchul/M4) |
| | Interpersonal adaptability | Being good at yielding to friends | “It’s hard for my younger friends to run away” he said while giving the younger friends time to run. (S7) | “When I play London bridge, I stick behind my friends and play with them. When a friend asks me to give up my turn, I just do and head to the back of the line.” (Minchul/M1) |

| | | | | |
|----|----------------------|---|---|---|
| | | Being friendly and kind to friends | Haechul(M5) said “You’re too short; I’ll make it shorter.” (S27) | “I’ve done archery at school. I can explain archery and hide-and-seek to my friend so we can play it.” (Woochul/M5) |
| | Social participation | Participating well in activities with friends | One child cheered another who doesn’t complain about his different physique. (S9) | “I like playing best when it’s with my favorite friends.” (Hyehee/F5) |
| | Initiative | Leading play | “If you want it to spin longer, don’t spin it too fast or too slowly,” explained the captain to the children. (S10) | “I’ll do it. I’ve never done it before, but I’ll just do it. If our team loses, then there’s nothing we can do. It’d be good if we win.”(Hyunchul/M6) |
| | Popularity | Making friends laugh | “Wow, that’s amazing. Wow, it’s fast; if you do this, you’re going to fly off with the arrow,” joked one student. (S11) | “It’s fun playing with friends because I make them laugh.” (Shihee/F4) |
| SE | Social SE | Persevering and not giving up easily | To win, one child took off his socks and started the tug-of-war. (S26) | “I play until it’s over. Playing tug-of-war was hard; I still did it till the end.” (Mihee/F2) |
| | | Collaborating with friends | The friends rescued those caught in the game of tag and assisted younger players in escaping quickly. (S7) | “Woochul thinks about others’ feelings. We won because he thought of how the others would feel.” (Yoochul/M3) |
| | | Being a deserving person | “Miss, we’re doing really well,” repeated one and added that she didn’t fall and went all the way. (S10) | “I think it’s worth being born.” (Bumchul/M6) |
| | Overall SE | Having fun with friends | One child couldn’t stop laughing, said “Wow, I won. Hey~I won, let’s do it again.” (S27) | “Playing with friends is fun. I learned something new while playing traditional games.” (Eunhee/F5) |
| | | Being popular among friends | Yoochul(M3), who was playing really well, was asked to team up. (S23) | “I feel very proud when other people thank me.” (Bumchul/M6) |
| | | Being proud of oneself | The children learned how to spin a top and gained confidence in their ability to do so, continuing to spin it. (S13) | “I feel proud because I contributed to the victory. I know this. I’m happy even if nobody knows.” (Hyehee/F5) |

Table III. Pre- post-test score differences in EQ, SA, and SE

| | Experimental group(n=24) | | | | t/Z | Control group(n=24) | | | | t/Z | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|------|-----------|------|----------|---------------------|------|-----------|------|------|----------|
| | Pre-test | | Post-test | | | Pre-test | | Post-test | | | |
| | M | SD | M | SD | | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| EQ | 3.36 | 0.68 | 3.93 | 0.60 | t=-3.933 | *** | 3.38 | 0.43 | 3.45 | 0.45 | t=-1.919 |
| Self-awareness | 3.15 | 0.83 | 3.88 | 0.89 | -4.425 | *** | 3.35 | 0.79 | 3.33 | 0.70 | 0.196 |
| Self-management | 3.33 | 1.05 | 3.79 | 0.79 | -1.771 | | 3.46 | 0.67 | 3.54 | 0.76 | -0.595 |
| Social awareness | 3.48 | 0.89 | 3.77 | 1.01 | -1.320 | | 3.52 | 0.87 | 3.56 | 0.84 | -0.262 |
| Relationship management | 3.48 | 0.99 | 4.27 | 0.81 | -4.015 | *** | 3.19 | 0.66 | 3.35 | 0.67 | -1.881 |
| SA | 3.05 | 0.58 | 3.58 | 0.69 | Z=-3.506 | *** | 3.19 | 0.44 | 3.14 | 0.44 | Z=-1.821 |
| Sociability | 3.25 | 0.81 | 3.77 | 0.86 | -2.153 | * | 3.40 | 0.78 | 3.25 | 0.82 | -1.444 |
| Interpersonal adaptability | 3.15 | 0.60 | 3.60 | 0.88 | -2.124 | * | 3.23 | 0.71 | 3.31 | 0.69 | -0.884 |
| Social participation | 3.52 | 0.62 | 4.13 | 0.85 | -3.234 | *** | 3.50 | 0.74 | 3.40 | 0.77 | -1.076 |
| Initiative | 2.58 | 1.06 | 3.15 | 1.17 | -2.233 | * | 2.73 | 0.57 | 2.73 | 0.71 | -0.030 |
| Popularity | 2.73 | 1.15 | 3.25 | 1.13 | -2.231 | * | 3.10 | 0.82 | 3.02 | 0.56 | -0.894 |
| SE | 3.29 | 0.71 | 3.75 | 0.77 | t=-3.620 | *** | 3.22 | 0.40 | 3.30 | 0.48 | t=-1.748 |
| Social SE | 3.33 | 0.85 | 3.81 | 0.79 | -2.640 | * | 3.31 | 0.55 | 3.35 | 0.59 | -0.622 |
| Overall SE | 3.25 | 0.70 | 3.70 | 0.88 | -3.121 | ** | 3.14 | 0.64 | 3.25 | 0.64 | -1.408 |

