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Performing Along the Spectrum: a Study in the Application of Theatrical Approaches to Develop and Enhance Social Skills for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

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PERFORMING ALONG THE SPECTRUM: A STUDY IN THE APPLICATION OF

THEATRICAL APPROACHES TO DEVELOP AND ENHANCE SOCIAL SKILLS FOR

STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

A MASTER'S THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY

KIM LAMBERT

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

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Abstract

Individuals on the autism spectrum are faced with many unique challenges in navigating their respective worlds. One of the areas in which individuals across every sector of this spectrum may feel a significant impact is in the area of social skill development. The process of social skill acquisition is somewhat elusive in nature; while there are foundational skills that may be consistent across social scenarios, the ability to recognize, develop, and incorporate these skills into daily life may require an approach to learning that is both non-formulaic and non-linear. Engagement in performing arts activities, specifically those related to theatrical arts, provides access to one such non-linear pathway towards the potential development of social skills. The guiding research question for this study is as follows: How do performing arts activities promote the development of social skills for students on the autism spectrum? In order to enhance the reader's understanding of this topic relevant to the field of special education, the research will be further guided by the following set of sub-questions: What are performing arts activities? How do they promote the development of social skills; and, more specifically, how can they be adapted for students on the autism spectrum? The goal of this research is to enhance the reader's knowledge and understanding of theatrical approaches to social skill development for students with ASD, as guided by review of relevant literature and development of a framework for application that may be utilized and modified across group and classroom settings.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

What Is Autism

Autism at its core, and in its most approachable terms, is defined and described as a neurological developmental disorder that is characterized by challenges related to social interaction and communication skills (Vormer, 2020). In addition, individuals with autism may characteristically feel the need to repeat actions, experiences, routines, and/or verbal expressions to an intense degree (Sherman, 2018). The prevalence of autism has been observed to rise over the course of the last decade specifically. In 2002, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimated that 1 in every 150 children had some form of autism (Sherman, 2018). By 2012, that estimate had risen to 1 in every 68 children; and by the most recent statistics, the CDC estimates that 1 in 54 children is impacted by the diagnosis of some form of autism (Sherman, 2018). Many theories exist to address the cause for such a dramatic increase in these statistics, including genetic factors, changes in diagnostic tools and criteria, and environmental factors to name just a few (Sherman, 2018). Autism presents itself in different ways and to varying degrees of severity from case to case; in addition, it disproportionately affects boys, who are two to three times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with autism (Sherman, 2018).

It is both necessary and relevant to give agency to those who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders in describing their ASD for those who are not on the spectrum. John Elder Robinson, a neurodiversity scholar in residence at the college of William & Mary in Williamsburg, VA, is not only a scholar but an individual living on the autism spectrum; he is the acclaimed author of several books including *Look me in the eye: My life with Asperger's* and *Switched on: A memoir of brain change and emotional connection.* In an article published in *Psychology Today* in 2018, Elder Robinson described it as such: "Over the past 20 years or so, a generation of newly diagnosed people has emerged, and our

voices have changed how the world sees autism. We have shown the world that we are far more than a pathology or developmental mistake. Our disabilities are real, but so are our gifts. This has caused a re-evaluation of us and our place in the world" (Elder Robinson, 2018, p. 49). Author Casey Vormer, otherwise known as "Remrov," is a self-taught artist and autism advocate. In his book *Connecting with the autism spectrum: how to talk, how to listen, and why you shouldn't call it high-functioning*, Vormer says this in the prologue: "There are many books about autism written by people who are not on the spectrum themselves. Even though they can share very valuable information, they don't know what it really feels like to be autistic. That's why it's important that people learn about autism directly from autistic people" (Vormer, 2020, p. ix).

Social Skills Defined and Explored

In an article published in *Autism Research: Official Journal of the International Society for Autism Research,* autism is further described as a presentation of impairments in reciprocal social interactions that occur across all areas of the spectrum (Corbett et al., 2014). More specifically, the article goes on to address the concept of social competency, which is described as the ability to recognize and interpret both the emotional and interpersonal cues of others (Corbett et al., 2014). The lack of ability to recognize and interpret such clues is noted to be correlative with a lack of inherent motivation to socially engage with others, which ultimately affects interpersonal relationships between individuals with ASD and their peers (Corbett et al., 2014). These social challenges manifest in a variety of ways amongst individuals, and particularly children with ASD. Difficulty engaging with others may lead to an increased arousal or stress level as measured by the hormone cortisol; however, there is evidence that interventions may improve practical social skills, including face processing, which is often impaired amongst individuals with ASD (Corbett et al., 2014). There is not a singular effective approach to enhancing and developing social

competency; however, for individuals with ASD, the performing arts provide an innovative gateway for social exploration and enrichment.

Performing Arts

The performing arts present a unique landscape in which to experience personal enrichment and, as explored throughout the following research, practical application in the development of relevant social skills. A number of theater-based programs addressing the unique social needs of students with autism have emerged through the years. The Social Emotional NeuroScience Endocrinology (SENSE) which became the SENSE Theatre project, is specifically aimed at supporting individuals with ASD enhance their development of social skills, first emerged from Vanderbilt University in 2009; Blythe Corbett, a psychiatrist and former actor, began the SENSE Theatre project in order to facilitate flexible thinking and promote social perception through participation in improvisation, role-play games, and community performance (Makin, 2014).

In addition to the SENSE Theatre project, other programs addressing the social needs of individuals with ASD through exploration of theatre have emerged across the country and across the globe. Kelly Hunter, a British actress who once performed as part of the Royal Shakespeare Company, co-founded the Shakespeare and Autism Project alongside developmental disability expert Mark Tasse at Ohio State University. This program was designed to implicitly teach social skills through participation in drama games based on the works of William Shakespeare and exploration of rhythm in iambic pentameter (Makin, 2014). At the University of Kent in England, drama professors Nicola Shaughnessy and Melissa Trimingham developed a weekly program called Imagining Autism, which was designed to support children with autism in the development of social awareness through puppetry and performance (Makin, 2014).

The Convergence of Theater and Social Skills Interventions

As documented in a study published in *Arts in Psychotherapy* in 2013, scholars and practitioners have noted that drama therapies may be uniquely suited to address the needs presented in individuals with social challenges, including those with ASD; even more specifically, incorporating drama activities within the scope of therapeutic programming, as opposed to implementing a more exhaustive dramatice therapy program in full, may provide a uniquely efficacious framework for social remediation (Guli et al., 2013). It is further asserted that drama is inherently and uniquely situated to address the social deficits often present in individuals with ASD; that is to say, many dramatic games and activities were created to enhance actors' abilities to read and interpret one another's nonverbal cues (Guli et al., 2013). By design, many of these practices originally intended for theatrical applications are directly poised to address the social perception challenges most often seen in children with ASD (Guli et al., 2013). The interactive nature of drama activities emphasize the exchange of both verbal and nonverbal interpersonal cues; they work to enhance the development of relationships, increase awareness of emotions in both self and others, and promote the development of imagination and cooperation (Gule et al., 2013).

While theatrical practices provide what may be fertile ground for the development and enhancement of social skills for individuals across all spectrums, including and perhaps especially the autism spectrum, the potential success of its outcomes are hinged on the perceptions and level of buy-in amongst autism education stakeholders (Goldstein et al., 2019). A study published in the *Journal for Learning Through the Arts* in 2019 addressed the relevance of this by conducting a survey of educational stakeholders including teachers, teaching artists, classroom paraprofessionals, and administrators to glean information regarding their perceptions of theatre-based programming for students with ASD (Goldstein et al., 2019). While this study did not include research surrounding the actual implementation of any set dramatic-based social skills curriculum or activities, the results it yielded provided beneficial insights regarding the perceptions of those who are ultimately in charge of shaping and implementing curriculum.

