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Katie O'Leary

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Brighter Connections Theatre:

The Effects of Drama Therapy for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Katie O'Leary

Honors College Project

Bowling Green State University

Dr. Susan Cruca and Brianne Kramer

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## **Introduction**

My research for the summer of 2013 revolved around how drama therapy can positively affect students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). I began Brighter Connections Theatre (BCT) in Dayton, Ohio, a six week theatre program for children ages 8 to 14 years old. While the program was open to any child within this age range, I focused on recruiting children with an ASD. I was aided by six volunteers, all of whom were in college studying different fields of expertise such as Psychology, Pre-occupational Therapy, Intervention Services, Early Childhood Education, and Family Studies. Rehearsals and performances took place at the Dayton Theatre Guild's Caryl D. Phillips Theatre. All research participants signed assent forms and the participants' parents signed consent forms, allowing the observations made regarding their progress throughout the program to be documented here.

## **Literature Review**

In order to better understand the need for drama therapy, it is important to have a background knowledge of autism. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) "are a group of developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges." Such an extremely broad definition is necessary for a disorder with vast ranges of symptoms. ASDs occur in all socioeconomic and racial groups, but are five more times to occur in boys rather than girls. Several common symptoms of someone with an ASD include lack of eye contact, difficulty in understanding their own and other peoples' emotions, echolalia (repetition of words and phrases), sensory processing disorders, obsessive interests, adherence to routines, and more (CDC, 2012). While a specific cause and cure has not been pinpointed for those with ASDs,

there is an exhaustive 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 select individuals, one being the Austrian psychodrama therapist, Jacob L. Moreno at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bailey, 2010; Courtney & Schattner, 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 an individual's problem and the community support. It is the "acting out" of an issue that helps one work through his/her difficulties. However, there is also the ongoing support from not only the other actors and directors (the patients and the therapists), but the audience as well. Courtney and Schattner (1981) also divide the collective term of drama therapy into two different scenarios: one where drama is used in a clinical situation, the other where drama is used in a non-clinical situation. The latter scenario is the type of drama therapy this literature review will focus on; one that is flexible in both the qualifications of its participants and leaders.

The literature concerned with drama therapy specifically for those with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is minimal. There are currently only three Master's level programs in North America that provide Drama Therapy programs, two in the United States and one in Canada (North American Drama Therapy Association, 2013). Drama therapy resources specifically geared towards children with special needs is an even smaller list, with focuses in autism a part of this division. The intent of the literature discussed here is concerned solely with children with an ASD.

The whole purpose of therapy through drama centers on the idea that art is communication (Bailey, 1993). Drama 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). Yehudit Silverman highlights several focuses of drama therapy itself in *Drama Therapy Theoretical Perspectives*, an in depth look at the history and theories behind the successful method. In order for a student with an ASD to learn to communicate using theatre, the following four components of drama are highlighted by Silverman as aiding an individual through the therapeutic process: performance, projection, narrative, and improvisation.

With performance, the leader is able to determine if the individual is working with others, cooperating, and committing to the performance (Silverman, 2006). SENSE Theatre began with the aim to teach students with ASD core skills those on the spectrum typically lack by pairing the individual with a neurotypical student as a model during a theatre process. The study showed that after the process, students on the spectrum showed an increase in ability to recognize facial expressions and theory of mind skills. The neurotypical peers act as those who can model actions and expressions for the students with autism (Corbett, et. al, 2011).

Projection includes the different ways the individual communicates, such as using masks, puppets, written stories, role play, etc. When one is not able to directly express themselves, these mediums help the individual access a different form of communication. Certain forerunners, such as Autism Theatre Network leaders Andrew Nelson and Parasuram Ramamoorthi, have been partnering together to do groundbreaking work in the field of autism and theatre. Nelson and Ramamoorthi's research provides great arguments as to why this technique could be so helpful for someone with ASD and what drama therapy has to offer. The coauthors specifically stress the benefits of role play exercises in their article *Drama Education for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum* by saying "Young people with ASD often have a strong visual memory but may lack the ability to plan 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, p.

2). For younger ages, children are in a crucial stage in which they are experiencing new life events and must begin to learn how to cope in unfamiliar settings. The authors conclude with final points that touch on the necessity of a child being able to express themselves by using their strengths. Coming back to the importance of communications skills, Nelson and Ramamoorthi stress the idea that each individual has something to say but needs a different way to say it – a vital theme for the foundations of drama therapy using different modes of projection.

