

AN EXPLORATION INTO THE SUCCESS AND IMPROVEMENT
OF DRAMA-PLAY PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUALS
WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

By

Rebecca Carroll

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of Theatre
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 4, 2020

AN EXPLORATION INTO THE SUCCESS AND IMPROVEMENT
OF DRAMA-PLAY PROGRAMS FOR INDIVIDUALS
WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

By

Rebecca Carroll

Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Alan Shorter M.F.A.

Department of Theatre

Lydia Mackay M.F.A.

Department of Theatre

Wendy Williams P.h.D

Department of Honors

Abstract

This project is an exploration into the success and improvement of drama-play programs for individuals on the autism spectrum. I outline the social aspects of Autism Spectrum Disorder and how principles of theatricality can be used to explore skill-building. Specifically, I explore the success of drama-play programs like Story Stage in Fort Worth, TX and the SENSE Theatre program at Vanderbilt University. I outline the factors necessary for creating future drama-play programs that can be more successful and accessible for large groups of individuals based on principles of drama that I find to be conducive to development of communication skills and socialization. The COVID-19 pandemic has made me unable to put my ideas into practice in person, so I also outline my plan to do so once it is deemed safe to convene in larger groups. Due to the COVID-19 crisis and social distancing, drama-play programs have taken to social media and the internet to create material that can be used at home. I explore how this concept could be effectively developed for future use. I hope to work with Story Stage in the future to further my research and create drama-play material that can be used by a wide-range of individuals.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Operationalization.....	4
History and Research on Drama-Play for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum.....	7
Story Stage - Fort Worth.....	11
A Note on COVID-19.....	16
Elements Necessary to Make Drama-Play Programs More Effective and Accessible.....	18
Accessible Material.....	18
Trained Theatre Professionals.....	19
Trained Peers.....	21
Educational Outreach.....	22
Individuals on the Autism Spectrum in Leadership.....	22
Research.....	23
Conclusion.....	24
Appendix A.....	25
Works Cited.....	26

Introduction

As with most children, I did not recognize the extent of my privilege until I reached my later teenage years. It wasn't until I was beginning to come into early adulthood that I truly realized I had the greatest parents in the world. Of course, I knew they were wonderful my whole life, but their level of dedication became apparent to me when I was old enough to begin to ask them questions about mine and my brother's upbringing.

According to my mother, my brother was a very precocious child with a wide vocabulary and extreme intelligence. However, he had a lot of trouble communicating his needs and asking questions. He was hyper-focused on his interests and not quick to answer questions from other people. He would reverse pronouns when he asked for things. For instance, he would say "you want juice" instead of "I want juice." He was put into speech therapy around age three, and my parents worked a lot with him on asking questions and communicating needs. It wasn't until the public school system required a diagnosis for special education services that he was evaluated for an official diagnosis. My brother was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome when he was eight years old. This diagnosis has since been retired in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), so he is now considered to have Autism Spectrum Disorder.

As he grew older, my parents exhausted absolutely every resource they knew of to help my brother succeed. They worked closely with the school, and when one school couldn't meet his needs, they would find another that could. They got him into the necessary speech and behavior therapies. I have found dozens of books in my house about parenting a child with autism and setting them up for success. My parents simply gave it their all to make sure this child had the

best chance because he was and is extremely worth it. He is intelligent, inquisitive, kindhearted, passionate, friendly, and absolutely the greatest person I know.

I can't say I was always the best sibling to him. I try to cut myself some slack because I know all siblings fight. And we definitely fought. I struggled to understand our differences, even as I got older, and I deeply regret it. But, I always — always— stood up for him. Public school was brutal for my sweet brother. Kids are mean. And sometimes, the most popular and "nice" children patronize those different from themselves for their own personal gain. It was heart-wrenching for me to see my big brother teased and bullied and ridiculed, often without him realizing. He wanted so badly to socialize and was very outgoing, but his unique methods of communication and tendency to constantly share his own interests were often scoffed at by his peers. I can't imagine what he went through. I did my best to be his advocate. And I knew early on that I had to do something to serve people like him: those who are misunderstood by a society that truly hasn't made an effort to understand them.

My passion is performing – there is absolutely nothing else I can imagine myself doing. There is something magical about creating something that is there one minute and gone the next. Theatre allows us to share stories and feelings that are otherwise inexplicable. It allows us to explore ourselves and others in a uniquely playful and creative way. Often, theatre allows us to escape ourselves and our worlds and enter a new one, even if just for a brief time. Theatre can help us learn things about ourselves that we may not otherwise decide to explore. Throughout my training, I began to realize that the principles of theatre can be used for more than just entertainment. And, I began to realize that my brother shared this passion with me. He was always singing around the house and definitely had a performative spirit. He tried to participate in theatre

in high school, but, like many public schools, our high school lacked the proper assistance for him to enjoy such programs. I firmly believe that if there had been some sort of theatre program that was welcoming and available for young adults like my brother, he would have been all over it.

Thus, I have set out to combine my passion for theatre with my desire to serve people like my brother. I wish to use what I have learned in my theatre training to find out what it takes to create drama-based workshops that are malleable and transportable. I will discuss the use of dramatic principles in exploring social skills for those on the autism spectrum, and how a program using these principles can be created in an effective and universal manner.