Specifically, they surveyed stakeholders to ascertain their perception of the potential benefits of particular practices across different social development domains (Goldstein et al., 2019).

The program which the aforementioned survey investigated was a musical theatre program in Manhattan; this program was implemented as a sequential curriculum within a specialized public school serving children with special needs in grades K-12 (Goldentstein et al., 2019). There are a number of factors worth noting when investigating the results of these stakeholder surveys. First of all, while the survey addressed the relevance of the musical theatre programming as it pertained to development of social skills for students with ASD and other special needs, it should be stated that the intent of the program itself was not to serve as a social skills curriculum; the objective of the program in question was to mount a stage production at the end of the semester (Goldstein et al., 2019). As such, the results yielded spoke to the likelihood of incorporating some of the practices and activities within that program across other instructional realms. It is also worth noting that the perceived success of the program itself was not specifically addressed in the survey; students, parents, and other stakeholders were not surveyed before and after the culmination and final staging of the program. Stakeholders engaged in multiple rounds of think aloud surveys as laid forth by the Delphi Poll methodology, which is a multi-round series of surveys conducted amongst experts on a topic, in order to glean information regarding both their familiarity with the techniques in question and their perceptions regarding the potential benefit of those techniques (Goldstein et al., 2019).

Results of this study indicated that stakeholders expressed a high level of agreement regarding the utility of four to five strategies (including modeling/imitation, use of routine, vocal/physical warm ups, and small group work), but expressed less agreement surrounding behaviors that may change as a result of those strategies (Goldstein et al., 2019). Potential outcomes as identified by the survey participants included expected improvements in imitations and gross motor skills (Goldstein et al., 2019). The

significance of such surveys, and indeed stakeholder perceptions in general, is relevant to the efficacy of theatrical practices implemented within social skills programs. Just as educators recognize students need to buy-in to the lessons and activities in which they are asked to participate, so too must educators and practitioners buy-in to what they are teaching. Attitudes towards programming ultimately color the manner in which those programs are implemented. If an educator or practitioner does not see the potential benefits of the instruction they are implementing, they may be less likely to deliver it in a manner that is captivating to students and ultimately inhibit its outcomes. This points to the need for highly engaged facilitators across social skill program delivery, including but not limited to those which incorporate dramatic play.

This thesis will therefore provide research to demonstrate how performing arts activities will benefit students with autism.

Thesis Question

How do performing arts activities promote the development of social skills for students on the autism spectrum?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review Procedures

The research materials for this thesis were culled from a variety of sources, primarily those accessed via Bethel University's online library. A number of databases, namely EBSCO and ERIC, were utilized to gain access to scholarly articles from journals, including the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, Education Digest,* and *Research in Drama and Education*, amongst others. Articles relevant to the research and application topics were located through use of search terms including "social skills development and autism spectrum disorder," "autism and the arts," and "theater activities for individuals with autism spectrum disorder." Additional resources in the form of books and curriculum materials pertaining to both autism spectrum disorder and the arts that had been cultivated as part of the writer's personal library, including the book *Teaching Social Skills Through Sketch Comedy and Improv Games* and the *We Thinkers* social thinking curriculum, were also utilized within this research and the development of its application.

Social Skills on the Spectrum

One of the hallmark characteristics of autism spectrum disorders (ASD), along with restricted and repetitive behaviors, is noted differences in social communication that diverge from those typically observed amongst neuro-typical individuals. In order to understand the impact and implications of these differences, it is necessary to develop a foundational understanding of what it means to be social. The challenge herein, for both neuro-typical individuals and those across all areas of the spectrum, is that social rules change across settings, situations, and groups of people. Recognizing the manner in which those rules may change requires a foundation of social competence; a person who is considered socially competent is one who is able to to both share space and interact with others in a manner that is deemed

expected with regards to that particular social scenario (Crooke et al., 2016). This brings to light an additional inherent challenge in this layered and nuanced process of learning and utilizing social skills, which is that there is not a singular set of rules one must follow in order to adhere to socially accepted and expected behaviors; furthermore, it requires the ability to use others as a social barometer of sorts in order to assess whether or not one is following these standards, which are often referred to as hidden social rules (Crooke et al., 2016).

One vital component of learning what it means to be social involves the concept of theory of mind. This theory is built around the central notion that individuals develop an understanding of others' perspectives and the ways in which they differ from one's own perspectives in a manner that is both abstract and intuitive across a typical trajectory of neurodevelopment (Crooke et al., 2016). In other words, as children grow, they typically develop an understanding of how their own beliefs and emotions may differ from those of others. This progression from concrete and self-focused thinking towards abstract consideration of others' thoughts and feelings across the stages of childhood development may also be referred to as evolving from a "me thinker" to a "we thinker" (Crooke et al., 2016).

While it has been established that the expectations and parameters for what may be deemed socially acceptable vary greatly across settings and contexts, it is also vital to establish a succinct baseline understanding of how social skills present themselves in general. Simply put, social skills may be defined as a specific set of behaviors that impact social interactions (Rao et al., 2008). These behaviors include both verbal and non-verbal expressions within social interactions. Physical manifestations of social skills may include behaviors such as eye contact, contextually appropriate facial expressions, and regard for spatial proximity to others with respect to physical boundaries. The concept of theory of mind, as discussed previously, may present itself in a more tangible way with regard to verbal skills utilized within social interactions. Specifically, one's ability to understand the potential perception of the person or

persons with whom that individual is interacting, based on their prior knowledge and assumptions of their

communication partners and current physical setting, may shape one's ability to filter external expressions

of internal thoughts. Individuals with autism often display deficits in these particular realms; specifically,

it is common for individuals on the autism spectrum to experience social challenges including initiating

and maintaining reciprocal social interactions, interpreting verbal and non-verbal social cues, and

understanding the perspective of others (Roa et al., 2008).

The process of learning to be social occurs across developmental levels and increases in

complexity as individuals develop; it evolves in ways that are active, intuitive, and abstract (Crooke et al.,

2016). Just as social expectations themselves vary across domains, so too does the manifestation of social

challenges for individuals with ASD; while some individuals on the autism spectrum may struggle to

understand and apply social knowledge for the duration of their lives, others may develop a more keen

ability to engage in social problem-solving as they grow and develop. These social outcomes may be

further impacted by language and cognition, of which there are a wide range of skills represented across

the autism spectrum; when considering the range in skills represented within this population, it is

important to note that a higher level of cognitive competence as measured by Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

does not correlate to a higher level of social competence (Crooke et al., 2016). Indeed, standards-based

measures may impede access to beneficial interventions for some individuals with ASD. This is

particularly true of those who display high cognitive levels of achievement but possess lower levels of

social competency. Standardized measures may play a significant role in meeting criteria to qualify for

services that address both academic and social challenges present in students with autism; therefore

individuals with ASD who perform high on standardized measures may experience greater difficulty

accessing interventions to address their social challenges. The scattered skill sets represented in and

amongst populations of individuals with ASD point to the unpredictable and non-linear nature of

development across various learning contexts and areas of study, including social learning; that is to say, for individuals with ASD, the evolution from "me-thinking" to "we-thinking" is rarely intuitive and requires a more intentional approach to learning (Crooke et al., 2016).