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Results

Quantitative results. The experimental group showed a statistically significant improvement in EQ, SA, and SE compared to the control group. Specifically, significant improvements were noted across all the sub-domains of SE, and some sub-domains of SA (social participation, sociability, initiative, and popularity) and EQ (self-awareness, relationship management). No significant improvements were found in the remaining sub-domains (Table III, IV).

Qualitative results. 18 sub-themes were identified through process analysis of the TPP and 19 through interview analysis. The 22 children responded to each sub-theme (100% response rate). Table II presents selected quotes and observations with children's aliases, sex, and grade.

Table IV. Effect of TPP on EQ, SA, and SE

| | Experimental group(n=24) | | Control group(n=24) | | <i>t/Z</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|------------------|----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| EQ | 0.57 | 0.71 | 0.07 | 0.17 | <i>t</i> =3.365 | .002 |
| Self-awareness | 0.73 | 0.81 | -0.02 | 0.52 | 3.824 | .000 |
| Self-management | 0.46 | 1.27 | 0.08 | 0.69 | 1.274 | .211 |
| Social awareness | 0.29 | 1.08 | 0.04 | 0.78 | 0.918 | .363 |
| Relationship management | 0.79 | 0.97 | 0.17 | 0.43 | 2.891 | .007 |
| SA | 0.53 | 0.59 | -0.05 | 0.15 | <i>Z</i> =-4.122 | .000 |
| Sociability | 0.52 | 1.01 | -0.15 | 0.48 | -2.430 | .015 |
| Interpersonal adaptability | 0.46 | 0.99 | 0.08 | 0.46 | -1.043 | .297 |
| Social participation | 0.60 | 0.71 | -0.10 | 0.47 | -3.667 | .000 |
| Initiative | 0.56 | 1.09 | 0.00 | 0.51 | -2.052 | .040 |
| Popularity | 0.52 | 0.97 | -0.08 | 0.46 | -2.502 | .012 |
| SE | 0.46 | 0.62 | 0.08 | 0.21 | <i>t</i> =2.852 | .008 |
| Social SE | 0.47 | 0.88 | 0.04 | 0.33 | 2.251 | .032 |
| Overall SE | 0.44 | 0.70 | 0.11 | 0.39 | 2.042 | .049 |

Note: **p*<.05, ***p*<.01, ****p*<.001

Discussion

The present study examined the impact of TPP on EQ, SA, and SE among children attending Korean CCs. While some improvements were not statistically significant, TPP positively impacted most of the measured skills. Specifically, it helped children recognize and regulate emotions and build positive relationships with peers, and improve social support and self-esteem, leading to overall improvements in EQ (Lim & Park, 2022). The findings also align with Cho (2012), suggesting that TPPs enhance children’s sense of community, social skills, and ability to form positive relationships with peers. Finally, winning in meaningful and personally relevant games makes children feel valued, respect themselves, and fosters their interest in and love for one another (Kim & Choi, 2015). These positive findings need to be considered however, in the light of the study’s limitations, namely potential researcher bias, small sample size, and partial effectiveness. Future research should use larger samples, test different play programs, and examine traditional play effects on different age groups.

Disclosure

This is to confirm that the author has no conflict of interest to disclose with regards to this research.

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