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 plot, the lessons, and the characters that go into these narratives allow individuals to connect with their problem indirectly, working and solving through the fictional work (Silverman, 2006). This theme of using theatre to help build communication skills is directly applicable to those with autism who struggle expressing emotions, one of the three impairments included in an ASD diagnosis (Huebner, 2001). Bailey (1993) gives many first-hand accounts of using theatre to help students express emotion. Students with ASDs have trouble communicating emotions, and by giving them a character to transform into, they can learn how other people feel and behave by becoming that character themselves. Theory of Mind is a concept that many of those on the autism spectrum struggle with immensely. 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). Bailey discusses the case scenario of a college

student on the autism spectrum who was a drama major at Kansas State University. The student noted that through his theatre experience, he “learned to recognize himself in others,” taking his experience with characters and script work and applying “it to the real people he encounters in everyday life” (Bailey, 2010, p. 126). This concept of learning about others through the theatre was relevant even 30 years ago, as a way for those with disabilities to learn to relate to others and make “adequate social adjustment” (Blumberg, 1981, p. 108). Children with an ASD take the skills learned from mastering the narrative and begin to apply it to their own lives.

Improvisation in theatre is nerve wracking for most people at first. We visualize the idea of getting up on stage and creating a completely fluid scene without any preparation as a nearly impossible task. However, we are constantly using improvisational techniques throughout our daily lives, such as conversation and play skills. Just as theatrical improvisational techniques, these natural “improv” skills can take extra practice and time to develop, especially for those with ASDs. Improvisation in drama therapy begins with warm ups in 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, p. 227). One of the most important lessons to take away from improvisational work is the ability to be flexible and adaptive. When the individual can apply this ability to real life situations, the result can be invaluable.

Taking all of the previously mentioned drama therapy components into account, it is important to finally include the benefits a child with an ASD brings to the theatre. Lee R. Chasen (2011) helps to remind those in the drama therapy field of how capable children with an ASD can be when it comes to theatrical talent. The spectrum is such a diverse one that practically every child has an ability that establishes his or her theatre skills. Those children on the spectrum

who are classified as higher functioning already speak with a unique intonation that is expressive. Many “reproduce specific vocal intonations and qualities” (Chasen, 2011, p. 97), perfectly capturing the essence of a character. Others, particularly younger children, use their “media obsessions” in the theatre to explore these drama therapy elements. A child who has an excessive passion for Batman uses the super hero as a medium to communicate and excel in the theatre activities. Other unique skills include the ability to memorize dialogue (echoic abilities), adherence to rules, and adaptability to routines in order for rehearsal and plot performance. No child diagnosed with autism is the same –some children may possess all, some, or none of these qualities. It is important to remember that no routine of therapy is flawless, either. Just as any other technique, some students will excel in drama therapy while others receive little to no stimulation from the programs. The growing partnership between drama and Autism Spectrum Disorders needs to continue to grow, providing these opportunities as an option for children and their families to explore.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how students with autism can improve their social and behavioral skills through the therapeutic use of theatre. Each participant was in an environment where he or she was working with others, interacting and engaging with peers, learning parts for the performance, concentrating his physical body in games and exercises, and learning how to behave through a different character that each student was assigned as an actor. The therapeutic use of theatre for those with autism is a quickly growing field and holds a lot of potential as being able to affect the different neural configuration of a child affected with ASD in a positive manner.

### **Method**



### **Participant Selection**

I recruited BCT students in a variety of different ways. My most effective method of outreach was my subscription to Dayton United Against Autism, an email listserv that has roughly 600 members, including parents of children with ASD. Participants were selected on a “first come, first served” basis. I emailed my first five recruits letting the families know of the research participant opportunity. Participant eligibility included those aged 8 to 14 years old whom had an Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis. The maximum amount of research participants allowed was five students. I ended with a total of four research participants.

### **Data Collection**

The data reported here was collected from pre and post interviews with the participants' families, my personal observations, and volunteer observations. Each research participant had a binder in which any volunteer could record observations regarding the student before, during, or after rehearsal.

### **Design**

My timeline spanned across a 10 week time period. The first two weeks, beginning May 6, 2013, were dedicated to volunteer training, shopping for supplies, selecting theatre materials, and conducting interviews with the children and their parents.