Targeted focus on the development and enhancement of social skills amongst individuals with autism is perhaps more intrinsically woven into instruction during school-age years, in which student specific social needs may be addressed directly within an IEP. It is also worth noting that the presentation of these challenges continues to be impactful across both formal and informal stages of personal development that occur across age groups. During the post-school-age era of one's life, for instance, individuals may be required to weave through complex and novel social webs for which classroom experiences or even more structured role-play scenarios may not adequately prepare one.

This complexity of addressing social skills was illustrated in a study conducted in 2019 and published in *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* in 2020, wherein adults with autism and typically developing adults were conversationally paired with both typically developing adults and other adults with autism in order to assess the quality of their dyadic social exchanges (Morrison et al., 2020). In this study, which included 67 adult participants with autism and 58 typically developing participants, participants were paired in one of three types of partnerships that were categorized as follows: autism-autism, typically developing-typically developing, or autism-typically developing (Morrison et al., 2020). The study involved engaging in a 5-minute unstructured conversation with an unfamiliar person, followed by participant assessment that addressed both the quality of the interaction itself as well as participant impressions of their conversational partner. Due to the gender disproportionality present in populations of individuals with autism, as the majority of individuals with autism are male, all participants in this study were male; this also allowed for avoidance of additional complexities that multi-gender dynamics present within the context of conversations (Morrison et al.,

2020). Participants ranged in age from 18-45 and were paired based on demographics and general intelligence, as determined by evaluative measures conducted prior to this study; specifically, all participants with autism were administered the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS-II) and the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence (WASI) during a clinical intake session conducted at an earlier time (Morrison et al., 2020). It is worth noting that all participants who were identified as autistic for the purposes of this study scored above the clinical threshold for ASD on the ADOS with intelligence quotient (IQ) scores above 90 on the WASI (Morrison et al., 2020). Upon completion of a 5-minute unstructured interaction, which was videotaped and conducted with participants sitting across a table from one another, each participant completed an 11-question assessment called the *Social Interaction Evaluation Measure*; this self-report assessment allowed participants to place value on an eight-point scale that measured elements of the conversation including quality of the interaction, disclosure, engagement, and intimacy (Morrison et al., 2020). The results suggested that individuals with autism tend to show a preference for future interactions with other individuals on the autism spectrum as opposed to typically developing adults; typically developing adults, on the other hand, expressed a higher level of interest in future interactions with other typically developing adults (Morrison et al., 2020). Across both groups, individuals with autism were rated as more awkward, less attractive, and less socially warm when compared to typically developing adults (Morrison et al., 2020).

These results highlight the potential social implications and complications for individuals with autism across social contexts as they age; as adults with autism may display an affinity for interacting with other adults with autism in loosely structured social scenarios, this preference may present challenges when immersed in a world that requires interaction with socially diverse groups of people. This study further highlights the importance of approaching social skill development as a relational challenge as opposed to an individual impairment (Morrison et al., 2020). While this particular study was

relatively small in scope, it nevertheless underscores the importance of approaching social skill development in innovative ways that strive to serve the individual with autism as they face the unpredictability of social interactions across novel settings and situations.

Classroom Interventions and Therapeutic Approaches

The nature of social skill acquisition and development itself may be abstract and elusive; while there are foundational skills that may be consistent across social scenarios, the ability to recognize, develop, and incorporate these skills into daily life may require an approach to learning that is both non-formulaic and non-linear. Educators are charged with the task of identifying and utilizing innovative methods to support the development of such skills, particularly when working with students on the autism spectrum. At its foundation, the process of developing an effective approach to teaching and enhancing these skills for students on the autism spectrum requires an exploration of the myriad of ways in which autism may impact an individual's understanding and presentation of social skills.

Curriculum designed to address the particular social challenges associated with ASD vary across educators and practitioners, as is the case with other forms of instruction and intervention; however, there are a number of methodologies that are widely known and utilized across classroom and clinical settings, including the Social Thinking and PEERS curricula (Bottema-Beutel, et al., 2018). The Social Thinking curriculum, which was first developed by noted speech and language pathologist Michelle Garcia Winner, is primarily aimed towards school-aged individuals with ASD; the PEERS curriculum, which stands for the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills, was developed by licensed clinical psychologist Elizabeth Laugeson and is traditionally used more frequently with adolescents and young adults on the autism spectrum (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). While there are differences in regards to both the content and target audiences of these interventions, they seek to achieve a common objective, which is to improve the ability for an individual to establish and maintain relationships with others

through an enhanced understanding of commonly accepted social rules and expectations (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018).

The development of nuanced social skills curricula requires critical analysis of that which is currently in place. The future is colored and informed by what has come before it; and it is therefore worthwhile for any educator or facilitator of social skills curricula to glean the best of what exists in the present in order to provide an even more expansive approach to the practices of social skill development in the future. One barrier that exists in widely-accepted practices of the present, as highlighted in Bottema-Beutel, Park, and Kim's study published in 2018, is present in the bifurcation of what they describe of "top-down" and "bottom-up" curricular frameworks (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). In this description, "top down" refers to interactions that are structured within specific cultural expectations and the moves which adhere to those expectations; this may include allocation of turn-taking to speak within conversations and formulating a particular set of actions ascribed to the particular social exchange (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). A "bottom-up" approach, on the other hand, allows for a more fluid and spontaneous reconfiguration of norms with respect to the participants and other elements of the particular social interaction; this may include the development of a social repertoire that is more specific to the participants and may lie outside the lines of an otherwise typically-accepted contextual framework for the interaction (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). Bottema-Buetel, Park, and Kim further explain that the convergence of a top-down approach infused with bottom-up interactions, even those which may subvert top-down social constraints, creates a foundation upon which social affiliations may solidify (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). The traditional classroom itself provides a rich environment in which the confluence of these structures and dynamics may be explored. When one considers the social expectations of traditionally functioning school classrooms, there is an understanding that they typically operate according to a set of rules and expectations that inform when students are allowed to speak; however, in

addition to (or perhaps even in spite of) those explicit social rules for classroom conduct, meaningful social affiliations emerge in the interactions that may occur outside of those rules.

While tradition and an emphasis on established norms may indeed present a challenge with regard to innovating social skill instruction, as mentioned previously, it continues to be an essential and worthwhile practice to utilize the expertise of those who have committed years of study and practice towards the development of current curricula. This ever-changing instructional landscape is built upon ground that has been broken by experts such as speech and language pathologist Michelle Garcia-Winner, whose Social Thinking curriculum has shaped and informed social skills curricula in special education classrooms across the country. One aspect of social skills that is given a significant amount of attention in both Garcia-Winner's Social Thinking curriculum and Laugeson's PEERS curriculum is conversation; more specifically, both of these curricula address the strategies and practices they deem essential for initiating, joining, and sustaining conversations with particular consideration for topicality and the exchange of information (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). These social skills curricula are centered around the notion that a mutually agreed upon topic is essential for successful conversation; furthermore, it is suggested that conversational participants devote time to discovering preferred and non-preferred topics amongst their partners in order to either include or avoid particular topics, respectively (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). In addition to developing skills and strategies pertaining to verbal conversations, Garcia-Winner's curriculum, for example, addresses non-verbal components of social exchanges, including appropriate spatial proximity and the physical components of listening; specifically, the Social Thinking curriculum addresses the concepts and practices of described therein as having a "body in the group" and utilizing "whole body listening" within social interactions (Tarshis, Hendrix, Zweber-Palmer, Garcia-Winner, & Chapin, 2016).

