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## An Effective Method in Improving Social Skills: Literature Circles

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**Abstract:** This study was carried out to determine the effect of literature circles on the social skills of fourth-grade elementary school students. To this end, the study was designed as a quasi-experimental study and carried out on 74 students in a public elementary school in the Pamukkale district of Denizli, Turkey. The literature circles method was administered to an experimental group for 18 weeks. In the control group, activities continued in line with the current Turkish Course Curriculum. "School Social Behavior Scales" were used as a data collection instrument. A comparison of the scores on the scales revealed that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in favor of the experimental group. The results imply that the literature circles method had a positive influence on the development of the students' social skills.

**Keywords:** *Literature circles, social skills, elementary school.*

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### Introduction

Social skills are referred to as effective and essential skills that play a significant role in the ability of children to communicate effectively with their peers and teachers, with whom they spend the majority of their time, and to perform social functions (Sumer, 2003). Social skills, like many other skills, are largely taught to children at the elementary education level (Cubukcu et al., 2013). This is because deficiencies in social skills may cause children to have some negative emotions and thoughts, such as adaptation problems, propensity for violence, insecurity, and anxiety. Such emotions and thoughts adversely influence their peer relations and also impair their learning at school, negatively affecting their academic achievements. Consequently, their quality of life can also be influenced in a direct manner (Avcioglu, 2012; Coskun & Samanci, 2012). Moreover, social skills are considered an important element forming personal competencies. It has been stated that if people lack such skills, they experience significant problems in establishing emotional and social relationships, maintaining relationships, and coping with the problems they face. In this sense, social interaction can be considered as a universal and inseparable part of a person's life (Kabasakal & Celik, 2010).

Child development is a whole. Positive changes in a certain trait can have a positive impact on other traits. For this reason, students with poor social skills have been reported to have poor academic achievement in general. Students with strong social skills in the classroom environment also come to the forefront with their academic achievements. Research shows that there is a significant correlation between social skills and academic success in school (Coskun & Samanci, 2012). It has been pointed out that children fail particularly in primary school due not only to cognitive incompetencies, but also to social incompetencies (Kocak et al., 2015). For this reason, further research is needed to provide children with social skills that facilitate their social adaptation (Kabasakal & Celik, 2010). A review of studies on social skills shows that such studies have mostly been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of various programs and interventions to teach students social skills during the preschool period (Erbay, 2008; Kadir & Orcan, 2011; Kayili & Ari, 2016; Kocak et al., 2015). There is also research examining social skills at different elementary school levels (Coskun & Samanci, 2012; Civitci & Civitci, 2009; Duran et al., 2013; Duran & Saban, 2015; Kabasakal &

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Celik, 2010; Tagay et al., 2010; Uz Bas, 2010). According to Genc's (2005) study, elementary school students do not have sufficient social skills.

A review of the methods and practices for developing social skills has highlighted the literature circles method. Research on literature circles shows that there are studies introducing the cognitive, affective, and social benefits of literature circles to people (Almasi, 1995; Ediger, 2002; King, 2001; Lopez Medina, 2007; Peterson & Belizaire, 2006). Literature circles are defined as a teaching method in groups created in accordance with students' choices of books, where students periodically discuss the parts they read (Daniels, 2002). Literature circles usually involve an active collaboration of four or five students. In such circles, students gather to select books to read based on their interests and to discuss them in-depth (Ediger, 2002; Ruby et al., 2003; Schoonmaker, 2014). During a reading, students take notes about their reading, share their reading roles, and discuss the text according to these roles. In literature circles, regular meetings are held, and in each meeting session, discussion roles are swapped. Once a book is finished, group members share what they have read with other classmates. Then, the cycle of reading and discussion begins again with the selection of a new text or a new book (Daniels, 1994). In literature circles, each student respects others' opinions during discussions, which is an important feature highlighted in literature circles.

Literature circles are an effective practice to collaboratively support a study environment, to make reading and writing successful, and to improve spoken language. Literature circles have a great impact on and allow the highest level of support for student participation as they constitute a dynamic approach. On the other hand, literature circles encourage students to participate fully as leaders and teachers in an environment suitable for studying collaboratively. Within regular classroom routines, often academically successful students come to the forefront in sharing responsibilities. In literature circles, however, every student has an equal opportunity to manifest himself or herself. Students who have difficulty reading or are weak in reading do not stay behind. Such students can also choose roles or activities suitable for themselves to demonstrate their special abilities (Anderson, 2009).

