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Delineation of Self Image: A Critical Study of Perception in Autistic Children

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ABSTRACT--*Autism spectrum disorder or ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder and individuals suffering with it face social and communicative difficulties. Many of them show mismatched Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab, India.feelings about themselves. The current study focuses on the perception of children with ASD about themselves and their immediate awareness of the environment. The main objective of this research is to decipher their conceptual understanding about themselves as well as focus on their observation skills and their artistic qualities in expressing their perception through the medium of art. It is a qualitative research which utilizes random sampling method to analyze a group consisting of 6 autistic children, 3 male and 3 female; belonging to the age group of 6-12 years. The experiment required them to make a self-portrait wherein they were given instructions about the activity and supervised. Results show that most autistic children struggle with representation of self though they are sensitive to certain details of their body. The notion of self is extended to immediate environment as well as belongings. Drawing of form rather than color is the primary medium for expression of feelings.*

Keywords-- *Autism, Self-image, Drawing, Perception, ASD, Art therapy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder which affects communicative skills as well as general behaviour of an individual. In most cases, it is diagnosed very late in age but its symptoms are often appeared near the age of two in a child. It is a well-established fact that the human brain is not fully developed at the time of birth. At the age of 6 years almost 90% of the human brain is developed to its adult size. The structure of the brain consists of two hemispheres- left and right and they both need to be in constant connection with each other for perfect synchronisation. It is expected that the speed of the brain needs to be very quick in responding to the information received from various sources in the environment. Discrepancies in the expected speed lead to issues in brain synchronisation, resulting in the imbalance of electrical activity in the brain. This results in two possibilities, one where few areas of the brain function unusually better and they are known as 'Higher Functioning Area'. Second where the brain functions are inactive or less active that results in poor performance. Individuals with such a disorder have a feeling of suffering that cannot be compared to normal individuals because these feelings relate to their perception of own body which is mismatched. They find difficulty in recognising themselves relative to concepts such as space, visual measurement, coordination and timings. Over reaction to feelings of happiness and sadness and easy distraction are some of the very common features seen among them.

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Children with autism have cognitive abilities that lay between averages to above average intelligence. According to CDC (Centre for Disease Control) 1 in every 59 children suffer with ASD and while in male gender the ratio is 1 in 37, in the female gender it occurrence is as less as 1 out of 151 girls. Hence, it can be safely assumed that the male gender is approximately four times more prone to this disorder. The average age in which this disorder can be diagnosed is two years, although as a part of normal development its inquiry is delayed to an average age of 4 years. The diagnostic basis of ASD is found in general behaviour which displays social and developmental impairment. It is observed that they:

- like to stay alone and try to ignore other people's presence, find it difficult to adjust in social gatherings including their classmates and other known adults, try to avoid eye-contact.
- are generally irresponsive to the names and do not or very rarely give response to expressions, are hyper or hyposensitive towards sensory inputs like sounds, sight or physical contact.
- do not act on the instructions and do not imitate actions performed by adults such as talking on phone, driving vehicle and many other activities which normal children do.
- occasionally show insensitivity to the fears and pains, display of stress without any reason or are unaware of the stress in atmosphere.
- show good memory of songs, advertising jingles, rhyming lines
- display repetitive behaviour in peculiar body movements such as constant head movement from right and left, clapping, shaking of body, rocking while sitting in a chair or stool etc.

It has been observed that children with autism stay comparatively peaceful and motivated when they are involved in creative activities such as drawing or colouring. Their artworks act as a non-verbal means of communication, which also facilitates them to cope up with emotional issues. The art making process in autistic children assists them in the representation of physical and mental self and their creations are an evidence of their thought process. Art making is pleasurable and meaningful for teens and pre-teens with autism and has become an integral part of behavioural modification therapy. Many individuals with autism show up significant ability to work in the field of art as they find difficulty in expressing with words (Gradin,1995). However, there is very limited research on artistic expression of children with autism.