I wish to note my positionality in this topic. I am approaching this from a purely theatrical lens. Though I have a background in working with children and young adults with special needs, I am not educated in pedagogy or special education. I am not a paraprofessional or trained to work with those with special needs. I wish to use my theatrical training to enhance the pre-existing research and curriculum that exists.

Within my exploration, I notice that a gap is present. It seems to me that role-playing education has been approached from an overly clinical standpoint, and has often been widely overlooked as an effective and unique method of aiding social skill development. The existing courses lack the theatricality and playfulness that make role-playing most effective. I want to bridge this gap. I want to take what I know and turn it into something very useful for a community that is often neglected by the general artistic community. I wish to create this literature in order to start a conversation about how drama can best be used with those on the autism spectrum. By doing so, I will increase the reliability and effectiveness of role-playing and drama-based intervention for adolescents and young-adults on the autism spectrum.

Operationalization

It is important to operationalize a few terms before continuing in this discussion. First and foremost, we must understand the distinction of Autism Spectrum Disorder within the DSM-V. The DSM-IV had four separate disorders that fell under the same umbrella: autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder. However, these diagnoses were not used congruently across physicians and clinics. Researchers at the National Institute of Mental Health suggested a change in which a single diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) would replace the previous four diagnoses. (National Institute of Mental Health). According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), ASD is a continuum of symptoms and each individual will experience a unique set. The APA mentions that those with ASD will "tend to have communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age" (APA, 1). They also mention people with ASD being routine-driven and sensitive to change, and, in order for people to be diagnosed with ASD, they must have shown symptoms early in childhood. Those who were diagnosed prior to the DSM-V revisions are now considered to have ASD regardless of their previous diagnosis. Some of the sources cited in this paper were created before the DSM-V revisions and will thus use previous diagnosis names to describe ASD.

The nature of Autism Spectrum Disorder is described in its name: it is a spectrum. Those with ASD can have a range of symptoms that can affect the ability to speak, use fine motor skills, socialize, etc. Because of this, creating programs for those on the spectrum can be very difficult. What will work for one individual may not work for another. Thus, I want to establish early on

that my aim is to determine how to make drama-play adaptable and malleable to be effective for a variety of individuals on the spectrum. However, because of the current nature of drama-play and the existing research, most programs are geared toward individuals on the spectrum who are verbal and able to engage in conversation rather than those who may be pre-verbal. Because of this, my research and suggestions in this exploration are also geared toward those individuals on the spectrum who are verbal. I do hope that future research looks at using drama principles for all individuals on the spectrum regardless of their individual needs and challenges.

The word “neurotypical” is often used to describe those who have not been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Often, the term “neurotypical” is preferred over the term “normal” when discussing individuals who do not fall on the autism spectrum (National Autistic Society). I will use this term throughout my exploration.

I want to highlight the purpose of my exploration. I wish to further encourage drama-play as a method of improving communication and socialization. I am in no way trying to replace any form of therapy that one may decide to pursue. “Drama-play” itself is not a form of therapy. Rather, it is a method of skill exploration via theatrically based play.

There are significant merits to play as a form of skill-building. Play “is a safe place in which children can learn new things and practice emerging skills without fear of failure, and as a means of establishing courage to address life's challenges” (Nelson, 211). A lot of communication can be fostered through play, and play is often used as a method of socialization for young children. Play can often aid many developmental functions, including “regulation, symbolic capacity, emotional development, and readiness for learning” (Gerber, 229). I believe that

extending such play and encouraging it as children transition to adulthood can allow a pathway for the development of healthy social habits.

It is important to recognize some of the common challenges that those with ASD face and which I hope to target specifically with drama-play. Some of the challenges with socialization that people with ASD face include “impaired use of non-verbal behaviors to regulate interactions,” few friendships, delay in initiation of conversation/social interaction, and “absence of social judgement” (Levy, 1628). These can be very complicated challenges that are unique in nature. These challenges are also characterized by deviation from social norms, so it is important to note that they are only considered “challenges” because of the way society frames “normal” interactions. This is why I think drama-play can be so effective. Drama-play exercises will not seek to “fix” any sort of problem, but rather, aid the individual in exploring social interactions and help ease some anxiety that may come with socialization.

Individuals on the autism spectrum often face challenges regarding what is known as “Theory of Mind.” Theory of Mind, in general terms, is “the capacity to attribute thoughts and beliefs to other persons” (Belmonte, 118). This is not to say that people on the autism spectrum lack empathy or compassion or even the ability to understand another’s thoughts. Rather, “the capacity to feel what others feel, and to respond in kind, may be fully intact, but its expression during real time social interactions may be flummoxed by an inability to connect affect with action” (Belmonte, 127). This often manifests itself more broadly in language, similar to my brother’s tendency to switch pronouns as a child when talking about something he needed or wanted. Though the development of Theory of Mind for any child is very complex, a lot of development can come from the use of stories and narratives as ways of looking at how people

feel and experience things. Children and young adults can greatly benefit from hearing and exploring narratives that highlight experiences different from their own. In this regard, drama-play and imaginative storytelling can be very effective in allowing individuals on the autism spectrum to explore Theory of Mind in a unique way.