My volunteer training was a great chance to sit down with all of my volunteers at one time and review their duties for the program. I explained how rehearsals would typically run and handed out detailed reports of each student's goals, abilities, impairments, and specific needs/wants. This was very beneficial in letting everyone get an idea of variety of students s/he would be working with and begin to brainstorm about who would work well with each participant and what problems may arise. While I did not have any neurotypical students in my

program as did SENSE theatre, I explained to the volunteers that they were to serve as models. The volunteer to student ratio was anywhere from 1:1 to 1:2, giving the participants a chance to work closely and model their volunteers. The volunteers participated in all games, warm ups, and skits in order reiterate techniques just as a model student would in the SENSE theatre program.

I went through countless web sites and books designed for children's theatre. I knew before I began that I did not want to rehearse and perform a full length play; anything over 10 minutes long I eliminated as an option. I wanted multiple skits to keep attention and interest, as well as for a chance to showcase every student and work on a variety of different behaviors and skills. The full production ran for just a little less than 30 minutes and was divided into three parts: Aesop's fables, the student's "creations," and three small skits that we referred to as our "group skits."

Interviews were done with all of the students. Almost all took place in the family's home with one being at the student's school. The following questions were approved by the Human Subjects Research Board:

Have you ever been in a theatre before? If yes, what was it like?

Have you ever been in a show? If yes, did you like being in the show?

Do you want to be in the show and are you excited to see what it is like?

Have you ever had to stand in front of your class and present something? Was it scary?

Who do you like to talk to when you're at school? At home?

What do you like to talk about?

Would you want a big or small part in the show? If you want a big part, you'll be speaking more. Is that okay with you?

What are some trouble areas that you work on at school?

Are any of these behaviors/skills especially hard for you?

These questions were a great chance for me to get a better understanding of how much interest the student had in the program, his previous experience, and what target behaviors we could possibly develop. However, much more was gained from the pre-interviews from what *wasn't* said. I paid attention to the student's physical activity, his mannerisms, his attention span, his relationship with his parents, his ability to communicate, his attitude in interacting with me for the first time, and so many more subtle behaviors that helped me in preparing the program for each individual student.

### **Production Content**

Here is where our lessons through narratives and performance were taught and emphasized. As Silverman pointed out, the performance aspect is to aid the individual in cooperating and working with others while the narrative uses those characters to help teach the individual important skills and/or values. The Aesop's fable rehearsals centered on 1) teaching a behavioral or social lesson and 2) giving the student an animal to recreate physically. I took fables such as *The Ant and the Grasshopper*, *The Bald Man and the Fly*, and others in which each student worked with one or two others on memorizing lines and "becoming" the character. In many instances, I assigned a student a specific fable in accordance to a skill or behavior they were working on. This is covered in detail for the research participants and their results later in this study, but I also applied this to non-research participants. Some activities were designed to help the students learn to act out their animal characters. This included a drawing workshop in which all students drew what they thought their Aesop character would look like, brainstormed costume ideas, and wrote down/dictated physical traits of their character. We also played multiple games where the students had to use their body and voices to become different animals.

I found this concept to be very interesting for students with excessive or lacking energy. I had several students who spent much of the first two weeks running around the room, shouting and refusing to sit down (much less sit still). However, when participating, I could ask one of these students to “show me how a turtle acts” and the student would crouch down and slowly walk on all fours. In contrast, I could ask a usually lethargic student to show me how fast a cheetah is, and the student would jump up and run across the room with more energy than I thought was possible from him.

The writing workshop was one of the highlights of the whole program. I had each student paired with a volunteer and for one week they spent time each rehearsal writing and editing their individual skits. I gave them no rules or restrictions on what they had to write except that they were required to create *something*. Many of the students responded very well, and it was a great show of their individuality and creativity. Others struggled with this lack of regulation, but volunteers helped guide them along depending on their need. This tied into our emphasis on improvising in order to help some of our less adaptive students start to focus on their imagination. For some students, it was labelled a success if they wrote their entire skit without any assistance. For others, the success came from imagining a name for a character or an occupation for them to have. Almost all of these individual pieces were included in the final performances.

We began to rehearse group skits the last two weeks. Once again, students were given roles that would help coincide with their target behaviors for the program. However, *everyone* had the common goal of working successfully with his peers. The group attitude toward each other was stressed every day, for each of the boys had some characteristic or habit he needed to work on in order to get along with his fellow cast members. Silverman's concept of creating

cooperation through performance came to life during these group skits, as everyone's patience and tolerance level was tested and improved upon.