Critics of these popular social skills training programs question their effectiveness with regard to skill generalization and maintenance across real-world contexts. In their 2018 article in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders,* Bottema-Beutel, Park, and Kim addressed their concerns with the blind spots in these programs as they pertain to contextual nuance and variation. They maintained that the significance of bottom-up approaches to social exchanges may be neglected within the top-down structures of these curricula. The more formal and designated format of exchanging information and taking turns with verbal utterances has the potential to hinder long term interactional goals. Ultimately, these goals may be achieved via authentic banter and even conversational taunting, which occurs outside of the curricula's parameters (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018).   They concluded their analysis of these programs by recommending a more nuanced approach; one that does not entirely abandon the framework provided by top-down instruction, but rather an approach that extends its reach to incorporate other socio-linguistic disciplines that emphasise social interaction over social cognition (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). A more nuanced approach, one that is more expansive in its acceptance of communication that occurs outside of strict adherence to conversational norms, may ultimately serve to destigmatize the role of individuals with ASD as communication patterns across social contexts (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018).

The Impact of ASD on Performing Arts Patronage

When one considers the contexts in which such nuanced social exchanges may be both implemented and observed, a vast array of locations may come to mind; one such locale, in which both verbal and nonverbal exchanges occur in both highly structured and wildly boundless expressions, is the theatre. While the unpredictable nature of theatre itself and the environments in which it is performed may present challenges to patrons with ASD, particularly given the environments' amount of visual and auditory stimulation and its associated potential for inducing sensory overload, the theatre community at large has strived to make performing arts patronage more accessible and enjoyable for neurodiverse

audiences (Giserman-Kiss et al., 2020). In 2020, the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* published a study addressing audience perceptions in order to identify areas for growth in the theatre community, specifically in terms of expanding accessibility for neurodivergent audiences and ultimately increasing community involvement for individuals with ASD and their families. In the article, entitled *The immersive theater experience for individuals with autism spectrum disorder*, the author asserts that, while there is generally a growing level of public awareness surrounding autism spectrum disorder, there continues to be areas for growth in terms of accessibility and providing access to sufficient accommodations to community or recreational activities for individuals with ASD (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020).

The research conducted in this study yielded a list of best practices for meeting the needs of theater patrons with ASD and their caregivers, as obtained via analysis of pre-show and post-show questionnaires, with the ultimate goal of increasing accessibility to cultural and recreational activities for community members impacted by ASD (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020). Parents and teachers of 256 children and adolescents completed questionnaires which addressed their pre-show expectations and post-show levels of satisfaction; these parents and teachers, along with the children and adolescents, were all in attendance of an immersive theater performance that was designed specifically for individuals with ASD (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020). It should be further noted that, within the context of this study as expressed in the article, the authors cite a 2013 definition of immersive theater by J. Machon, which defines it as "a performance form emphasizing the importance of space and design that creates tangible and interactive environments focused on individual audience experiences" (p. 1074).

The questionnaires utilized in this study were originally dispersed to the parents/caregivers or teachers of 342 children; ultimately, 85 participant responses were not included in the final analysis, due to either incomplete reporting or previous attendance of the show (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020). Analysis

of population demographics relative to the reported type of disability were dependent on what the researchers presumed to be accurate adult reporting; that is, the adults surveyed self-identified their child's/student's diagnoses. Parent report indicated that 82.7% of the sample population's children/ students were classified under the diagnosis of autism on their respective IEPs (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020). It is further noted that one-third of the overall sample included individuals identified at "minimally verbal" by their reporting adult (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020).

This study was qualitative in nature; and participants were asked to complete three questionnaires. The nature of these questionnaires were as follows: one 11-item demographic questionnaire, in which parents/teachers were asked to provide information regarding gender, language, and IEP classification; one 9-item pre-show survey, in which parents/teachers rated their expectations regarding presumed satisfaction with the performance elements on a scale of 1 to 5; and one 9-item post-show survey, in which parents/teachers rated their satisfaction with the performance on the same scale of 1 to 5 (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020). Issues addressed within the context of the survey questions included comprehension of the plot and perceived accessibility of the physical environment. It is also noted that researchers with extensive experience in ASD attended the performance in order to document their analyses of the environmental accommodations; however, it is unclear as to what designates these individuals as having what is described as extensive experience (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020). The research indicated that across all three performances attended on the day of this data collection, satisfaction levels significantly surpassed the pre-show expectations as expressed in the questionnaires (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020). Questionnaire results indicated that patrons with ASD, as reported by proxy via their parents or teachers, were pleased with the accommodations including visual schedules, social narratives, access to sensory supports, and environmental accommodations that included allotment for break and movement spaces (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020).

The objectives of this study were well aimed; however, with respect to scientific research practices, some of their data collection methods were lacking in terms of validity and reliability, particularly as it related to demographic reporting. The impact of this research would potentially be farther reaching if questionnaires were distributed to parents/caregivers/teachers of individuals with autism who patronized theater experiences designed for the general public. Collecting data within that type of environment may provide a clearer picture of what is lacking in terms of accessibility for individuals with autism in the community. Future research in this area would benefit from incorporating data collection tools that allow individuals with ASD who have limited verbal expression skills to convey their impressions and responses directly as opposed to by proxy via their parents/caregivers/teachers.

The authors concluded that, while there are noteworthy limitations to the research presented within this study, the results are promising in terms of broadening exposure to cultural and recreational activities for individuals with ASD and their caregivers. They further noted the need for more research in this area, as well as development of additional data collection tools (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020). The methods for collecting the data in this study, loose as they may be, gave a voice to patrons who are historically underserved in terms of meaningful access to recreational activities available to the general public. The point of service method for collecting this data was also a relative strength of this study. As the authors indicated, this research encompasses what they describe as the first examination of immersive theater experiences that have been designed specifically with individuals on the autism spectrum in mind (Giserman-Kiss, et al., 2020).

The desire to create a theatrical landscape that is inclusive to a broader range of patrons is one which is developing, but far from new; in 2014, the journal *Support for Learning* published an article outlining an initiative that originated in the British theatre, which is often considered the cultural epicenter of theatre itself, designed specifically to include and attract children with disabilities to participate in

theatre patronage. This undertaking was the result of a collaboration between the Prince's Foundation for

Children and the Arts, the Society of London Theatres, and the Theatrical Management Associations; their

joint efforts were aimed at creating what they coined the Relaxed Performance program (Kempe, 2014).

Eight theatres were involved in this project, which was a multi-step approach to creating a relaxed

theatrical environment via sensory input adjustments, ASD-centric staff-training, and adjustments in

audience expectations; more specifically, theatres made adjustments to sound and lighting to reduce the

potential for overstimulation, created quiet spaces with monitors to allow for separation from the larger

crowd while still accessing the performances, and encouraged exploration and interaction with the stage

and actors (Kempe, 2014). They attracted audiences through collaboration with school programs that

served students with ASD; and the results were considered overwhelmingly positive. Over the course of

the project's initial seven-month phase, the participating theatres engaged with a total of 4,983 audience

members; and 42% of that total audience included individuals living with ASD and their family members

or caregivers (Kempe, 2014). Amongst that subset of audience members impacted by ASD, 60% of

individuals surveyed as part of the project indicated they had never been to the theatre as a family, and

30% of those surveyed indicated they had never been to the theatre at all (Kempe, 2014). Initiatives such

as this, point to the impact that minor adjustments in presentation and audience expectations can make in

terms of creating a more inclusive space for patrons with ASD.