History and Research on Drama-Play for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum

Drama-based intervention is by no means a new concept. The use of theatrical elements in play with children on the autism spectrum has been toyed with for years. Evidence suggests that proctored drama-based therapies have been used since the 18th century, though dance, music, and role-playing have been methods of play for centuries (Maynard). A pioneer in what he called “psychodrama” was Jacob Moreno. As a psychologist, his most notable contribution was the creation of “sociometry,” which is a qualitative method for measuring social relationships. He was also known for his refining of role-playing as a multipurpose technique. He used role-playing as a vehicle to aid individual perspective-taking with an emphasis on interaction (Borgatta, 151). Moreno specifically based his drama therapy on the Greek idea of tragedy as catharsis. He often asked patients to improvise around themes, to which they often reported they were able to gain insight into their own problems and interactions (Wepman). This “psychodrama” has thus morphed into what is known as “drama therapy.”

Drama therapy is an umbrella term that is used to describe a wide variety of theatrically based forms of therapy. This form of therapy is implemented for many groups of individuals. According to the North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA), “client populations may include persons recovering from addiction, dysfunctional families, developmentally disabled

persons, abuse survivors, prison inmates, homeless persons, people with AIDS, older adults, behavioral health consumers, at-risk youth, and the general public” (NADTA). Thus, there are many iterations of drama therapy that are tailored to specific individuals and challenges. With individuals on the Autism Spectrum, drama therapy “can model clear, expressive communication, as well as facilitate the development of relationships with others, which gives participants numerous opportunities to rehearse and replay social skills until they are learned and integrated into behaviour” (Godfrey, 21). It can be very effective in providing a unique and creative method by which individuals can explore their strengths and weaknesses in socialization and Theory of Mind. Though I am not advocating for drama-play to replace drama therapy, it is important to note how drama therapy has been successful in order to understand how drama-play might also be a successful tool.

Unfortunately, there is little research into drama therapy. Most commonly, the research includes specific case studies that can only be applied to other similar cases. Wide scale use of drama therapy is not as mainstreamed as therapies like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or Applied Behavior Analysis Therapy (Godfrey, 22). The same is true of drama-play. In researching the success of drama-play, I found that there was a deficit. There is evidence of some successful programs, but it seems that such programs are hard to find, only available in select areas, and typically quite expensive.

There is promise that drama-play can be very beneficial if conducted in the proper setting. In a study conducted by Corbett et al, the success of drama-play was assessed for adolescents on the autism spectrum. The style of drama-play used in this study was called “SENSE Theatre,” a combination of “theatre games, role-play exercises, improvisation, and character development

while putting on a play, to explore and practice social interaction skills" (Corbett, 660). The study was conducted in a summer-camp atmosphere, and the participants worked toward a goal of performing a forty-five-minute play after a ten-week period of preparation. Corbett et al. found that, compared to the control group, participants showed an increase in social functioning and retained such improvements in the long term. Participants "showed improvements in social abilities including social awareness, face memory, Theory of Mind, and reduced social stress" (Corbett, 660). SENSE Theatre continues to be tested in clinical trials for which interested families with qualifying children can apply. The trials target children on the Autism Spectrum between the ages of 10 and 16 who are verbal. This is significant in that most drama-play is geared toward children rather than adolescents and young adults, though adolescents and young adults may find it more beneficial and applicable in some cases.

A very important factor that makes this so successful is the use of trained peers. Not only are participants in these trials lead by highly skilled and trained professionals, but they are surrounded by peer actors of the same age who have also been trained on ASD, ethics, improvisation and theatre games, and 10 core principles of SENSE. These core principles are as follows: "provide social support; create a fun, enjoyable and playful environment; model warm, appropriate social interaction; encourage and motivate interaction using behavioral techniques; engage in directed communication; use gestures and nonverbal communication in directed ways; engage in imaginative play; empathic responding; learning as an active process; advance learning" (Corbett, 662). I find that this is a factor many studies and trials lack. Having individuals on the crews for these programs who are trained in theatre is invaluable, and I find that this is a factor many studies and trials lack.. The knowledge theatre professionals have can be

extremely useful in these situations. Not only are they able to act as an example for proctored activities, but they are able to encourage creativity and imagination in ways that might make some other professionals uncomfortable. By combining theatre professionals with education and speech professionals, drama-play programs can be much more effective and well-rounded.

While SENSE Theatre is an amazing step in the right direction regarding drama-play workshops, there are certain limitations. The main issue here is that SENSE Theater has yet to be transformed into a transferable program that can be easily accessed. The elements of the program have shown a lot of promise, but have not been made into a format that can be recreated by other groups. Again, this is precisely the problem I am suggesting we solve.