All three of the group skits were intended to be funny, opening up the door to conversations regarding the intentions behind audience members laughing. Not only did I want the students to become *aware* of the audience laughter, I wanted them to understand that they were not being laughed at; the laughter was a positive sign. Our last group skit of the show featured every student on the stage and was one of the few times a volunteer was not nearby to help. While I selected the piece thinking it was going to be a fairly simple skit for everyone to master, it was one of the most difficult tasks for the students to complete. All seven students sat in one row and repeated whatever was said to him to the next person until it was all the way down the row and then passed it back. For example, Evan turned to his left towards Matt and started with the line "Wanna buy a duck?" From there, Matt would turn to his left and repeat the phrase to the person next to him, everyone repeating "Wanna buy a duck?" until it reached Luke on the end. Luke then turned to his right and said "What kind of duck?" and this phrase was repeated by each student all the way back to Evan. Getting all seven students to pay attention, stay seated, turn to the person to their left or right, and actually repeat the phrase correctly were huge problems our first rehearsal. The volunteers and I were able to explain the purpose of the skit and why audiences would find it funny, even performing the skit several times ourselves to help them get a visual of what it was supposed to look like. Once again, each student caught on slowly but surely (some even requested to do it before every rehearsal!) and it was one of the most successful skits of the whole show.

### **Warm ups, Exercises, and Games**

Interestingly enough, we used improvisational activities to help set a routine. In order to establish the structure that helps students on the autism spectrum to excel, every rehearsal began with a warm up. We used this time as a group to review how our last rehearsal went and open the floor to any questions. During the warm up, I also let them know our schedule for the day and sometimes asked for feedback such as game preferences and/or ideas. Most importantly, this was a time for all of the volunteers and me to get a feel for how each student's day was going. Starting the program in May, many of them were getting anxious with the end of school approaching which meant routine changes, the excitement for summer, and thousands of other day to day factors that would have an effect on their behavior before coming into rehearsal. As with any scenario involving children with special needs, we always had to make adjustments for how a particular student's day was going. While this was no simple task, it is a display of the entire foundation for why I began BCT. I wanted to create a program that could adapt and flex to meet the needs of these students while teaching them to learn to adapt and flex themselves. Our ability to work with students with almost a complete 1:1 ratio was invaluable.

Numerous games were played throughout the course of the program. Referring back to the importance of improvisation for students on the spectrum, a few young participants struggled with these activities frequently. Over time, we adjusted the expectation level for certain students but still required everyone to push their boundaries in order to work on those flexibility skills (Silverman, 2006). I had a list of games I went into the first rehearsal with, but there were additions later on in rehearsals of either activities I came up with on the spot or recommendations the students made. The following is a list of some of the most popular games and their purposes:

Emotion party: In this game, a volunteer takes one student out into the hall and helps him pick out an emotion to act out. Then the volunteer briefly practices how to physically

show this emotion using body language before he goes back into the “party.” When the student walks back in, all students have to guess the emotion and then act it out themselves. The focus of this game is to allow students to over exaggerate facial expressions and actions. Students struggling with social cues can use this as practice in not only identifying someone else’s emotions, but also practicing expressing those feelings themselves.

Name Game: This exercise had many forms. Everyone sits in a circle and someone begins by saying his name and then an object he wants to bring to a picnic (or any other setting) that starts with the first letter of his first name. For instance, I would say “My name is Katie, and I’m bringing a kangaroo.” After all students in the circle have completed the exercise for themselves, we would go back around and introduce the person next to us and their object. The second time around, I would repeat what my neighbor had said to describe him/herself earlier, such as “This is Brooke and she’s bringing balloons.” Not only did this challenge the students creatively by asking them to think of random objects with a certain letter, it also encouraged the acknowledgement and cooperation of their peers.

Blindfold obstacle course: In this obstacle course, one student was chosen to stand in the hallway while everyone else arranged chairs around the room to create an obstacle course. The students’ goal was to lead their “blindfolded” peer from one end of the room to the other without running into chairs. I chose not to use blindfolds for sensory purposes and had the obstacle course walkers close their eyes instead. The obvious goal for this game was teamwork. The game was set up so that each student *wanted* his peers to

succeed, for if the student gave good directions, it meant he had succeeded as well. This shared victory went over very well amongst the group.