Self-awareness term is about getting to know about oneself which includes physical outlook and emotional traits (Morin, 2004). Dissimilarity is observed among the individuals with autism regarding self-image due to their heterogeneous nature of the condition (Elmose, 2016).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Grandin (1995) in her book titled 'Thinking in Pictures' states that children with autism think in pictures and words are their secondary language.

Gillian J. Furniss (2008) in his research on celebrating art making of children with autism takes up the case of three autistic children who can be considered as artists. Stephen Wiltshire is a mute autistic child who uses drawing for expression. He started to draw at the age of 5 years and by 10 years he was busy drawing buildings. Jessica Park is a child with delayed speech and language development and is impaired in social communication. She has created complex and intricate drawings showing hyper-sensitivity towards colours and patterns. Nadia, another autistic child amazed everyone with her drawings of horses, roosters and cats at the age of three and a half years.

The perfect perspective and sense of space in the drawings executed in the medium of black pen makes her a unique artist.

Yap Bee Chang, Amla Salleh and Kamaruzaman Jusoff (2011) in their research on portrait drawing therapy discuss the making of a portrait as an important therapy for autistic children. Since children with ASD have a habit of avoiding eye contact, 60-70 percent children do not recognise people. Using PDT (Portrait Drawing technique) a comparative analysis was done with non-autistic children and a small sample of 8 autistic children. Observations on general behaviour, attitude, confidence and artistic output have revealed that ASD subjects were able to give better results than non-ASD in the areas of colouring, drawing of facial features and structures, similarities and dissimilarities.

III. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research where random sampling method was used where the researcher selected 6 students, 3 male and 3 female; who suffer from mild and moderate ASD between the age group of 6-12 years. These participants belong to a special school who were instructed by their special educator about this activity. Material like paper, drawing material and colours were provided to the students. The topic of 'My-Self' was elaborated by mentioning sub-topics such as how do I look, my body, my dress and where I am. The educator explained them what to draw and how to draw step wise. They were asked to touch their face; feel it and then draw it. In the same way they were advised to touch eyes, hair, nose and draw. They were also told to touch their arms, hands and legs before drawing it. After completing drawing activity, they were told to use colours in their drawing.

These artworks acted as the primary data which was analysed by a male and a female art expert.

IV. FINDINGS

The artworks were critically examined by a male and a female art expert using observation method. Fig 1.1 by Parneet shows that the child has drawn more than one shape for face. The first representation of face is drawn in a proper circle where thick black outline of half circle shows hair while the rest of the outline is done with green colour. The choice of the skin colour of the child is as per norm followed. In terms of facial features, eyes of the child are left uncoloured and no lips are drawn. The second face gives an impression of an apple as it is coloured red. It is deciphered as a fruit because the lowermost drawing gives an impression of an orange slice. The second observer has decoded that this self-image is made in three separate attempts, starting from the lowermost drawing.

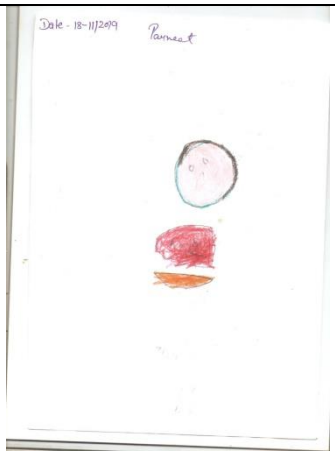

Figure 1.1: Parneet (M)

Figure 1.2: Tanu (F)

Figure 1.3: Jayaditya (M)

Figure 1.4: Preeti (F)

Figure 1.5: Priyam (M)

Figure 1.6: Natisha (F)

Fig 1.2 is a drawing by Tanu where the child has a proportionate perception of the face to body. Facial features have been drawn very prominently and although the nose is not very prominent but it is marked. There is an attempt to drawn arms though it lacks the detail of hands and fingers. Colour selection of the child for skin tone is as per norm while for dress, preference has been for warm colours. There is consistency of colour strokes and colouring follows contours of the drawing. Child is able to express her state of mind which is happy in making of this self-portrait. There is also an attempt to depict surroundings in terms of a suggestive table with folded legs, though not coloured; beside which is a school bag in red colour lying on the floor.