There is evidence of other successful theatrical programs geared toward those on the autism spectrum. One that I find particularly fascinating is the program offered by The Second City in Chicago, Illinois. The Second City is a very popular improv comedy destination that offers improv comedy classes and well-known improv comedy performances. They launched their program, “Improv for Autism,” in 2013 amongst other initiatives for people with Parkinson’s, people with anxiety, and senior citizens (Thayer). According to their website, the “Improv for Autism” classes focus on “ensemble and team building to help with the exploration of different relationships and social cues” (The Second City). This is a wonderful program that has been met with success. The Second City focuses on providing a safe, fun space in which people feel comfortable being creative and vocal. In addition, this program is geared toward young adults which is very unique for any autism spectrum communication program, let alone a drama-based program. I hope other improv comedy establishments follow the lead of The Second City soon, but for now, their program remains strikingly unique. The Second City also offers little

information about their program online, and no research has been published about the efficacy of this program. Though The Second City is not required to share their materials, it seems that their model could be recreated by other companies in order to provide more theatrical opportunities for people on the autism spectrum nationwide.

Story Stage - Fort Worth

Story Stage is a group of speech-language pathologists and theatre professionals in Fort Worth, TX that has begun to make drama-play much more accessible to a wide range of people. According to their website, their mission is to “foster literacy, problem solving, and social communication skills in children and teens” (Story Stage). They do so primarily by “integrating theater arts with writing to build learning from a sensori-motor experience” (Story Stage). They offer group, individual and school programs crafted by an expert in communication, Rebekah Carlile M.Ed., M.A., CCC-SLP. Any child/adolescent is encouraged to enroll, but Story Stage has a focus on individuals who struggle with elements of communication, much like those on the autism spectrum. The Story Stage programs allow children to create their own plays and see them performed by trained actors at the end of the course of the program. In all my research, Story Stage remains one of the best examples of how the principles of drama-play can be used effectively in allowing children and teens to explore social interaction. It is very difficult to find such companies whose sole purpose is to use the principles of drama to aid children in cognitive exploration of socialization. The program has been masterfully created and is based on the theories of very accomplished cognitive neuroscientists, including Kurt W. Fischer and Lev Vygostky. Story Stage also employs a well-rounded group of professionals to proctor the

programs. Not only does Story Stage employ language therapists, but they employ theatre artists who are highly trained in the elements of drama-play that call upon theatricality and dramatic technique. This is crucial to Story Stage's known success and is a major reason I think Story Stage stands out amongst the few other drama-play programs I have found.

What I think takes Story Stage to the next level is their outreach. Though they offer programs that take place in their building after school hours, they have begun to expand into local schools. Thus, they bring what might otherwise be inaccessible for many students and embed it into the school day at no extra cost to the students. Specifically, Story Stage works with the children at Kinderfrogs and Starpoint School in Fort Worth. Both of these schools predominantly serve students with learning disabilities. Story Stage has created a partnership with these schools in which they host weekly classes for the students that take place in the classroom within the school day. This is rare. Often programs like Story Stage are only available in select areas and come at a high cost to families. However, Story Stage has recognized the importance of its outcomes and worked with these schools to create a relationship. The in-classroom work that Story Stage does is additionally effective in that the students are monitored by their own teachers and surrounded by peers they see daily rather than just once a week. The students' teachers are thus able to observe how the children are doing with the Story Stage curriculum and use that information to inform their work with the children in other parts of the school day. The teacher can also serve as a liaison if the child feels nervous about participating in the Story Stage activities, or needs extra assistance that the Story Stage teacher may be unable to provide. By being with their peers, the students are able to use the Story Stage time to continue to build meaningful relationships in a more "fun" atmosphere than most of the typical school day. The

Story Stage program can feel new and exciting for students in that it brings in a new set of activities and new teachers. Thus, students are able to share in such fun with their peers and build communication skills between one another that they may not have found otherwise.

Having performed in some of the plays written by the Story Stage students earlier in my college career, I realized how impactful their work was on the students they reached.. In many of the Story Stage classes, students will participate in drama-based games and activities. They will also work on learning how to give and receive constructive criticism, which is a very important part of learning to communicate effectively.

A major component of Story Stage is the creation of material. The students will work with the Story Stage teachers to create their own stories based on concepts and subjects that interest them. The students are encouraged to be as imaginative as they wish and create stories that they find interesting and impactful. The teachers then transcribe these stories for the students and create scripts that will be performed by trained actors. Collegiate and professional actors in the Fort Worth area come together at the end of every program to rehearse and perform the scripts. The children are then able to experience their stories performed onstage.

Witnessing something that they have created and collaborated on can be a very impactful experience for children. Seeing their own creation allows them to feel a sense of ownership for something of which they feel proud. Hearing the response of their peers and parents can also make the students feel very confident about the work they have done, and become more inclined to be creative and collaborative in the future. Story Stage gives children a platform and the tools they need to express themselves effectively and appropriately which often leads to them finding that sense of ownership over their voice and their creativity.

There are countless skills that are explored through this program. Students are asked to converse with their peers and teachers to communicate the stories they wish to tell. The teachers are there to listen and transcribe the stories for the students, but they do not change the grammar, dialogue or plot. Rather, the students are encouraged to discuss and come up with the most effective language that can be used to communicate their story. This can be very helpful for children who struggle with communication of their ideas as well as concepts like Theory of Mind. By communicating about a creative story that is interesting and engaging for them, students find new ways to convey their ideas in everyday interactions. The student feels encouraged and excited about what they are discussing rather than embarrassed and nervous. The students also work on giving and receiving criticism in a constructive manner. This is very important in that it invites the individual to share their opinions and help their peers while framing it in a way that is respectful of their peers' point of view and feelings. The students feel safe sharing their ideas and creations. By creating such a safe space for the student where they feel heard and appreciated, Story Stage is able to successfully allow their students to explore socialization in a low-pressure scenario so that they are equipped with the skills they need to communicate effectively in other situations they may encounter.