Charades: As one of our most frequent activities, charades took on many different forms. It first started out with me assigning the whole group something to act out together. Then we advanced to one person demonstrating a charade on his own for everyone. From there, I let students pick cards randomly to act out while everyone else had to guess what the charade was. Finally, I let students choose their own characters to imitate and included this game in our final performances in which the audience made the guesses.

Red Light Green Light: Once again, this game was played throughout the process in a variety of ways. Everyone began at one end of the rehearsal space and was given a direction such as "Walk very slow" or "Jump up and down" and when I said "Green!" the students performed that action across the room until I said "Stop!" This was very much an exercise designed to reel in focus. It took several students a while to stop on time, and they soon learned they needed to focus on what I was saying. We would usually play until everyone was able to stop all together at one time. To keep it interesting, I would always change up the directions, instructing them to move like a certain animal or generalized character (i.e. kings, monsters, robots, etc). One student even suggested and led a "disco" dancing version!

Number Who: In this game, I assigned every person (students and volunteers) his/her own number. Everyone would walk around the room as s/he pleased but had to immediately sit when I called that person's number. I put this game together near the end of the program to use as an attention exercise. Sometimes it would take several rounds for



the majority of everyone to sit down at the right time, but it was simple enough for students who struggled with the more complex games while keeping everyone's interest.

### **Role Play**

Role play was one of the central focuses to BCT. Using guidelines from Andrew Nelson in *Foundation Role Plays for Autism*, we completed role play activities almost every day for the first three weeks. Using Nelson's (2010) model, I established a purpose and procedure that remained consistent throughout the program. By always setting up a poster board behind two chairs, the participants quickly learned that setting was designated for role play. With the goal of that student applying the new skill in real life, we covered a wide range of topics: handling bullies, helping a friend who is being bullied, abrupt schedule changes, responding to invitations to play (in specific places such as a park), initiating play, learning to ask someone questions while conversing in order to learn more about them, and introducing oneself to new people.

I would first begin the session by bringing everyone to a semi-circle in front of a blank poster on the wall. I would write the topic of our discussion and begin to ask questions like, "Who has been bullied before?" and "How did it make you feel? How did you react?" I set up two chairs in front of the group and took volunteers, assigning each student to a role (ie: the Bully and the Bullied). I gave the group details such as where this fake scenario was taking place and gave the Bully a trait *that nobody in the room actually possessed* he could poke fun at, such as the other's big red shoes. Before we began, I stressed that all of our scenarios were not real. No students were allowed to touch each other to not only help those students with sensory processing disorders feel comfortable, but to also establish a basic level of respect for one another. Once everyone had a turn playing at least one of the roles, we had a discussion about what we had just acted out and how they could apply it in a real life situation.

I chose role play topics appropriate to individual needs and issues that many children in this age range experience. While I do not have evidence that these students took these role play lessons and went back to their classrooms, homes, and playgrounds and successfully applied the practiced scenario, we often reminded students of lessons previously learned within the program itself.

## **Results**

Out of the seven program participants, four of these children agreed to be research participants, signing assent forms with the parents' consent. All names mentioned have been changed for the research participants' privacy. The following is an overview of what significant observations were made by me, the volunteers, the participant's parents, and the participants themselves:

Research Participant #1 was Kaleb. Kaleb was 9-years-old at the start of the program and is diagnosed with autism. Kaleb came off as very disinterested in me during our pre-interview. I soon learned that this was not so much an issue of lack of interest as it was the difficulty of making conversation. He answered many of my questions with "I don't know" and made infrequent eye contact with me. His mother gave me more insight to his daily behavior and areas where he tended to excel. Kaleb struggles in school with writing and science but is very skilled in reading and learning concepts visually, such as math. Kaleb also is good at memorizing, but will only do it if he likes what he's been told to memorize. Social skills are a central focus in his IEP, so from there we came up with the following target behaviors: Initiating conversation, making needs/wants known, and casual "chit chat" with peers and volunteers.

The volunteers and I made an effort to challenge Kaleb in our writing workshop by gradually giving him prompts to think of story ideas, eventually having him choose between two

options. While there was little observed regarding this behavior, one volunteer wrote that Kaleb “expressed that he wanted to do the skit about 50 flavors. He kept asking to do it instead of the lion, bear, and fox one.” I believe this speaks incredible volumes about Kaleb’s interest in the skits. He absolutely loved one of the skits he was in called “50 Flavors” in which he played Mr. Ice, an owner of an ice cream shop. He memorized these lines the fastest and repeatedly asked to rehearse this particular skit. In order to encourage Kaleb making his wants known, I let him practice those lines several times during rehearsals when he asked.