While the aforementioned article does not speak specifically to theatre arts as a means of

therapeutic intervention for individuals with ASD, the topic of accessibility to theater remains highly

relevant to the research question posed within this thesis. In order for an individual to establish or

maintain any sense of buy-in to an activity or therapeutic measure, there is value in establishing

familiarity through exposure. It would seem rather unlikely that any individual who had never

experienced theater as a patron would entertain the notion of participation in it as a performer. As such,

providing the opportunity for theatrical patronage for individuals with ASD may be a worthy endeavor when considered within the broader scope of establishing and implementing therapeutic approaches that involve theatrical components.

The Intersection of Performing Arts and Social Skill Development

The point at which theatre and social skills training merge in order to create an innovative learning experience for individuals with ASD has been explored across a number of studies. In 2014, a study published in *Autism Research:Official Journal of the International Society for Autism Research* aimed to explore and identify the ways in which social interaction amongst youth with ASD may be impacted by involvement in a novel intervention program that incorporates theatrical techniques and behavioral strategies in a peer-mediated model (Corbett et al., 2014). This study was implemented over the course of two weeks within the framework of a summer camp model. When stating their objectives for this study, the authors referred to similar research that was previously conducted over the course of three months, during which time subjects displayed progress with face perception, social interaction, and stress reduction (Corbett et al., 2014). Specifically, the researchers sought to answer whether or not a novel intervention program that incorporated both behavioral strategies and theatrical techniques would improve reciprocal social interactions in youths with ASD, aged 8-17 years, over the course of a two-week summer camp experience which paired them with trained and typically-developing peers. They further hypothesized that increased time spent engaged in peer activities may correlate to a change in levels of cortisol, which they defined therein, as a stress hormone impacted by physiological arousal (Corbett et al., 2014).

The aforementioned research article addresses SENSE, which stands for Social Emotional NeuroScience Endocrinology; and SENSE Theater is further defined in the article as the theater-based intervention research program which was developed in the SENSE laboratory in 2009 (Corbett et al.,

2014). The initial sample population of this research study included 12 of 16 youths attending a two-week SENSE Theater Summer Camp. This sample population included 9 boys and 13 girls, all of whom had a diagnosis of ASD in accordance with DSM-IV criteria. It is further noted that 3 participants were African-American, 7 participants were Caucasian, and 2 participants were Hispanic (Corbett et al., 2014). ASD diagnoses of the participants were confirmed by a clinical psychologist with expertise in ASD. Exclusion criteria included children with severe intellectual disabilities, as measured by the Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence, or frequent displays of uncontrolled aggression. It is further noted that one participant failed to complete the majority of dependent measures within the study and was subsequently dropped from the research group, resulting in 11 participants as opposed to the initial 12 (Corbett et al., 2014). Researchers utilized mixed methods, which incorporated both qualitative and quantitative measures, within this study; these research methods included neuropsychological measures, as well as collection and analysis of cortisol levels as obtained via saliva samples (Corbett et al., 2014).

The interventions and performances assessed within this study occurred at the University School of Nashville (USN) in cooperation and with approval from The Human Research Protection Program of Vanderbilt University. Assessments and behavioral coding were completed by independent, research-reliable raters and biostatisticians in order to promote objectivity; in addition, typically developing peer models received training to participate in the intervention with parental consent (Corbett et al., 2014). The following diagnostic and neuropsychological measures, in addition to cortisol sampling, were implemented as part of this study: *Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule* (ADOS), *Wechsler Abbreviated Scale of Intelligence* (WASI)*, Social Communication Questionnaire, Social Responsiveness Scale, NEPSY: Affect Recognition, Memory for Faces, Parenting Stress Index* (PSI)*, Adaptive Behavior Assessment System* (ABAS)*,* and *Companionship Scale* (Corbett et al., 2014).

The Peer Interaction (PI) Paradigm consisted of a 20-minute playground interaction with two novel peers, which was conducted both pre-intervention and post-intervention (Corbett et al., 2014). One peer acted as an instigator for play during this time; and interactions were recorded utilizing audio and visual equipment in order to collect and analyze cooperative play. In addition, saliva samples were collected at designated times in order to measure and detect changes in cortisol levels that corresponded to specific types of play; more specifically, cortisol samples were obtained 40 minutes after initiation of the play protocol (Corbett et al., 2014).

The SENSE Theater program itself served as a peer-mediated, performance-based framework embedded in play, whereby participants with ASD and typically developing peers were paired as co-actors in a play (Corbett et al., 2014). The schedule for this intervention included four-hour long camp sessions five days per week, culminating in two performances open to the public at the end of the two weeks. The rehearsal process included mock-auditions, imaginative play, scripted role-playing, movement games set to music, and technical run-throughs of the show that developed through participation in these practices over the course of the two weeks. The final performances presented at the end of the camp experience were both 45 minutes in length and included dramatic, technical, and musical elements (Corbett et al., 2014).

Results obtained by the end of the two weeks, and analyzed via measurement tools previously described, indicated significant improvement in social perception and social cognition amongst participants with ASD; more specifically, improvements were noted in the areas of facial perception and the ability to interpret social meaning within the context of peer interactions (Corbett et al., 2014). Despite significant social perception and cognition improvements noted within the structured context of the treatment setting, this was not observed to translate into increased time spent with novel peers on a

playground. In addition, a strong positive correlation was found to exist between the amount of time spent engaged in cooperative play and cortisol levels (Corbett et al., 2014).

The primary strength of this study was the treatment approach itself, which represented a convergence of novel theatrical approaches along with established behavioral techniques as a means of treatment (Corbett et al., 2014). Improvement was measured by utilizing a variety of instrumentation. The tools utilized in the study lent themselves to assessment of the outcomes across a number of settings; though it is noted that further research and additional methods are necessary in order to assess the capacity for generalization of these skills across additional environments for greater lengths of time in the future (Corbett et al., 2014).

Despite the strengths of this study, there were also a number of limitations. As mentioned previously, one of the original 12 participants was dismissed from the study due to failure to complete the majority of dependent measures in the study, thus reducing what was already a small sample size. The researchers themselves noted that it is unclear, based on the nature of the study and the results yielded, as to whether or not this enhanced social awareness will be sustained over time and generalized across settings (Corbett et al., 2014). As further indicated, next steps in research should include analysis of the effectiveness of isolated components of the intervention (i.e. music, video modeling, etc.) by comparing the success of the treatment with and without those components (Corbett et al., 2014). It is also noted that testing a comparison group in future studies may add both clarity and gravity to the results yielded by such research (Corbett et al., 2014).

This study yields promise and potential for the implications of further research within this theatrical realm of treatment for individuals with ASD, particularly as it pertains to the development of functional social skills and stress management techniques within this population. As mentioned by the authors, it would be worthwhile to explore the effects of participation in such programs on the neuro-

typical participants of such a study. Specifically, it would be meaningful to explore in what ways, if any, are neuro-typical individuals impacted by participation in theatrical pursuits alongside individuals with ASD; namely, how might it impact their own social awareness and stress management? From the perspective of both a researcher and practitioner, it is encouraging to know that the theater yields a fertile ground for nourishment of social skills for individuals with ASD. The arts provide a pathway to escape and connection for some individuals. Aside from recreational benefits, participation in novel activities such as theater arts may have a substantial and positive impact on the development of social skills, particularly for individuals with ASD.