It is important that the work the children are doing at Story Stage remains fun and engaging, as well as low-pressure. This is where the “drama-play” idea is so important. Though Story Stage does not use this specific terminology on their website, it is evident that the principles of drama-play exist within their curriculum. In other words, Story Stage uses playful elements of drama that help the students explore creativity, language, communication, confidence, and many other invaluable skills, thus inviting the students to be playful and open with one another. They

will often participate in improv games that ask the students to think quickly on their feet and communicate their ideas to their audience. Effectively, the students don't realize they are working on skills. They feel, rather, that they are getting to be creative and having fun with their peers. However, the skills that many of the students gain do not go unnoticed by their families and teachers. There are several testimonials that Story Stage highlights on their website in which parents describe recognizing a new level of confidence and excitement within their children.

Story Stage has also begun to take a major step toward making their curriculum accessible to people around the world. Their team has created printable materials that can be purchased on their website by parents or teachers. For instance, they have a variety of what they call "Icon Stories" on their website (See Appendix A). These are short stories split up into sections that have icons next to them. They provide the characters, setting, motivation, and problem for the story, as well as some elements of grammar that might be utilized when creating the story. Once they are purchased, the icon stories can be downloaded, printed and copied. There are a variety of activities that can be done with each set of icon stories. The elements of the story can be cut out and scrambled for a student to put into the correct sequence. Students can create dialogue for one element of the story, or they can write their own story using some or all of the elements. Traits can be created for the characters. Students can improvise a short play based on the story. They can change one essential element of the story and discuss how it might change the rest of the story. There are endless possibilities that come with these simple icon stories. This is exactly how drama-play can be made more accessible in the future.

A Note on COVID-19

A major obstacle was thrown in my path regarding my research endeavors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I was hoping to do much of my research on the Story Stage model of drama-play in person and work with the faculty to make it more accessible online for parents and teachers to use. As I am unqualified to create a language drama-play program on my own, I was hoping to collaborate with the experts at Story Stage to decide how to best create a malleable program. Much of this was to be done over the month of March. However, the COVID-19 crisis and social distancing have prevented me from doing so. I have done research on their program model, but none of my research has been as fruitful as it may have been had I been able to observe their classes in real time, conduct interviews, and observe the curriculum creation process. Thus, the ideas I have for making drama-play more accessible are based solely on research that has been conducted through online databases, resources that Story Stage has available on their website, and an initial interview I conducted with one of the drama instructors from Story Stage. Had I been able to observe Story Stage directly, I may have been able to simply report the success of their program and look at ways to make it more accessible to others who may be interested in using it. Rather, I am using Story Stage as a guide by which I assess how drama-play programs can be improved to become transportable and usable for many groups of people with varying sets of resources. I hope that in the future I will be able to return to Story Stage to look at what it would take to put this idea into practice.

I do wish to highlight how Story Stage has handled COVID-19. Obviously, they are not able to host classes or go into the schools for their outreach programs during this time. However, Story Stage has done an incredible job offering families activities and games for their children to

do at home via their Instagram page. I think that this is a wonderful use of social media. As we continue to face challenges similar to COVID-19 in the future, which will inevitably happen, it is vital that we remain adaptable and attentive to the changing needs of those with specific challenges. Story Stage has done so by ensuring their materials and skill-building exercises are available even when their space and time is not. On their instagram page, @storystagefw, the Story Stage teachers have shared fun and engaging video clips that encourage children to think about language and practice important language skills. For instance, Rebekah Carlile shared a video on the page in which she gave a tutorial on how to make “peanut butter sushi.” Throughout the video, Rebekah discussed the use of transition and sequencing words when telling someone how to do something, as well as the use of specific language when giving someone instructions. She then gave the tutorial as an example of how to utilize those skills. She ended the video by asking the viewer what words they noticed that involved sequencing and encouraged them to teach someone else how to do something this week using the skills they had learned. This provides children with a fun and imaginative activity they can do at home that will simultaneously help them exercise their language skills. Telling someone how to do something or explaining a problem can be very difficult for someone who struggles with communication, but being able to do so is a very important skill. Thus, Rebekah uses a fun tutorial to encourage students to use important tools of description and sequencing for more effective communication. Though I do wish I could have done more observation and analysis of Story Stage, I think that this challenge resulted in an interesting concept: the use of social media. I definitely think this could be implemented by other groups in the future. This enables a much wider audience to experience the impact of Story Stage’s program.

I also wish to point out what The Second City has done in the wake of COVID-19. As they are unable to host their popular improv classes, they have quickly found out how to move these classes online. They have translated their material to be accessible in an online format, making their classes available to anyone. I hope that The Second City and other similar companies consider continuing this even when things go back to normal. However, I did notice that The Second City did not take their “Improv for Autism” class online. I think that this may have been a perfect opportunity for The Second City to extend their outreach and open a new avenue of opportunities for drama-based skill building to happen online over platforms like Zoom and Skype.