While very well behaved and able to respond to all questions, Kaleb struggles with making casual conversation with other individuals. One of the skits that Kaleb helped to write was “The Superhero and the Farmer.” In this skit, the two characters meet each other for the first time and spend the day learning about the other. I talked about the lesson behind this skit frequently with Kaleb, reminding him that it is important to not only answer questions in a conversation, but to also ask questions. Kaleb practiced this skill in role play scenarios, meetings with volunteers, and our post interview. The conclusive results regarding Kaleb and this behavior are mixed. A workshop was set up near the end of the six weeks where the student sat down with an individual they had never met before and a volunteer to help facilitate one on one conversation. Kaleb needed a lot of prompting during the session and was very timid. However, one volunteer noted that “[Kaleb] is having conversations with me more. He is speaking to the other kids some as well.” Reflecting on this, I believe the structured workshop was too intimidating for Kaleb. He clearly began to reach out to the volunteers and other specific students in an environment that slowly came to be very comfortable for him, displaying the flexibility and adaptive skills that improvisation pushes (Silverman, 2006).

In our post interview, Kaleb's mom noted that she "saw at home he was much more engaged and initiated activities and conversations more than previously." He became more "aggressive" with his siblings, initiating teasing and playing with them more during the last few weeks of the program. I discussed with Kaleb's mom his energetic behavior he had been displaying more and more during the last few weeks of rehearsal. He was usually very quiet and subdued during the first three weeks of the program. Some of the earliest observations made by myself and volunteers included "not much interest in story," "would not listen to others when it was their turn," and "demanded I explain rules of the game way ahead of time and said 'Sounds kinda boring.'" However, by the end of the program he was laughing during his own skit, running in circles, verbally expressing he was excited to practice his part, and communicated more with volunteers, as reflected in the observation notes. Kaleb's mom mentioned that bursts of energy both physically and vocally is how Kaleb shows he is comfortable, but she rarely sees him get this excited for activities.

While Kaleb's speech was not one of the initial target behaviors developed in the pre interview, I and the volunteers worked extensively with him to help him increase volume and speak slower during his featured parts in the show. In accordance with Chasen's (2011) observation of the contributions of echoic abilities to the theatre, Kaleb used his own skills to mimic our vocal warm ups in rehearsal repeatedly. Our daily warm ups frequently included vocal exercises in which Kaleb practiced inflection, identifying and displaying appropriate stage volume, and articulation. Near the end of our 6 week program, Kaleb's speech teacher reported to Kaleb's mom that she noticed his pronunciation of sounds had "really improved over the past month or so."

Research Participant #2 was Luke. Luke was 9-years-old at the start of the program and has been diagnosed with AD/HD and Asperger's syndrome. During our pre interview, Luke was shy to come out to meet me at first. He made little eye contact with me but was fairly talkative. I learned that Luke loved to make up his own stories and characters. He has a great imagination and enjoys entertaining people. Luke doesn't handle criticism well and is not always able to discern the difference between a "big deal" and a "small deal." Luke also rarely initiates or reacts to conversation, as his parents described him as being very disinterested in other students. Target behaviors we agreed to work on included initiating and holding a conversation, accepting constructive criticism, and learning to think about whether issues are a big or small deal in the long run.

Luke did very well with the structured conversation workshop. He was "very polite...and conducted himself well." He did become fixated on random subjects, but he held a tactful and engaging conversation, a very impressive feat for Luke.

Halfway through the process, one volunteer noted that "Luke accepted my constructive criticism and happily switched up the way he did things..." While this was certainly not the case throughout the whole process, such an attitude shift in Luke was certainly noteworthy. He expressed his frustration with my criticism several times, but almost always Luke did make the suggested changes.

One of the most important observations I made regarding Luke was after our last performance. While the actors were gathering their things and preparing to leave, Luke walked up to another member of the cast to shake his hand and tell him goodbye while smiling at him. This was a huge step for Luke, as for the past six weeks he had made little to no attempt to make friends with other members of the cast. In our post interview, he reported that while he liked

some of the other kids, Evan was his friend. The atmosphere that was created for Luke was one in which he felt more at ease and included, for many of the other children were struggling with the same issues as him.