In 2020, an article published in *Frontiers in Psychology* further addressed how participation in SENSE Theatre interventions may impact social play, including group and self play, as well as anxiety (Ioannou, et al., 2020). The researchers in this study predicted they would see marked improvements in the areas of social competency, memory for faces, social functioning, theory of mind, and adaptive skills, just as it was discovered during the course of previous research studies that utilized the same theatrical approach to therapeutic interventions (Ioannou, et al., 2020). Researchers in this study further predicted that SENSE Theatre interventions would have a positive impact on both group play in children with ASD and anxiety amongst participants (Ioannou, et al., 2020). The researchers used mixed methods, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research measures. One research method utilized was a Peer Interaction Paradigm, or PIP as referenced in the previous study, which was further defined within the realm of this research as a semi-structured playground observation protocol involving two gender and age-matched peers that divide interactions into free and solicited play (Ioannou, et al., 2020). Another research method utilized in the study was the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children (STAIC), which is described as a self-reporting questionnaire designed to measure current and enduring traits of anxiety (Ioannou, et al., 2020).

Similar to the previously discussed SENSE Theater research project, this study consisted of four-hour long sessions conducted over the course of 10 days. Sessions included activities such as mock auditions, theater games, imaginative play with music, and video modeling (Ioannou, et al., 2020). This theatrical therapeutic intervention also culminated in two public performances, which were open for the public to attend (Ioannou, et al., 2020). Following treatment, participants in the experimental group engaged in significantly more group play, both solicited and unsolicited (Ioannou, et al., 2020). In regards to analysis of anxiety levels within the experimental group, participants reported significantly less Trait (current) anxiety; however, there were no differences reported in regards to State (enduring) anxiety (Ioannou, et al., 2020).

There were a number of strengths and limitations presented within the parameters of this research study. The primary strength of this study is that it illustrates the positive impact that participation in a novel therapeutic approach, namely SENSE Theater, may have on the development of play skills and the diminishment of anxiety amongst individuals with autism (Ioannou, et al., 2020). The authors identified a relative lack of socio-cultural and ethnic diversity as a limitation of this study; specifically, though the sample size was relatively large with 102 total participants, 84% of that population identified as caucasian (Ioannou, et al., 2020). The authors further noted a lack of representation in relation to neurodiversity within the study, with participants being classified as higher functioning with a minimal IQ of 70. They addressed the need for future research that includes children with co-occurring intellectual disabilities (Ioannou, et al., 2020).

The authors concluded that the results yielded from this study further corroborate previous research which indicated that participation in SENSE Theater interventions may lead to increased group play with peers and a decrease in anxiety amongst individuals with ASD (Ioannou, et al., 2020). The authors further concluded that participation in theater activities may ultimately enhance motivation for

students with ASD to engage in play with typically developing peers across activities This research provides a foundation for continued exploration of theater-based therapeutic approaches for individuals on the autism spectrum (Ioannou, et al., 2020).

The research presented in the sources of literature reviewed herein yielded evidence that points to the potential positive impact of infusing social skills training practices with theatrical components. The ever-evolving landscape of learning requires an approach to teaching that matches it in its willingness and ability to evolve. This research lays fertile groundwork for the development of new innovations in social skills instruction, and further validates the potential value of incorporating theatrical approaches into those instructional methods.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH APPLICATION

Overview of the Social Skills Unit

The confluence of the research presented herein and this writer's experiences, both as a classroom teacher and a theatre performer herself, has culminated in the creation of a social skills unit for elementary-aged students with mild to moderate ASD.   This unit of study may be implemented within the classroom as either one component or a primary focus of a larger social skills curriculum. This social skills unit aims to incorporate a multi-faceted approach to utilizing various components of the research that have been presented thus far, specifically as it pertains to incorporating theatrical elements of play to support the development of social awareness and enhancement of contextually appropriate social skills.

While social skill development, much like creative processes themselves, is often non-linear, the approach for development of this unit of study and exploration is systematic and intentional in its progression from introduction to execution. This week-long unit is intended to build upon prior knowledge regarding thinking with our eyes and listening with our bodies, as introduced in the *We Thinkers* social thinking curriculum addressed in previous lessons; in addition, it incorporates components of exercises and activities laid forth in books such as Kelly Hunter's *Shakespeare's heartbeat: Drama games for children with autism* (2015) and Shawn Amador's *Teaching social skills through sketch comedy and improv games* (2018).

Week at a Glance

The chart below is a calendar outlining daily activities for this week-long social skills unit; it should be noted that the activities in these lessons are intended to be part of a daily twenty minute social skills time embedded into the students' schedules. This may be a component of a special education classroom schedule, or it may be addressed within a small-group pull-out service. While the target population for this unit of study is students with mild to moderate ASD, specifically students with

receptive and expressive verbal language skills who are able to sustain involvement in group activities, elements of these lessons could be extrapolated and modified to meet the needs of a more diverse population that may include nonverbal students with ASD. The objective of this lesson is to enhance practical application of social skills through participation in theatrical warm-ups and guided dramatic play.

Calendar of Daily Learning Targets and Activities

Day One **Learning Target:** I can describe (via words, pictures, actions, etc.) the difference between a thought and a feeling.	**My Thoughts and Feelings** We will lay the foundation for exploring character thoughts and feelings throughout the week by working on recognizing the difference between our own thoughts and feelings. The lesson will begin with a read-aloud of the book *Thinking thoughts and feeling feelings*, which is one component of the *We thinkers. Volume1* social thinking curriculum, by Kari Tarshis, Kari Zweber Palmer, Michelle Garcia Winner, and Ryan Hendrix (2016). At the conclusion of the book, the guided practice will include categorizing thoughts and feelings as a group, utilizing visuals/descriptions of scenarios prepared by the teacher in a collaborative jam-board and projected onto the SMART Board. Independent practice will include students drawing a picture and writing/ completing one corresponding sentence of a thought and a feeling (i.e. drawing a picture of something that makes them feel happy and completing the sentence "I feel happy when ____."). The lesson will conclude with a check out where students may choose to share their pictures and sentences with the group.

Day Two	**What Are They Thinking?! What Are They Saying?!** We will begin the lesson with a brief review of the book *Thinking thoughts and feeling feelings* as read the previous day, this time with a focus on thought bubbles and talk bubbles. The review may include a brief picture walk of the book with students sharing what they recall about the difference between thoughts and feelings, and how our thoughts affect what we say.
Learning Target: I can understand the difference between a thought bubble and a talk bubble.	Our guided practice for the day will include another jam-board activity projected onto the SMART Board; this time, popular characters or recognizable community figures (i.e. spider man, a teacher, a farmer, etc.) will be displayed along with thoughts/ideas/questions and the group will complete a sorting activity to show which talk bubble words make the most sense with each character type. There may be more than one right answer; for instance, the photo of a chef may be displayed. We will first identify the character/type as a group (i.e.) "I notice he's wearing a tall hat, and apron, and he has lots of cooking utensils."). A list of phrases that could belong in either a thought bubble or talk bubble will be displayed; and the group will take turns determining which thought matches each character/type, along with determining if that's something that should go in a talk bubble or stay quiet in a talk bubble (i.e. "'I can't find my whisk, have you seen it?' is something that makes sense in a chef's talk bubble. 'I'm so sick of cooking for these people!' makes sense in a chef's thought bubble, but it could hurt people's feelings if he said it out loud in his talk bubble." This lesson will encourage contextual thinking as it relates to character types, as well as practical application as it pertains to what types of thoughts should be said out loud and what should stay quiet in one's thought bubble.