Elements Necessary to Make Drama-Play Programs More Effective and Accessible

Because I am unable to physically implement an accessible program due to the COVID-19 outbreak, I wish to discuss the unique factors I deem necessary to make such pre-existing and potential programs more effective and accessible.

1. Accessible Material

What I have found is, currently, in order for a child to receive the benefits of drama-play, they must live in an area where the programs are provided, be able to afford such programs, and fit the participant requirements established by said programs. There are several problems with this. While there is evidence of some really great drama-play programs like SENSE Theatre and Story Stage, other than a select few programs and clinical trials, drama-play is just not available in most areas. This isn't particularly surprising given that drama-play is often an overlooked form of skill building for those on the autism spectrum. Until drama-play programs pop up in more

locations that allow a wider majority of people access, material must be created that can be shared online for therapists, teachers, parents, etc., that can be implemented with their own children.

Similar to Story Stage making online resources available, other drama-play programs should be looking into making their curriculum digitally accessible for those who do not live near such programs. This can also make drama-play materials more accessible for those who cannot afford to attend in-person programs or don't fit the requirements for the clinical trials.

By making the materials more accessible, more groups can choose to put on their own programs. For instance, if the SENSE Theatre clinical trial proves to be successful, it would be beneficial for the creators to make their full curriculum accessible online for other professionals to put into practice. I toyed with making my own curriculum, but quickly realized that I don't have the qualifications of a speech-language pathologist or a psychologist that would be necessary. But, I believe that I and many other theatre artists have the skills necessary to act as successful practitioners and peers in drama-play scenarios. If the expertly developed curriculums were made more widely available, theatre professionals, trained educators, and therapists could come together to put on programs in their own cities. I think college theatre departments in many areas could be called upon to provide volunteers for programs. In fact, Story Stage often employs Theatre TCU students to act in the final performances of the student-written plays, and several of their current teachers are Theatre TCU alumni. This leads me to the next element that I think is important in making drama-play programs more effective.

2. Trained Theatre Professionals

Drama-play can only be successful when elements of theatricality are heartily incorporated. Drama-play programs must therefore have trained theatre professionals or even

theatre students on the staff. These professionals can bring a lot to the table with their expertise in improvisation, creativity, and empathy. They can also act as an example when demonstrating exercises. It is quite likely that drama-play programs will be an individual with autism's only opportunity to participate in theatre until the wider theatre community becomes more inclusive to people with varying levels of needs. (That is a social conversation for another time.) It is extremely important that they be met with the highest level of theatrical training available. This will help the individual get much more out of the program than they might if the material were proctored by someone who feels uncomfortable performing, or has little background in improvisation exercises which are a large part of drama-play. This is not to say that people who do not have theatrical training should not act as volunteers or examples for drama-play programs. Rather, it is important that a mixture of professionals with different backgrounds and areas of expertise be present on the staff. To use Story Stage as an example once again, we see that they employ not only theatre artists to teach, but also speech language pathologists and trained educators. Having a well balanced group of practitioners and curriculum creators is one of the keys to making drama-play successful.

Obviously, this idea is only applicable in in-person scenarios. When a parent or teacher wants to implement drama-play materials they find online with their own students or children, there will not be opportunity for a theatre professional to be present and act as an example. In this case, the materials that are available online must be accompanied by thorough instructions and, ideally, videos that model how each exercise can be performed.

3. Trained Peers

Trained peers should also be present when possible. In any program geared toward communication skill-building, the presence of trained peers is ideal. When I refer to “trained peers,” I am referring to “neurotypical” peers around the age of the participants who have been briefed on the aspects of ASD and trained to help facilitate the activities. SENSE Theatre employs such peers, and I think this is part of what makes their program so successful. By having trained “neurotypical” peers participating in the same activities, individuals on the autism spectrum are provided with examples to follow and people with whom they can engage. Some individuals on the autism spectrum may respond more to the examples of their peers rather than teachers or others presumed to be authoritative. Thus, it is important that trained peers are present if the resources to do so exist.

This is another idea that only applies to in-person scenarios. However, the peer concept can be replicated for those using materials distributed online via what is known as “video modeling.” When there is no possibility for a trained peer to be present, videos featuring children/adolescents modeling interactions, activities, and behaviors can be used as examples for the individuals using the online materials. Behavior modeling is a concept that was first introduced by Albert Bandura. Bandura claimed that “children acquire a vast array of skills by observing other people perform the skills, rather than just through personal experience” (Bellini, 265). Bandura also found that children were most likely to repeat the behavior of people they perceived to be similar to them. By this logic, children will often imitate the behaviors they observe in their peers of the same age. With video technology, modeling can be encouraged even

when physical peers cannot be present. Thus, video modeling can be used for children participating in drama-play activities that are found online.