In our post interview, I reviewed the lessons intended for Luke through the characters he played and our role play sessions. As with all of the participants, I wanted to constantly reiterate the idea of seeing oneself in another character (Bailey, 2010) in order to make those social adjustments (Blumberg, 1981). We discussed his role as the Fly in *The Bald Man and the Fly* in which he focused on loosening up and having fun. The lesson of this fable is that when someone tries to hurt their enemies, they hurt themselves more. I discussed this lesson with Luke many times throughout the process, usually when he was angry with a volunteer or cast member. While he said he didn't remember much from the role play, he did say that he would use the skills he learned from playing Mr. Ice. I frequently talked to Luke about the benefits of putting on a friendly face even when someone else is frustrating, just like Mr. Ice did with his customer. Before I moved on from reviewing this skill, he managed to say "I'm using it right now," in reference to his frustration with me asking him questions. While not the most tactful approach, neither I nor his parents could deny that he was definitely applying the skill.

While all of these behaviors were worked on throughout the process through different character assignments, role play scenarios, and theatre exercises, whether or not the program made a definitive impact on Luke's behavior is not something I or his parents could conclude. However, Luke's parents believe that the program itself "opened up the door for a lot of good conversations" regarding how Luke handles his own behavior and how he reacts to other individuals. I believe this essentially defines the crucial role of art in communication (Bailey, 1993), giving students the opportunity to express themselves and work through issues in a setting

designed for such discussion, whether it be negative or positive. There were several points in time during the process that Luke verbally expressed he was quitting, but his parents were determined to have him finish the entire six weeks. During the post interview, Luke also mentioned that he would like to come back the following year if he got the chance to write more skits.

Research Participant #3 was Evan. Evan was 13-years-old when he started the program. He has been diagnosed with Asperger's, AD/HD, and anxiety disorders. I sat down with Evan to discuss some issues he struggles with from day to day. Just as Nelson and Ramamoorthi (2011) describe a child who struggles with planning for new settings, Evan and his parents agreed that he gets very frustrated when the schedule changes, a symptom many individuals with ASD possess (CDC, 2012). I developed a role play scenario in which the participants pretended to have their schedule during school changed at the last minute with Evan in mind. I encouraged Evan to find the positive aspects in the change, such as getting to go to art class earlier. Evan was able to recall this lesson on his own during our post interview almost five weeks later and said that he felt that it was a lesson he would "try and think about" next time he was struggling with this issue. Evan also said that he enjoyed the role play scenario regarding bullying. He liked acting the different parts out and learned how to handle bullying "in a good way."

Evan was one of the few research participants who had been in shows before. Having worked under a director in school that Evan had experience with, I was aware of the fast paced system he had been a part of previously. In our post interview, Evan said that he liked BCT in particular because of the shorter rehearsals, his chance at more stage time, and that he "didn't sit around and do nothing."

Research Participant #4 was Sam. Sam was 9-years-old at the beginning of the program and has autism. During our pre-interview, Sam was very animated and outgoing. He answered most of my questions but would trail off onto other irrelevant subjects such as the game Angry Birds, his iPod, or food. Sam understood everything he would be doing in the program, but was not what I would call "excited." Sam and his mother identified strengths being video games, exercise, anything involving physical coordination, Legos, and math. Areas that prove to be difficult for Sam are recognizing social cues from others, concentrating on others, and conversation etiquette.

One of the initial target behaviors Sam agreed to work on was paying attention and focusing on other people. The earliest observations made regarding Sam included "needs to work on turn taking...he will continue to go on without letting the other person have a chance" and "has a hard time waiting for his turn to talk." One of the last observations made in the last two weeks of rehearsal was "Sam did a great job listening to others and waiting for his turn to speak...When working on large group skits, Sam was very respectful when others were performing..." Many of the later observations revolved around Sam's good behavior in working with other students.