Students can develop a critical perspective on human nature depending on their values and contexts as they interact with their peers in literature circles. Students become aware not only of questioning or justifying others' attitudes but also of their own when they establish connections between the book they are reading and their life experiences, needs, and concerns. All such connections and thoughts establish the basis of aesthetic experiences created through interactions with their peers and texts (Lopez Medina, 2007). In such peer interactions, students are able to study together successfully in literature circles where students with different abilities do not harm the self-esteem of students with poor skills, or no learning hierarchy is established between students with strong academic abilities (Pierzga, 2007). The literature circles method — with all these features of it and a structure based on collaborative and student-centered work — stands out as a method that contributes to the development of students both academically and socially.

### *Significance and Aim*

It is possible for people who have acquired social skills sufficiently to build healthier relationships in different areas of their lives. It has been pointed out that acquiring social skills during childhood has significant consequences. Therefore, people's acquisition of adequate social skills at an early age allows them to be successful in different areas of their lives and to adapt to the society (Caldarella & Merrell, 1997; Kabasakal & Celik, 2010). Deficiencies in social skills, however, may cause children to have some negative emotions and thoughts, such as adaptation problems, propensity for violence, insecurity, and anxiety. All such negativities adversely influence students' peer relations and also impair their learning at school, negatively affecting their academic success. Thus, their quality of life can also be influenced in a direct manner (Avcioglu, 2012; Coskun & Samanci, 2012). It has been pointed out that heterogeneously formed literature circle discussion groups led by students contribute to each other's learning, creating opportunities for the development of social interaction, and higher-order thinking skills. In addition, there are several studies in the literature that have demonstrated that the literature circles method contributes positively to social skills development (Brown, 2015; Certo, 2011; Kim, 2004; McElvain, 2010; Pierzga, 2007). Literature circle practices include collaborative studies and require students to work interactively in groups. Moreover, group interaction and dynamics play a significant role in the success of the studies. In the present study, it was expected that such literature circle practices would have a positive influence on the social skills of students. There are a variety of studies that show the capability of different methods for the development of social skills in our country, Turkey. However, no studies conducted in Turkey investigating the influence of the literature circles method on social skills could be found. For this reason, this study aiming to demonstrate the influence of the literature circles method on social skills is expected to contribute to the literature in Turkish.

In this context, this study was conducted to test the following hypothesis: "When the social skills pretest scores of the students in the experimental group undergoing the literature circles method and the students in the control group undergoing the current Turkish Course Curriculum are controlled, there is a significant difference between the groups in terms of posttest scores." In other words, the aim was to determine the influence of the literature circles method on social skills of fourth-grade elementary school students.

## Method

### Research Model

This study was designed as a “pretest-posttest nonequivalent control group design,” which is one of the quasi-experimental research designs of quantitative research methods. The implementation was carried out by randomly identifying two groups as the experimental and control groups from the existing fourth-grade cohorts. It has been pointed out that this type of design is the most suitable model for educational research, in which it is particularly difficult to randomly select people to participate in a study. Such groups initially undergo a pre-test, then an experimental intervention is carried out in one of the groups, and at the end of the intervention, a post-test is administered to both groups (Basturk, 2014; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2008).

### Sample

Data were collected through practices conducted in the fall semester of the 2017–2018 academic year. To that end, permissions for the study and the practices were obtained from the Denizli Provincial Directorate of National Education. After the permissions, the implementation school was determined through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling was preferred because, as Creswell (2013) pointed out, in many experimental studies, only convenience sampling is practical due to the fact that no other than spontaneous groups or volunteers can be found. Convenience sampling was also preferred to implement the quasi-experimental design in a healthy manner. A meeting was held with the principal and the fourth-grade teachers at the designated school, and the study was explained to them in detail. The social skills scale pretest scores of the students in three cohorts who were interested and willing to participate in the study were compared. One of the two classes with the closest scores was determined randomly as an experimental group and the other as a control group. The students filled out a personal information form to allow making sure that the experimental and control groups were equivalent. By comparing the information from the form, the experimental and control groups were selected to have similar characteristics. Comparison of the social skills pretest scores of the experimental and control groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Independent Samples t-Test Results Regarding Social Skills Pretest Scores of Experimental and Control Groups

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	t	p
Social Skills (Pretest)	Experimental	38	4.50	0.551	-0.466	0.643
	Control	36	4.55	0.380		

Table 1 shows the independent samples t-test results regarding the pretest scores of the experimental and control groups on social skills. According to this table, the scores on social skills did not differ significantly between the experimental and control groups ( $t = -0.466$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Therefore, it can be said that the experimental and control groups were equal in terms of social skills.