The lesson will conclude with an at-home challenge to write a sentence or draw a picture showing one thing that belongs in a thought bubble and one thing that belongs in a talk bubble (i.e.) "I might have a car in my thought bubble during reading time, because I really love cars; but when we are talking about our story, I need to leave the car in my thought bubble until later and share what I know about the book." |

Day Three	**Thinking With Our Brains and Our Bodies** The lesson will begin with a physical warm-up, specifically a game called "Slow Mo Snowball Fight" as outlined in the book *Teaching social skills through sketch comedy and improv games* (Amador, 2018). We are going to get our bodies moving and think with our eyes, as we have talked about in previous lessons, to notice when our friend is about to throw a snowball at us. The teacher will model first, picking up an imaginary snowball, finding a person in the circle with their eyes, and throwing it to that person. That person can choose if they will catch it, get hit by it, jump over it, etc. The only rule is that we do not touch others' bodies. It will be important to look with our eyes so we know when the snowball is coming for us. Pick it up and think about how it feels in your hand, notice the thrower's body and face. Do they look mad or silly or excited? How do you know? The purpose of this activity is multi-fold; it is a practical and physical extension of previous lessons regarding thinking with our eyes, as no words will be spoken during the snowball fight, in addition to building group rapport and encouraging imaginative play while focusing on joint attention. Each lesson for the remainder of the week will begin with a physical warm-up based in theatrics; this is also intended to decrease inhibitions as it pertains to socially appropriate imaginative group play.
Learning Target: I can work in a team to create a group plan.	
	Today, we are going to make a group plan (a concept previously introduced from the *We thinkers* curriculum) to decide what kinds of characters we will be for the rest of the week. The teacher will project three choices of settings and give examples of the characters we might pretend to be within those settings. For example the teacher may project a picture of a toy store, a restaurant, and a hair salon. The group would decide (via conversation or vote) which character setting to explore for the rest of the week. If, for example, the group settles on a restaurant, we would brainstorm on the smart board all the types of characters we might see (i.e.) chef, waiter, diner, greeter, etc....
	The lesson will conclude with an at-home challenge to pick one character from that setting and draw a picture/think of a sentence that character might have in their thought bubble and talk bubble. We will have a chance to share our ideas in the next day's lesson.

Day Four	**Who Am I?** Today's lesson will begin with a game called "Dance Party" as outlined in *Teaching social skills through sketch comedy and improv games* (Amador, 2018). This activity, as with the other games outlined in this lesson, is intended to establish and encourage joint-attention along with physical exploration within imaginative play. This activity involves one person entering the center of the circle, doing a silly movement or dance, approaching a partner on the outside of the circle, looking at them, and waiting for them to copy the movement. Once the person on the outside of the circle has copied their partner's motion, they will switch spots, enter the center of the circle, change their dance or motion. This can be as big or small as the student would like, as long as they abide by the rules of moving safely and not putting their hands on others' bodies. This pattern will continue until every student has had a turn to be the dance leader.
Learning Target: I can apply what I know about thought bubbles and talk bubbles in dramatic play.	Upon completion of the physical warm up, the students will sit in a circle to review what setting we selected as a group the day prior; students who would like to share their character drawing/sayings will have an opportunity to do so at this time. The teacher will have contextually appropriate items prepared for the play scenario, (i.e.) props such as a tray with toy food, a small pad of paper and pencil for the waitress, a paper chef hat, and spaced-out cube chairs that signify a table for customers and a place for the host. The teacher will project some of the phrases discussed/brain-stormed from the day prior for each role within the setting and read them aloud. The teacher will have prepared laminated labels for each student, which will be selected at random, signifying their role within the play scenario. Students will be given their roles and allowed the rest of the time to act out a social play. The teacher will move through the space and may suggest expressions or responses; students will be encouraged to use phrases that were discussed and think of their own as well.

The lesson will conclude with a discussion/reflection of what the students liked/ did not like/what was hard/what was fun. The students will be told that during the next day's lesson, they will have a chance to switch roles. Their at-home challenge is to think of a dilemma that might happen in our restaurant (i.e.) the chef is out of cheese, the customers don't like their table, the dishes are dirty, etc... and bring their idea to the group tomorrow. |

Day Five **Learning Target:** I can demonstrate my understanding of thoughts and feelings across characters and scenarios.	**Mix It Up!** Today's warm up is adapted from an exercise called "Throw the Face" outlined in the book *Shakespeare's heartbeat: drama games for children with autism* (Hunter, 2015). This exercise sees the students sitting in a circle; there is one scarf that will be thrown to each person in turn and first modeled by the teacher. The teacher will hold the scarf in front of their face, then say "Raise the curtain!" at which point she will lift the scarf up to reveal a face representing a different emotion. She will then say "Throw the face!" at which point she will throw the scarf to another student. The student will catch it or grab it, place it in front of their face, and wait for the teacher to say, "Raise the curtain!" The student with the "curtain" will reveal a new emotion on their face, lower the "curtain," and "throw the face," until each student has had a turn. Again, the objective of this activity is to establish and engage in joint attention as well as physical exploration of emotion and perspective-taking. Upon completion of the warm up, the teacher will ask students to share any of the dilemmas they came up with for our play scenario. She will write each one of them down on a piece of paper, place them in a hat, and select a dilemma at random. Students will have their character labels from the day prior and will be told to pass it two times to their right. This will give each student a chance for a different role within a new scenario. The teacher will gradually release control of the activity at this point, with less intervening and feeding of scripts. The students will be allowed and encouraged to improvise, within the parameters of safe play and the established rules, until they hear the sound of a bell. At that point the students will stop, return their chairs to the circles to have a post-mortem. The teacher will explain that a post-mortem is what it is called in theatre when a play is finished and all the participants have a chance to share their thoughts about how it went. Students will have the opportunity to share their reflections if they desire. The teacher will provide feedback and a challenge to the group: "Let's think about how, just like the characters in our play we created, our thoughts and words can change the way that other people feel. How did it feel when the customer used mean words when they didn't like their food? We can stop and think before our ideas escape our thought bubbles and enter our talk bubbles."

Data Collection

While the data collection system for a unit of activities that is not discrete-trial centric may be more nuanced, it need not be more complicated; it must be noted that the data yielded from such a learning activity may be most compelling when examined alongside student data collected across other activities and realms. Specifically, it is worth examining if increased engagement in such activities as those outlined within this unit are correlative to an increase or decrease in unexpected behaviors, sustained involvement in activities, and attempts at initiating play to name but a few. The inclusion of anecdotal notes would provide an even more robust portrait of the impact of social learning within the larger scope of the students' learning activities, both academic and non-academic. The following page provides a sample of a data collection sheet that would be appropriate to use for this social skills unit.

Social Skills Group Data Collection Sheet

Student Name: _____

Date: _____

Please indicate the appropriate number in the chart below; include any notes/observations as appropriate for each 5-minute window of time.

1=Yes

0=No

	12:00-12:05	12:05-12:10	12:10-12:15	12:15-12:20
Actively engaged in activity (asks/ answers questions, follows physical routines, listens to teacher and peers, etc...)				
Stayed with the group (i.e.)kept their body in the expected space or within expected proximity)				
Safe body (i.e.) hands and feet to self)				

Notes: (Please note anything significant, i.e. they initiated more questions/sharing ideas, they did not actively participate but stayed in the group, etc.)_____

_____

_____

_____

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

The research and application presented herein points to the exciting possibilities that exist within the shared realms of social skill development and theatrical applications. While the research explored within the context of this project was primarily centered around school-aged students with ASD, as was the focus of the application portion of this project, the research points to the potential long-term impact of social development deficits in adults. A study conducted amongst adults that was published in *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice* highlighted the reality that adults with ASD may tend to show a stronger preference for interactions with other individuals with ASD as opposed to adults who have developed typically (Morrison et al., 2020). While this is not a result or consequence that should be seen as dire, it highlights the potential for even greater social challenges for adults who are immersed in and amongst diverse social and professional circles as they age.