Within the six week program, I believe there was a definite growth in Sam's ability to focus on others. I believe that out of the four techniques gathered from Silverman (2006), performance was Sam's greatest improvement. I would attribute this to his recognition of everyone's interactive role in the play and his connection with the other cast members. One of his best displays of this ability was in the game Blindfold Obstacle Course. He was very helpful in helping to direct his peers around the room and was focused the entire game, which lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. His ability to focus during rehearsal activities was also reflected in our



actual performances. One of our show's skits was called "Wanna Buy a Duck?" in which each cast member sat in a row and repeated a line to the person next to them until it got to the last person in the row. Sam was seated next to another cast member who was struggling with grasping the concept of repeating the line Sam had just said to him. While at first Sam became very annoyed with his co cast member, this frustration turned into a supportive attitude. This was a great opportunity for Sam's parents to sit down with him and have a conversation about other peoples' intentions when they frustrate Sam. Once again, another chance for our participants and their families to use theatre as a mode of communication (Bailey, 1993) both in and out of the home. Sam began to understand that there was no intentional harm coming from his other cast members and this was reflective in rehearsals. By the time of the show, Sam was coaching the member next to him and whispering the lines into his ear if he could see that the member did not know what to say and needed extra prompting. This helpfulness is reflective of Sam's attitude throughout the process. While Sam was withdrawn and disinterested in other cast members the first week or two, he began to become more interested in everyone else's progress once he realized they played a part in his skits.

Along with this lesson of focusing on others, I assigned him to play the Farmer in Kaleb's skit, *The Superhero and the Farmer*. This opened discussions with Sam regarding the friendship between the two characters. I made sure to point out how the Farmer and the Superhero connected because they made sure to ask questions about the other person and how he could apply this in real life.

### **Limitations**

Two of the original five research participants did not complete the program. One student was just not ready for such an environment and had to drop out. The other participant dropped

out after four weeks, which made his consent/assent forms void. This was disappointing to everyone who had worked with him, but I did ask Evan if he was interested in being a research participant as soon as possible. Observations were not made about Evan until June 18<sup>th</sup>, which hindered our ability to record his progress over the course of an entire six weeks.

My volunteer team was made of undergraduate college students, so it was very much a learning process the first few weeks for everyone, including myself. None of us had ever conducted research before and three volunteers had little to no experience with children with disabilities. It took us quite a few rehearsals to get accustomed to each student and how to go about creating the best atmosphere for everyone simultaneously. Even with seven adults, it was still difficult to write down as many notes as we wanted to on each research participant.

The variety of disabilities was an expected limitation that I did my best to prepare for. Each student had their own array of disabilities to address, and almost every student was on a different learning level. Games, warm ups, exercises, and all activities were either too simple or too complex for at least one person. However, I hesitate to label the variety of disabilities as a limitation for it is the entire purpose of this theatre program. I believe a larger number of participants and volunteers in the future will be key in helping to perpetuate the effectiveness of our modeling techniques and tensions among specific cast members.

## **Conclusions**

For our first time out, I don't think Brighter Connections Theatre's first program could have gone any better. Every rehearsal was a learning opportunity and constant adjustments were being made by me, the volunteers, the parents, and the participants themselves. I believe all seven of the students made positive advances in certain social and behavioral skills as is reflected by the results of the four research participants. I saw every student come into this program with a

target behavior to work through and focus on throughout the process and, as a result, I saw every student struggle to grasp new concepts and stretch their physical and emotional boundaries. I think the research results we gathered prove that drama therapy has the potential to reach many more children with ASDs and to continue helping those who have been through the program.

I opened up the floor to suggestions and comments from all of the parents afterwards. While all of them had pieces they would like to see adjusted or added, every parent expressed an interest in signing their child up again next summer. There is currently no other program like this one in the Dayton area and several parents communicated to me that they were more than willing to put in their own efforts to help bring BCT back next summer. Parents are taking notice of what drama therapy can do for their children and it is time for research initiatives to reflect this. Drama therapy combined specifically with autism is a relatively unexplored field of research. The most reputable sources include the Autism Theatre Network which consists of so many creative visionaries, but its resources are limited to a Facebook page and a subpage on a larger website for theatre therapy. The 2010 Journal of the International Association of Theatre for Autism consists of a mere 37 pages. In this instance, the quantity of these works undermines the quality of what is being researched. There is no "rule book" when it comes to drama therapy. There is no certification required or restrictive boundaries on the practice. It is a process that consists of trial and error, experimentation, and open mindedness. Brighter Connections Theatre has been and will hopefully continue to play a part in the advancement of drama therapy.

I could not have been more proud to see all seven of the participants come together after six weeks and put on a show that *they* were responsible for. The four research participants accomplished so much in such a short time and serve as a testimony to the potential all children

with Autism Spectrum Disorders have. They had the chance to be the stars of the show and tell their stories, ending Brighter Connections Theatre on a high note.

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