### Data Collection Instruments

The “School Social Behavior Scales”, developed by Merrell (1993) and adapted to Turkish by Yukay-Yuksel (2009), was used to determine the students’ social skills. Confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to test the reliability of the scales. Factor loading values resulting from the confirmatory factor analysis were between 0.26 and 0.79. The values indicate that a great number of items were at a desired level ( $>0.30$ ). The *internal consistency* of the scales was calculated separately for the two scales and each sub-scale of the scales. The results were significant at  $p < 0.001$  level. Cronbach  $\alpha$ , and Spearman Brown and Guttman Split-Half reliability coefficients of the sub-scales ranged from  $r = 0.98$  to  $r = 0.91$ . A high correlation was achieved between the data obtained from the practices carried out for the test–retest method at  $p < 0.001$  level. The correlation coefficients based on the sub-scales varied between  $r = 0.83$  and  $r = 1.00$ . These results indicate that the School Social Behavior Scales were highly reliable. The Cronbach Alpha value in this study was calculated as 0.97 for all dimensions of the School Social Behavior Scales as a result of the practices performed in the experimental and control groups.

### Data Collection Process

The quasi-experimental design was carried out in the two fourth-grade cohorts of an elementary school in Denizli province. One of the two cohorts was determined randomly as an experimental group and the other as a control group. The literature circles practice was administered for 18 weeks in the experimental group. In the experimental group, the researcher first carried out an awareness program. The program included four two-week literature circle practices. This program was carried out to raise the students’ awareness about how to play their roles in literature circles and how to discuss during group meetings. In general, roles are classified as basic and optional ones. The basic roles include participation as a questioner, a connector, a literary luminary, or an illustrator. Optional ones involve being a summarizer, a vocabulary enricher, a scene setter/travel tracer, a character analyzer, or a predictor. Each student in the

group assumes a role and does whatever it requires for the group success. After two weeks of practice, the books selected in the experimental group were read within the scope of the literature circles practices and discussed in accordance with the roles determined in the weekly group discussions. The practices at the first meeting began with selecting a book, creating groups and distributing roles. In subsequent meetings, the students discussed the book part that they had read based on their roles. After the whole book was read, the students prepared group projects and presented them to the other groups in the class. These practices were repeated for each book in each literature circle cycle. In the control group, the students read the same books during reading hours in accordance with the existing Turkish Course Curriculum. After the entire book was read completely, the usual practices were followed in the form of writing a summary of the book and explaining the summary of the book verbally. During the last week, the post-tests were administered to complete the quasi-experimental study.

### Data Analysis

Statistical techniques including percentages, frequencies, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, chi-square analysis, and independent-samples t-test were used when analyzing the data obtained from this study. When comparing the pre-test scores, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was carried out to determine whether the scores showed a normal distribution. According to the values obtained from the test ( $KSZ = 1.379$ ;  $p > 0.05$ ), the scores showed normal distribution. Because of the normal distribution, the scores of the students in the experimental and control groups on the social skills pre-test were analyzed through independent-samples t-test to identify any differences between the groups. Percentages, frequencies, and chi-square analyses were carried out to examine the demographic characteristics in the personal information form. Although the experimental and control groups were balanced in terms of social skills, it may be more accurate to run analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to account for the effect of one or more of the confounding variables affecting the dependent variable, which allows to achieve more accurate, consistent and reliable results (Sonmez & Alacapinar, 2014). Thus, one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was carried out to analyze the post-test scores.

### Findings

The hypothesis of the study was established as "When the social skills pre-test scores of the students in the experimental group undergoing the literature circles method and the students in the control group undergoing the traditional instructional method are controlled, there is a significant difference between the groups in terms of post-test scores."

Table 2 shows the arithmetic mean and standard deviation values of the pre-test and post-test scores on social skills. Table 2 also shows the corrected mean scores and the standard error values on the post-test, which were calculated as a result of the analysis of covariance and used in the multiple comparison test.

Table 2. Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviation Values of Scores of Students in Experimental and Control Groups on Social Skills Pretest and Posttest, and Corrected Mean Scores and Standard Error Values on Posttest

Groups	n		Total Scores		Corrected Posttest Means	
			M	SD	M <sub>d</sub>	SE
Experimental Group	38	Pretest	4.50	0.55		
		Posttest	4.92	0.00	4.92	0.037
Control Group	36	Pretest	4.55	0.38		
		Posttest	4.70	0.34	4.69	0.038

An examination of Table 2 reveals that the mean posttest scores of the experimental group increased in comparison to the mean pretest scores ( $M = 4.92, 4.50$ , respectively). The mean post-test scores of the control group also increased ( $M = 4.70, 4.55$ , respectively). As shown in Table 2, the corrected mean post-test total score of the experimental group ( $M = 4.92$ ) was higher than that of the control group ( $M = 4.69$ ). Analysis of covariance was carried out to test whether this observed difference was significant. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. Analysis of Covariance Results of Posttest Total Scores of Students in Experimental and Control Groups on Social Skills Scale

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Controlled Variable (Pretest)	0.404	1	0.404	7.654	0.007
Main Effect of Grouping	0.974	1	0.974	18.441	0.000***
Error	3.751	71	0.053		
Total	1720.823	74			

\*\* $p < 0.005$

The results of the analysis of covariance (Table 3) showed that the main effect of grouping was significant in terms of the corrected mean posttest scores when the pretest total scores were controlled [ $F(1,71) = 18.441, p = 0.000; \eta^2 =$

0,445]. It can be said that the significant main effect of grouping had a relatively large effect size (Cohen, 1988). Bonferroni binary comparisons test was carried out to identify among which groups the specified difference was. Table 4 shows the results.