Given the potential long-term ramifications of unchecked social development, an exploration of both accepted and innovative approaches to the nuanced field of social skills yields exciting possibilities. The literature addressed a dissection of current social development practices, including the widely known and lauded social thinking curriculum developed by speech and language pathologist Michelle Garcia-Winner. The literature challenged this author to explore the possibilities beyond teaching an understanding of conversational fundamentals, such as initiating verbal exchanges and staying on-topic. While these practices and concepts are important, they are not holistic in their approach to developing skills which may be both beneficial and required to navigate unpredictable and shifting social situations. There is a lack of consideration for the importance of social connections that

are developed outside of situational norms and basic social rules, including authentic banter and conversational taunting (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018).

One instructional strategy that encourages social play which exists both within and outside the traditional parameters of top-down social rules is dramatic play, as developed within theatrical practices. A number of theatre-based frameworks for social skill instruction were explored, including that which was first developed by the SENSE Theatre. Results yielded from a two-week study of SENSE Theatre practices indicate their intervention approach may result in increased group play with peers and a decrease in anxiety within the ASD target population (Ioannou, et al., 2020).

Limitations of Research

While the possibilities this research illuminated, specifically in regards to exploration and development of new realms of social skill instruction, were undoubtedly exciting, the limitations of the research conducted thus far were also evident. The sample sizes and duration of the studies researched herein were both small in their respective magnitude. An additional limitation that was evident in the research was a lack of diversity; this does not just pertain to cultural or socioeconomic diversity, but also neuro-diversity within the ASD population itself. As discussed throughout the research, there is a broad range of skills, talents, and challenges represented along the spectrum; the research explored within this study failed to include nonverbal participants. Verbal expression is only one means of communication; and surely, as the research pointed to the impact of activities involving movement and music, there is certainly a place and a need for exploration of how these instructional approaches may be applied to benefit an even broader range of individuals with ASD.

An additional blind spot in the research presented thus far pertains to neurotypical populations. The impact of theatre-based social skills instruction on individuals with ASD specifically may be understood with greater clarity when compared adjacently to neurotypical groups. It may well be that

participation in theatre presents a similar impact on typically developing individuals as it pertains to increased social engagement and decreased social anxiety across contexts. Contextually, it would also serve to explore any latent impact of these interventions; that is to say, one wonders if the positive outcomes observed within the context of the theatrical practice would sustain and carry-over also social realms long term outside of the study.

Implication of Future Research

In addition to exploration of the aforementioned research limitations in future studies, there is one even more specific sector of theatre which may be beneficial and worthy of further exploration: humor. In a study published in *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review,* British psychologist Tony Attwood addressed the potential benefit of specifically using humor as a tool for treating ASD (Hartigan, 2012). He specifically references the power that humor has in de-stigmatizing some of the traits of ASD (Hartigan, 2012). More pointed research into the possibilities of utilizing improvisational play as a social skills teaching tool feels worthy of exploration. Anecdotally, this writer is aware of local improvisational groups that sought to include individuals on the autism spectrum in their practices and performances prior to the CoVid-19 pandemic and its associated tightening of social events.

Shaun May, Research Director of the Centre for Cognition, Kinesthetics and Performance School of Arts at Kent State, also sought to explore the use of humor as a means of socialization and de-stigmatization, as outlined in her article published in *Research in Drama Education* in 2017. This informal study addressed the exploration of humor amongst individuals with ASD who participated in a comedy workshop program alongside neurotypical peers. The study involved 9 participants between the ages of 13-16; 5 of these participants were diagnosed with ASD, and 4 of the participants were not. May led workshops over the course of 4 weeks with exercises designed to assess the presentation of social anxiety, concrete thinking, and restricted repetitive behaviors within the workshop environment (May,

2017). These exercises consisted primarily of social role play and use of props. May concluded from her findings that, despite what she presupposes is a common belief amongst individuals who lack knowledge of ASD, individuals with ASD have a great capacity to express humor (May, 2017). There were a number of limitations to this study, chief among them were her parameters for measurement. The information presented in the article was anecdotal; and much like comedy itself, its analysis is subject to the perception of its audience. It is nevertheless a compelling notion to research the impact of comedy on social competency and interaction for individuals with ASD and their typically developing peers.

The convergence of physical education and theatrical play presents another realm worthy of research and exploration as it pertains to social skill development for students with ASD. In 2019, the *International Journal of Special Education* published a study conducted at an elementary school in Greece that addressed the potential impact of including elements of dramatic play into psychomotor play as an aspect of physical education (Mpella et al., 2019). While this particular study was rather small in scope, with the inclusion of six participants, it points to the benefits of social skill instruction that may exist outside of typical classroom settings with a top-down instructional model. In this study, theatrical play was implemented within the physical education class via loosely structured play in the form of choreography; specifically, students were put in teams and asked to create a dance that was representative of an assigned season (Mpella et al., 2019). Upon conclusion of the sixteen session study, it was noted that students displayed an increase in cooperation and a decrease in indifference as documented by time sampling conducted by designated staff (Mpella et al., 2019). This student presented several limitations in addition to its small sample population, including unclear parameters for measuring traits such as empathy and acceptance; these terms are rather abstract and lend themselves to unclear observer interpretation. Nonetheless, this points to another venue for effective social skill instruction outside of the classroom and the theatre.

Professional Application

  The implications and possibilities of this research inspire and excite me as both an educator and participant of theatre arts. Dramatic play holds great potential for inspiring connections between students with ASD and their peers, along with its capacity to create a non-threatening and creatively engaging means of developing social skills. As a practitioner of the arts and a participant in activities such as improvisation groups, I have witnessed firsthand the social benefits of engaging in such programming. As an educator, I hope to not only incorporate and adapt some of the aforementioned social skills instructional tools into my own classroom that serves students with ASD, I also hope to inspire my fellow educators to explore participation in theatrical activities themselves. I can say with certainty, albeit anecdotally, that participation in theatre has made me a more calm and effective educator. Structured practice of developing a group mind, attuning one's self to social cues, and practicing the art of improvisation has given me a foundation to move through unexpected situations with a sense of wonder and play. As an educator working with students who present with unpredictable behaviors and responses, I consider this training to be a tremendous tool to have in one's educator toolbelt.

  The application outlined in chapter three of this research provides a framework for activities I intend to implement in my own classroom. My goal is to create an environment in which students are encouraged to explore, play, learn new ways to connect and show respect, and most of all have fun. Many of the students I serve have been in programming from a very young age; it is easy to take for granted the tremendous effort it takes for them to endure each day in school that is essentially an adult work day in terms of its length. Play, be it dramatic or otherwise, is an invaluable tool for learning. I hope to inspire my students and coworkers alike to pursue a love of lifelong learning through the magic and wonder of play.

Conclusion

The end road of dramatic play extends far beyond the proscenium stage. As this research has shown, the benefits of dramatic play reach far beyond the playhouse. Theatre is a tool for connection and inspiration; and there are many more realms within it that are worthy of research and exploration. As I stand on the precipice of my first full school year as the lead special education teacher in a Federal Setting III classroom serving students with ASD, I intend to access the gifts that theatrical play provides.

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