4. Educational Outreach

Educational outreach is another element that can be very important in making drama-play accessible and effective. Part of what makes Story Stage so successful is the fact that they bring their curriculum into local schools. The students at these schools are thus able to experience the curriculum and reap the benefits without having to pay an additional cost or attend an after school program across town. Of course, schools must have funding available to pay for services like Story Stage, and this kind of money is often not available especially for public schools. Yet, I would like to believe that more school districts would enjoy this kind of opportunity if it presented itself in more areas.

This is another case in which having program materials available online is going to be extremely important. If teachers are able to get access to such materials to use in the classroom, so many children will have the opportunity to experience drama-play and hopefully do some skill building in the process. If this material becomes available, it will also be easier for groups similar to Story Stage to establish themselves in other cities and create partnerships with local schools for either in-class or after school instruction.

5. Individuals on the Autism Spectrum in Leadership

I have recently found that a lot of foundations or programs created for people on the autism spectrum lack representation from individuals who are on the autism spectrum themselves. I think that for a program to be successful and effective, there needs to be advocates in power who are actually members of the Autism community and can speak to their own experience. I think

many overlook this idea when creating programs for children especially. However, as I believe upcoming programs should be geared toward young adults as well as children, it is important that individuals on the autism spectrum be represented within the programs' leadership teams. It is unacceptable to continue the narrative that we must be the voice for people on the autism spectrum. Rather, we must use our own strengths to serve them. The voice is theirs' - we are not "giving" anyone a voice. The notion that people on the autism spectrum are voiceless and in need of our saving has to end in order for us to continue to reduce stigma and create meaningful and effective tools for skill building.

6. Research

The most important element necessary to creating new programs is additional research. Specifically, there needs to be in-depth research conducted on how drama-play can be best used for young adults rather than just children. So much research goes into the development of communication in young children on the autism spectrum. This makes sense because it is in your formative years that language skills are created and rapidly changing. However, as individuals reach adolescence and young adulthood, communication becomes more nuanced and communication therapies drop out. Drama-play programs specifically are geared almost exclusively toward elementary school children. However, I think that drama-play programs could be extremely effective with people of all ages. New curriculum will obviously need to be created for different age groups. Improv games and storytelling activities are not going to be as useful for young adults as they may be for children. Rather, young adults may benefit more from putting on a play from start to finish or performing as a crew member for a performance. Performing some of these tasks can not only aid in building skills, but can also introduce career possibilities to those

on the autism spectrum who may have never been given an opportunity to participate in theatre. These are definitely challenges that I hope will be explored as time goes on because I firmly believe that theatre is for everyone and should be a more welcoming place for those of varying needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a lot of work that must be done to make drama-play and drama based skill-building programs available to the wider public. While some successful programs exist, they are only available in select areas for select participants. I believe that drama-play has the potential to be greatly impactful for a large number of individuals on the autism spectrum. I wish to see the curriculums, research, and programs be made much more accessible in the near future. Though I wasn't able to get as "hands on" in this endeavor as I wanted to, I look forward to exploring the possibilities more once it is safe to do so.

This summer, if conditions allow, I plan to volunteer with Story Stage so that I can learn more about what it looks like in the Story Stage classroom and what is most effective for their students. I hope to then work with the professionals at Story Stage to create my own set of drama-play materials that can be distributed online for use by a wide number of people. Additionally, I plan to learn more about the use of social media and video-modeling in doing so. However, I do know I cannot create these materials without the expertise of the professionals at Story Stage who have gone through extensive education and training to create their curriculum. I look forward to seeing where this avenue takes me and seeing how it morphs over time to fit the ever-changing needs of our world.

Appendix A

Leaving for the Holiday Vacation



CHARACTERS: This is the story of Dottie, her brother Ricky, and her parents. Dottie is 10, her brother Ricky is 6.



SETTING: Dottie and her family lived in a house in Arizona, where it was always hot.



MOTIVATION: Dottie and her family were excited because they were leaving for their holiday vacation. They were going to visit their cousins, who lived in Minnesota. There was lots of snow in Minnesota and Dottie couldn't wait to play in the snow.



PROBLEM: They got locked out of their house as they were loading their car for the airport. The car keys were inside the house.



FEELINGS: Dottie was worried that they would miss their flight to visit their cousins. Airports were crowded around the holidays.



FIRST: Dottie's mom looked for their hidden key. But, her dad remembered he forgot to put it back last time he used it.



NEXT: Dottie said that they should just break the window. But, her dad said they couldn't do that, since they were going to be gone. Their house would have a broken window over the holiday vacation.



AFTER THAT, AN EXCITING THING HAPPENED: Ricky noticed the extension cord for the holiday lights going through the corner of the bathroom window. They could push the window open and Ricky could climb through. They were able to get the car keys!



FINALLY, THE WAY IT ALL WORKED OUT: Ricky got the keys. Then, Dottie and her family unplugged the extension cord, closed the bathroom window, and got to the airport on time. They were on their way to see their cousins for the holiday!



DOTTIE AND HER FAMILY were so happy. They loved spending time with their cousins. Now they could celebrate the holiday and play in the snow.

Works Cited

American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association; 2013.

“APA DSM-5 Autism Spectrum Disorder Fact Sheet.” American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

“Autism Spectrum Disorder.” *National Institute of Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/autism-spectrum-disorder/index.shtml.