*Table 4. Bonferroni Test Results on Significance of Differences Between Corrected Mean Posttest Total Scores of Students in Experimental and Control Groups*

<b>Comparison</b>	<b>True Difference</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>p</b>
Experimental Group/Control Group	0.230	0.054	0.000

Table 4 shows that there was a statistically significant difference between the groups in favor of the experimental group. This finding can be interpreted as that the literature circles method created a significant difference in the development of the social skills of the students in the experimental group. In other words, it can be said that the literature circles method positively influenced the students' social skills development.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The literature circles method that was implemented in this study positively influenced the social skills of the students. There are a variety of studies in the literature showing the effects of literature circles on social skills development. Pierzga (2007) has pointed out that literature circles are effective in fourth-grade students' social skills development. Certo (2011) has stated that literature circles support elementary school students' social skills development. Kim (2004) has stated that students engage in high levels of social interaction in literature circles that are practiced for adults in language teaching. McElvain (2010) has stated that literature circles positively influence students' sense of self-efficacy, and their confidence and willingness to participate in class discussions. Moreover, Brown (2015) used the literature circles method to help third-grade students express themselves more democratically in discussions on digital texts. Based on her study, she stated that the group discussions that were conducted were effective in social interactions. The results of the cited studies are similar to the result of the present study, indicating that literature circles have a positive effect on social skills. In other words, the positive effects of literature circles on the students' social skills development are consistent with the research results in the literature. The students' participation in continuously-changing heterogeneous groups in the literature circle practices was effective in this outcome.

Small group interactions by using books naturally create a good conversation and discussion environment (Heller, 2006). Literature circle discussion groups offer opportunities for students to improve themselves in social interaction and higher-order thinking through their contributions to each other's learning. Moreover, literature circles help students construct active learning through a reflective and collaborative social environment (Purifico, 2015). Students are more enthusiastic to participate in difficult tasks when they engage in learning activities in collaborative study groups. It has been pointed out that classes where students participate in well-planned collaborative studies are venues in which administrative problems decrease and students develop social and learning skills (Willis, 2008). Furthermore, the common point of group studies and discussions after reading in literature circles is that they take place under peer leadership. Such student-managed and regular student-led interactions (Shelton-Strong, 2012) ensure positive communication and increased sociality among students.

Social skills are referred to as the ability to adapt to the social environment and to cope with possible conflicts using appropriate means of communication (Hilooglu & Cenkseven-Onder, 2010). The fact that the social structure and rules change rapidly makes it difficult for students to adapt to themselves and to their environments; in addition, students' socialization, which is one of the main objectives of education, becomes of secondary importance, considering that more emphasis is placed on academic learning and that educational activities are usually carried out in the form of direct teaching within the educational system (Kara & Cam, 2007). However, it is very important for people to have the skills to prevent negative reactions from other people around them and to ensure that other people react positively. This is because it is possible for people to have healthy communication and interaction with their environment by having socially acceptable behaviors. Such behaviors referred to as social skills play a significant role that directly impacts people's social lives (Yuksel, 2001). Therefore, in educational systems, social skills should be taught and improved with academic skills. Starting from the preschool period, social skills should be taught using diverse methods. In this context, it can be said that the literature circles method can be implemented as an effective method to improve students' social skills.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the conclusion that the literature circles were effective on the social skills of the students, some recommendations can be given for researchers and practitioners. Social relations can be improved among students in different classes by using common literature circles practices in different disciplines at the same grade level. In the present study, literature circles were practiced with fourth-grade students. According to Daniels (2002), literature

circles can be used in different grade levels as they can be practical beginning with the third grade. Research can be designed to implement literature circles in different classes in a longitudinal time frame.

### Limitations

In the present study, the duration of the literature circles was limited to 18 weeks. Studies can be planned to implement literature circles in a longer period. The present study was limited to the "School Social Behavior Scales," which constituted the data collection instrument. Another limitation of the study was the set of books chosen and read in the literature circles. Studies can be designed by diversifying books in line with interests of students.

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