

Impact of Drama as a Therapy for Teaching Social-Communication Skills on Children with ASD

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Abstract:

Drama as a therapy has numerous research studies to prove its significance. This therapy and studies related to it were however limited to the west. In recent times the trend of using drama as a therapeutic tool for children with ASD has gained quite favorable responses. One of the few therapists who were instrumental in bringing this technique to India was Dr. Parasuram Ramamoorthi with setting up a centre for Autism at Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Drama therapy has distinct benefits when it comes to the special needs population. Studies have suggested that theatre based therapy can bring about improvements in the social deficits of autism. This study was hence undertaken to find out the effectiveness of drama in improving social and communication skills in children with ASD and to compare the improvement in social and communication skills in a group of ASD students taught using drama and a group of ASD students using conventional methods. The result of the study reveals that using drama as a therapeutic tool can be beneficial to teach social and emotional skills to children with autism. This also leads to a conclusion that innovative techniques like these if used in the classroom as well as therapy settings, can lead to better learning.

Keywords: Drama Therapy, Social Skills, Communication Skills, Autism

I. INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the need and impact of drama therapy for children with autism, it is important to have knowledge about autism. According to APA (1994), Autism Spectrum Disorder is characterized by repetitive and restrictive interests, problems with communication, and impaired social functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). ASDs occur in all socio-economic and racial groups, but are found to be more prevalent in boys rather than girls. Several common symptoms of ASD include lack of eye contact, difficulty in understanding their own and other person's emotions, echolalia, sensory processing disorders, obsessive interests, adherence to routines, and many more (CDC, 2012). Although a specific cause and cure has not been pinpointed for those with ASDs, there is a vast list of treatments, medicines, and therapies to help individuals of all ages to live with their disorder.

The roots of drama therapy are credited to a few individuals, one of them being Austrian psychodrama therapist, Jacob L. Moreno who worked towards this at the start of the 20th century (Bailey, 2010; Courtney & Schatter, 1981). In Courtney and Schattner's (1981) Drama in therapy Volume 2: Adults, the authors describe two defining features of Moreno's therapeutic process: the actual performance of the individual's problem and the community support.

The literature concerned with drama therapy specifically for those with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is minimal. Drama therapy resources specifically geared towards children with special needs is even smaller list, which focuses on autism, as a part.

The major purpose of carrying out therapy through drama focuses on the idea that art is communication (Bailey, 1993). Drama as a therapy uses theatre techniques in order to create a safe space to work through individual issues in order to find new perspectives or alternate solutions (Silverman, 2006).

As highlighted by silverman, the following four components aid the an individual with ASD to learn to communicate using theatre through a therapeutic process:

- **Performance:** Through performance the leader is able to determine if the individual is working with others, cooperating, and committing to the performance. In a study by Corbett, et. Al (2011) the students on the spectrum showed an increase in ability to recognize facial expression.
- **Projection:** This includes the different ways the individual communicates, such as using masks, puppets, written stories, role plays, etc. when one is not able to directly express themselves, these mediums help the individual access a different form of communication.
- **Narrative:** The narrative or the content of any story used during the process, allows the individual to take on roles in order to learn from other characters. The lessons and the characters that go into these narratives allow individuals to connect with the problem indirectly (Silverman, 2006).
- **Improvisation:** We use improvisation continuously throughout our lives, such as conversation and play skills. Improvisation in drama therapy begins with warm ups in

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order to help everyone prepare for the session. It also provides a way for clients to connect creatively with the current emotional state and spontaneously expresses this state through movement, sound, image, or improvisational play (Silverman, 2006).

Certain forerunners, in the field of drama for autism such as Autism Theatre Network leaders Andrew Nelson and Parasuram Ramamoorthi, do groundbreaking work in the field. Their research provides great arguments as to why drama could be so helpful for someone with ASD and what does it offer. The coauthors specially stress the benefit of role play exercises by saying "Young people with ASD often have strong visual memory but may lack the ability to plan and prepare and prepare for novel settings and events... rehearsed response or role play techniques can be used to help prepare for social situations" (Nelson & Ramamoorthi, 2011). For younger ages, children are in a crucial stage in which they experience new life events and must learn to cope in unfamiliar settings. They also stress that each individual has something to say but needs a different way to say it- a crucial theme for the foundations of drama therapy.

Theatre helps to build communication skills by using narrative as a component, and this is directly applicable to those who struggle expressing emotions, one of the three impairments included in an ASD diagnosis (Huebner, 2001). Bailey (1993) gives many accounts of using theatre to help students express emotion. Children with ASDs have trouble communicating emotions, and by giving them a character themselves.

Typically developing children learn to understand how others feel, think, believe, and operate, normally acquiring Theory of Mind skills by the age of four or five. While this ability comes naturally for most, someone with ASD may never learn such skills. However, the seemingly distant and uninterested attitude we receive from those with autism is not indicative of their true intentions. Children on the spectrum want social connections as well, and drama therapy helps a child learn how to relate to others by actually becoming another person through a character on stage (Bailey, 2010). The concept of learning about others through theatre was relevant as before as 30 years ago. It was considered as a way for those with disabilities to learn to relate to others and make "adequate social adjustment" (Blumberg, 1981, p. 108).