Bellini, Scott, and Jennifer Akullian. “A Meta-Analysis of Video Modeling and Video Self-Modeling Interventions for Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders.” *Exceptional Children*, vol. 73, no. 3, Apr. 2007, pp. 264–287, doi:10.1177/001440290707300301.

Belmonte, MK. "What's the Story Behind 'Theory of Mind' and Autism?" *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 16, no. 6-8, 2009, pp. 118-139.

Borgatta, Edgar F., et al. “On the Work of Jacob L. Moreno.” *Sociometry*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1975, pp. 148–161. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2786239.

Braaten, Ellen. “DSM-5: What Happened to Asperger's?” *Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds*, 15 Apr. 2015,
www.mghclaycenter.org/parenting-concerns/families/dsm-5-what-happened-to-aspergers/.

Brinton, Bonnie, Lee A. Robinson, and Martin Fujiki. "Description of a Program for Social Language Intervention: "if You can have a Conversation, You can have a Relationship"."
Language, Speech & Hearing Services in Schools, vol. 35, no. 3, 2004, pp. 283-90.

ProQuest,

http://library.tcu.edu.ezproxy.tcu.edu/PURL/EZproxy_link.asp?http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/docview/232583155?accountid=7090.

Corbett, Blythe A., et al. "Improvement in Social Competence using a Randomized Trial of a Theatre Intervention for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2016, pp. 658-672.

Ellis, Katie. Disability and Popular Culture : Focusing Passion, Creating Community and Expressing Defiance, Routledge, 2015. ProQuest Ebook Central,
<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/lib/tcu/detail.action?docID=1843655>.

Fein, Elizabeth. "Making meaningful worlds: role-playing subcultures and the autism spectrum." *Culture, medicine and psychiatry* vol. 39,2 (2015): 299-321.
doi:10.1007/s11013-015-9443-x

Gerber, Sima. "Embracing the Potential of Play for Children on the Autism Spectrum: Facilitating the Earliest Stages of Developmental Integration." *Topics in Language Disorders* 37.3 (2017): 229-240. Journals@Ovid Full Text. Web. 18 April. 2020.

Godfrey, E., & Haythorne, D. (2013). Benefits of Dramatherapy for Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Qualitative Analysis of Feedback from Parents and Teachers of Clients Attending

Roundabout Dramatherapy Sessions in Schools. *Dramatherapy*, 35(1), 20–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02630672.2013.773131>

“How to Talk about Autism.” *NAS*,

web.archive.org/web/20150713051329/www.autism.org.uk/news-and-events/media-centre/how-to-talk-about-autism.aspx.

“Improv for Autism - The Second City Training Center, Chicago.” *The Second City*,

www.secondcity.com/classes/chicago/2020-improv-for-autism/.

Lai, Meng-Chuan, Michael V. Lombardo, and Simon Baron-Cohen. "Autism." *The Lancet*, vol. 383, no. 9920, 2014, pp. 896-910.

Levy, Susan E., David S. Mandell, and Robert T. Schultz. "Autism." *The Lancet*, vol. 374, no. 9701, 2009, pp. 1627-38.

Maynard, Kairo. “Dramatherapy: History, Applications and Outcome Measures.” *ACAMH*, ACAMH, 31 July 2019,
www.acamh.org/blog/dramatherapy-history-applications-outcome-measures/.

Nelson, Nickola Wolf. "From the Editor: Thinking Deeper About Play." *Topics in Language Disorders* 37.3 (2017): 211-213. Journals@Ovid Full Text. Web. 18 April. 2020.

Ratto, Allison Bassett. *Development of the Contextual Assessment of Social Skills (cass): A Role Play Measure of Social Functioning for Individuals with Autism*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010.

Shain, Alan. "Disability, Theatre and Power: An Analysis of a One-Person Play." *Canadian Theatre Review*, no. 122, Spring 2005, pp. 13–18. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,uid&db=ibh&AN=17255530&site=ehost-live.

"Story Stage." *Story Stage*, story-stage.com/.

"TCU: Kinderfrogs." *TCU Kinderfrogs*, kinderfrogs.tcu.edu/.

Thayer, Kate. "For Teens on Autism Spectrum, Improv Classes can Aid Communication." *ProQuest*, Jan 18, 2018, http://library.tcu.edu.ezproxy.tcu.edu/PURL/EZproxy_link.asp?/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.tcu.edu/docview/1988947977?accountid=7090.

Turnbull, W., JIM Carpendale, and TP Racine. "Talk and Children's Understanding of Mind." *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 16, no. 6-8, 2009, pp. 140-140.

Wepman, Dennis. "Moreno, Jacob L. (1889-1974), psychiatrist." American National Biography. September, 2010. Oxford University Press. Date of access 20 Feb. 2020, <<https://www.anb.org/view/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.001.0001/anb-9780198606697-e-1202119>>

"What Is Drama Therapy?" *What Is Drama Therapy*, www.nadta.org/what-is-drama-therapy.html.

Yi-Ping Hsueh, Synaptic Formation, Neural Circuits and Neurodevelopmental Disorders

Controlled by Signaling, Translation, and Epigenetic Regulation, *Developmental Neurobiology*, 79, 1, (2-7), (2019).