Self-portrait of Jayaditya in Fig 1.3 is an intriguing drawing which represents a confused perception of upper and lower body as the arms are directly attached with the face. The child has a good sense of fingers and made special efforts to draw thumb. Facial features are depicted in proportion with prominent eyes as well as detail of one eyeball; giving an impression of looking in a particular direction. Prominence of lips, parted hair ornamented with what appears to be a hairclip can be interpreted as a distorted perception of gender. Consistent use of line, with preference to drawing rather than colour is what defines the overall impression of this artwork. In the opinion of the second expert the representation of a female form could be either due to the prominent impact of a female from his family or a sense of style and fashion which has made attracted him and created a lasting impression on his mind.

The drawing attempted by Preeti (Fig. 1.4) displays her imaginative mind and better observation and expressive skill as compared to other children. The body has been drawn proportionately and lines are solid and confident. The child has juxtaposed eyes with hairline and a big smile expresses the child's happy state of mind. The choice of colour for face follows convention which includes the hairline and the child also displays wonderful sense of clothing and patterns. According to one of the experts, the child has attempted to show herself sitting in a purple chair behind her which she could not in her earlier three attempts. The environment consists of recognisable objects such as a big smiling flower with colourful petals and toys. Child also seems to have added elements such as the sun and clouds at a later stage since they are drawn directly with colour.

Fig.1.5 displays multiple attempts made by Priyam in drawing an image of himself correctly. The child has preferred not to colour and draws a total of three faces; wherein the two faces are marked with round eyes while the final face is made with complete detail of facial features. Though the alignment of nose and lips is parallel, the child has attempted to demarcate details in features such as eyeballs, nostrils as well as upper and lower lip. Opinion of expert differs on whether the child has attempted to draw hair or eyebrows in the upper part of the face. There is overall proportion in representation of the body but the drawing lacks clarity of limbs. In terms of elements, the use of line in drawing of face is stronger as compared that of the body. The awareness of environment has been depicted by a table like object in front with a stick that can be deciphered as a crayon which was used during the activity.

Fig. 1.6 displays Natisha's struggle in drawing a face and compose facial features rather than complete body. One eye is demarcated by black scribble surrounded by many green patches that are scattered over the face. The child has perhaps drawn more than two eyes with features such as nose and ears to create this abstract portrait of her; where one ear is round but while the second is a careful attempt to imitate the shape of the ear. Interestingly, the inverted image of self is very clear in terms of line, facial features and proportion which in in complete contrast to the main drawing. However, as per the opinion of another expert the inverted image might have been a contribution by another child, as the line quality of both drawings is different.

V. CONCLUSION

Perception of self is a critical notion in psychology and it becomes imperative to comprehend the complications of self-perception in children who suffer from autism. During the activity, it was observed that most children were excited and happy but at the same time were conscious in drawing. Art is an expression of the innermost feelings and thoughts but in the case of autistic children, it is also an expression of the struggle which they face in perception and representation of themselves and their environment. This can be evaluated by the fact that some of them have made multiple attempts in drawing their portrait and facial features. It is also evident that drawing becomes a key element of expression rather than colour, though the children seemingly have a reasonable sense of colour use. While some autistic children struggle with expressing correct proportion and formation of their body, others are comparatively better in terms of depicting objects from their immediate environment. However, what is apparent is that children are in a happy state of mind and have a positive perception of self.

Since children with autism do not find themselves comfortable with verbal expression, art activities such as drawing and painting can be adopted as a means of self-expression. This will lead to a better perception, communication, social relationship and overall development of children.

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