Lee R. Chasen (2011) talks about how capable children with ASD can be when it comes to theatrical talent. The spectrum according to him is so diverse that almost every child has an ability that establishes his or her theatrical skills. The children on the spectrum classified as higher functioning speak with a unique intonation that is expressive. Many of these children "reproduce specific vocal intonations and qualities" (Chasen, 2011, p.97), capturing the essence of a character. Most of the younger children, use their obsession with media in the theatre to explore the drama elements. For example, a child who has an obsession for Spiderman uses the superhero as a medium to communicate. Other unique skills present in children with ASD include the ability to memorize dialogue (echoic abilities), adherence to rules etc. No child with autism is the same- and some children may possess all, some or none of these abilities. Just as any other technique, some students with ASD excel in drama therapy while others may not. The growing partnership between drama and ASD needs to continue to grow.

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to explore how students with autism can improve their social- emotional and pre academic skills using drama as a therapy. Each participant was in an environment where he or she was interacting with peers, concentrating his/her physical body in games and exercises and learning to behave through different characters.

III. METHOD

Sample:

A total of 8 children diagnosed with autism were included in the study. The child participants were selected through convenient sampling from those who were attending AIISH, Preschool in Mysore, Karnataka. The only exclusion criterion was that they should not have any associated disability. The children belonged to different socio-economic status.

Procedure

After selection of children for the study, each child was assessed on Activity Checklist for Preschool Children with Developmental Disability (ACPC-DD, Venkatesan, 2003) for the social as well as the emotional domain. After the assessment common 10 items were selected to be focussed upon for the control as well as the experimental group.

With the baseline score in hand, a story (Hare and the Tortoise) was selected and sessions were planned for the experimental group, along with a trained special educator, having a background of using drama as a tool for teaching children with autism. The sessions consisted of warm up exercises and games, so that the children could get comfortable with the environment. For introducing the characters, the teacher initially used hand puppets. The next step consisted of making the children familiar with masks. Once the children got used to using the mask, the teacher started with enactment of the story, using handmade animal models. These models were used to demonstrate the story before enactment by the children actually. The enactment took part in the ground and the similar scene was created there.

At the same time the children in the control group were also assessed and taught the same story, but in the traditional way, using flash cards and video.

After a gap of 10 sessions, the children were again assessed to see if there are any improvements in the selected goals for the children, and if the same way of training can be continued. The results showed positive outcomes of the therapy used. Hence, after completion of 20 sessions, the final score was collected, based on the parent and teacher's report.

The results hence received were then analysed statistically for better understanding.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data analysed for finding out if drama as a therapy helps in improving the learning of social and emotional skills for children with autism, or is the traditional way of teaching more viable.

Table 1(a)

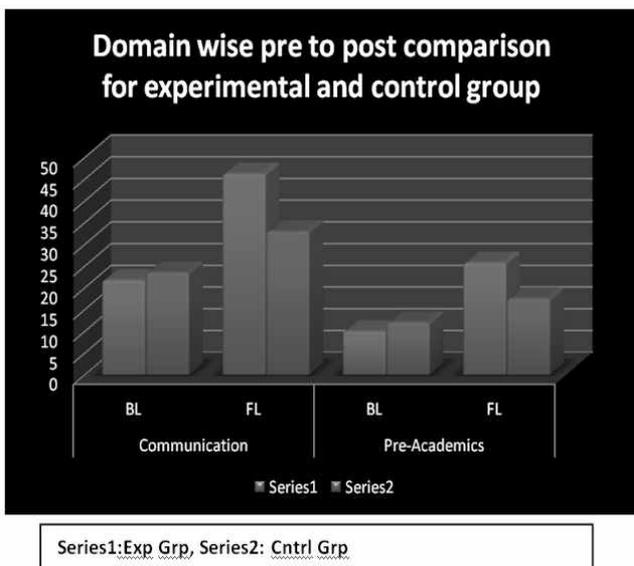
Domain wise distribution of pre & post treatment score on skill behaviour for experimental group

Domain	Communication		Pre-Academics	
	BL	FL	BL	FL
Total	87	185	40	103
Mean	21.75	46.25	10	25.75
SD	16.68	13.30	11.57	9.53
T Value	10.527		10.549	
P Value	0.002		0.002	

Table 1(b)

Domain wise distribution of pre & post treatment score on skill behaviour for control group

Domain	Communication		Pre-Academics	
	BL	FL	BL	FL
Total	94	132	48	70
Mean	23.50	33	12	17.50
SD	3.31	6.05	1.41	4.93
T Value	6.333		2.976	
P Value	0.008		0.059	



The results hence received are as follows:

- The results demonstrate that there is significant improvement in the social and emotional domains of both the control as well as the experimental group, but there is more improvement in the experimental group, which can be attributed to the techniques used in teaching the concept through drama. For the experimental group the

mean for communication domain improved from 21.75 to 46.25 (by 24.5 points) and the mean for pre academic domain improved from 10.00 to 25.75 (by 15.75 points). In the case of control group mean for communication improved from 23.50 to 33.00 (by 9.5 points) and mean for pre academics improved from 12.00 to 17.50 (by 5.5 points). This shows that in both the domains the extent of improvement was much higher in the experimental group rather than the control group, which proves the importance of using alternative techniques in teaching children with autism.

- Looking at domain wise improvement in both the groups, it can be seen that communication skills were more improved for both the groups although much more in the experimental group.

Thus after comparing the data, the study reveals that using drama as a therapeutic tool can be beneficial to teach social and emotional skills to children with autism. This also leads to a conclusion that innovative techniques like these if used in the classroom as well as therapy settings, can lead to better learning.

V. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With such results indicating the impact of drama therapy for teaching children with autism, it can be suggested that wider research can be undertaken for a longer duration and across various other domains to find out the real impact.

Also studies can also be carried out to see if it can help in reducing problem behaviours, which act as a hindrance in learning for children with autism.

And last but not the least, research focussing on drama therapy should be increased manifold and rehabilitation specialists, should take opportunity to get trained in drama therapy.

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