

Acting on the Autism Spectrum
Using Drama to Promote Social Skills for Children with Autism

Olivia Rhoades, B.S.

Department of Special Education

Eastern Michigan University

Program of Speech-Language Pathology

Faculty Mentor:

Ana Claudia Harten, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

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Introduction

Research has shown that the use of existing and creative literature paired with drama activities can increase the social skills of children on the autism spectrum (Schneider & Goldstein, 2009; Peter, 2009). Additionally, several theatre activities have been successful in teaching social skills to these children, including “mantle of the expert” activities, “teacher-in-role” activities, rehearsal, and performance (Kempe & Tissot, 2012; Blythe, et.al. 2011). Strategies and guidelines have been developed to aid instructors in developing supportive environments for children on the autism spectrum, including use of visual supports, structure, sensitivity to sensory needs, and easing into the drama (Notbohm, 2012; Fisher, 2011).

This study examined parent report on perceived differences in social skills in their children after a one week summer camp involving intensive exposure to theater. The following research questions were addressed: 1) Will parents report improved social skills after daily, intensive exposure to theatre and drama activities in the form of a summer day-camp? 2) If so, what types of social skills changes will be reported? 3) Will parents’ reports be congruent with instructors’ reports on the children’s social skills observed throughout the camp?

Methodology

A summer theatre camp developed for children on the autism spectrum served as the platform for data collection for this qualitative study. The layout of this camp was consistent with the routine structure that is important for the success of children on the autism spectrum, while allowing opportunities for safe social interaction through hierarchically based instruction. Each day, the campers participated in drama games, music and dance class, and a rehearsal for the performance which took place on the last day of camp.

Eight parents of children on the autism spectrum and four theatre instructors participated in this study. These participants reported on eight campers on the autism spectrum. All four instructors had previous arts experience and either personal or professional experience with children on the autism spectrum.

The parents completed pre and post-camp questionnaires, which included both short answer questions and rating scales on 9 individual social skills. The instructors were required as part of their camp responsibilities to complete social skills observation logs at the end of each day. Both parents and instructors participated in a post-camp interview.

Results

The interviews were transcribed, coded, and cross-referenced for common themes. Seven main themes emerged (caregiver interaction, peer interaction, adjusting to routines, overall changes, positive experiences, recommendations, and continuing drama education), which were later analyzed for congruency between matched parents and instructors. Additionally, the pre and post camp rating scales that the parents completed were analyzed descriptively.

Parents reported significant changes in their children social interaction with caregivers, especially in relation to longer and more complex utterances, the willingness to share information about their day, and initiating humorous exchanges. The instructors reported changes in caregiver interaction in individual students as well in the overall group. Change in peer interaction was also noted by parents, and was characterized by awareness of peers, and increased initiation. All of the instructors observed changes in peer interaction among campers, citing increased participation, complexity of interactions, and forming of friendships. An unexpected theme that emerged was improvement in adjusting to routines. Only one parent had originally identified this skill as a goal for the camp; however, by the end of the camp, five parents and two instructors specifically mentioned an improvement in routine adjustment among

the campers. Parents reported changes in their children's overall social interactions, highlighting more positive daily exchanges and increased attention levels. Instructors reported overall social skills changes in individual campers, and cited noticeable increase in positive behaviors, and decrease in negative behaviors in the group as a whole.

Both parents and instructors indicated that the camp was a positive experience for the children. Parents cited including camp as an escape from everyday therapy, the pride that their children exhibited, and the children's newfound love for performing arts. Instructors not only reported camp as a positive experience for the children, but also mentioned it as a positive and fulfilling work environment. Despite the overwhelmingly positive experiences reported by both parents and instructors, recommendations were made to improve the camp experience further, including a longer camp to promote generalization and maintenance of skills, and a more sophisticated grouping element, such as peer mentors.

At the end of each interview, the parents and instructors were asked if, in terms of social skill growth, they would enroll their camper in another drama experience/recommend the current program continue. Five parents said yes with no caveats, while three would enroll their child again if certain changes in programming were implemented. Three of the four instructors recommended that the current program continue, while the fourth instructor recommended it continue with a more specific target group such as higher functioning autism.

In an analysis of congruency between parents and instructors reporting on the same child, congruency rates were high. For all seven themes, congruency was 50% or higher, with 100% congruency for four of the seven themes (changes in caregiver interaction, changes in peer interaction, adjusting to routines, and positive experiences).

After a descriptive analysis of the pre- and post- camp rating scales completed by the parents, several trends emerged. Children who began camp with poorer communication skills compared to some other campers were reported by their parents to have more prominent changes in their social skills. The same trend occurred when parents of children with previous arts experience reported more prominent social skills changes when compared to those without previous experience. Finally, certain social skills were reported to increase more regularly than other skills, including peer interaction, social cues, social perceptions, and eye contact.

Conclusions and Direction for Future Studies

The findings in the present study are congruent with previous reports in the literature on the benefits of theater activities on the social skills of children on the autism spectrum. Such benefits are evident even in short programs, as the week-long summer camp depicted in the present study. Both parents and instructors reported improvements in children's social skills as a result of the summer day-camp experience. Not only were changes in individual social skills cited as a result of camp, but overall positive changes on an individual and group level were also reported. Considering such positive effects, SLPs should consider including drama and theatre activities in the social skills curriculum to meet pragmatics goals among children on the autism spectrum. In addition, children on the autism spectrum should be welcomed in community and school drama programs in order to foster inclusion and acceptance.

This study had certain limitations in that it included a single-trial offering, small sample size, and only short-term data collection. Future studies should consider incorporating multiple theatre camps, a larger sample size, and a longitudinal design to assess generalization and maintenance of skills. Future studies on the subject may substantiate an efficacious social skills program using theatre and drama, thereby impacting the communication potential of children with autism spectrum disorder.

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