

SUPPORTING ASD STUDENTS IN THE DRAMA CLASSROOM

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Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined by the Education Bureau (EDB) as a developmental disorder caused by abnormalities in brain function development.¹ According to the Census and Statistics Department, as of December 2021, approximately 22,400 individuals in Hong Kong were living with ASD. In a 2023 article by Ms. Louise So, the Deputy Secretary for Education, reported that over 10,000 ASD students are enrolled in Hong Kong's mainstream schools.² Recent data for 2024 indicates a continued rise in the number of children diagnosed with ASD around the world³, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced awareness and expanded support systems.

Children with ASD typically exhibit symptoms such as deficits in social communication and interaction, difficulties in understanding non-verbal cues (such as facial expressions), challenges in adapting to change, and the presence of restricted, repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. Without appropriate strategies and techniques to support their development and to increase understanding of ASD among their peers, there may be long-term negative impacts on parent-child relationships, peer interactions, academic achievement, and overall adaptation to school and society.

This article will highlight the strengths of using drama as an educational technique and provide practical strategies for effective teaching and creating an inclusive environment for all students; Strategies include curriculum planning, classroom activities, and spatial arrangement in a drama classroom.

Strengths of Drama Education

In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in literature, studies, and research connecting drama with autism. In the context of Drama Education, drama serves as a valuable tool for students with ASD, enhancing engagement and fostering personal expression, which in turn improves communication skills.

Drama lessons are typically structured in an interactive environment, offering more opportunities for students to collaborate as an ensemble, thereby developing their social skills. The adaptability of drama (e.g. the change of themes, topics, and the use of techniques) allows lessons to be tailored to meet individual needs, facilitating differentiated instruction that addresses diverse strengths and challenges.

Through role-playing, students can safely explore and express their emotions while also learning moral lessons embedded in narratives chosen by the teacher or created by the students themselves. By allowing both ASD and non-ASD students to step into the lives of others, they are more likely to develop understanding and empathy toward different individuals. Theatre genres such as Forum

¹ Integrated Education and Special Education Information Online -Education Bureau. (2024, March 1). Types of Special Educational Needs.<https://sense.edb.gov.hk/en/types-of-special-educational-needs/autism-spectrum-disorder/introduction.html#:~:text=What%20is%20autism%20spectrum%20disorder,communication%20and%20connection%20with%20others.>

² *Unleashing potential of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder through strength-based approach* - Education Bureau. (2023, July 23). <https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/about-edb/press/insiderperspective/insiderperspective20230724.html#:~:text=Currently%2C%20there%20are%20over%2010,in%20public%20sector%20ordinary%20schools.>

³ Ajenoui. (2024, July 8). *Hong Kong Autism Spectrum Disorder in Children in 2024*. Ican-B Asia - Effective Autism Treatment HK.<https://www.ican-b.asia/hong-kong-autism-spectrum-disorder-in-children-in-2024/#:~:text=The%20Prevalence%20of%20Autism%20Spectrum,need%20for%20expanded%20support%20systems.>

Theatre and Verbatim Theatre also provide great opportunities for students to respond and react in a safe environment.

Curriculum Planning: Using Verbatim Theatre to Build an Inclusive Environment

Verbatim Theatre develops performances through intensive research, including conducting interviews, reading news articles, and exploring videos on YouTube to gather true stories for inclusion in the play text. This form of theatre, which uses words of mouth to construct stories, is typically used to raise awareness, broaden perspectives, and educate audiences on specific topics.

According to an article in SCMP by Peace Chiu, “Nearly half of Hong Kong parents with autistic children have witnessed them being bullied or told off for being naughty”.⁴ Driven by the need to create a more understanding society and empathetic individuals, our school has utilized Verbatim Theatre to educate our Form 3 students about their peers with special needs, focusing on ASD in our unit.

In this unit, students are divided into groups of 5-6 to create a piece of Verbatim Theatre on Autism. After being introduced to this theatre style, students begin researching "Autism" through various means. Their research must encompass both qualitative and quantitative data, including statistics and primary accounts from real-life personal stories. Once students have a basic understanding of ASD, they will develop an artistic intention regarding how they want their piece to impact the audience, whether to educate them about ASD or to provoke reflection on equality within the school community. Using their artistic intention, students create interview questions to gather the necessary information from their immediate social circle, including parents, teachers, and friends. *(A successful interview includes obtaining consent from the interviewee, allowing the ensemble to use their information to create a piece that will be shown to the public. The information may be used anonymously upon request.)*

Sample Interview Questions (developed by students)

To Parents:

- How does it feel to have children with ASD?
- Can you provide any photos for our performance, and may we use them?
- What is your favorite memory with your children?
- Does your life change with children who have ASD?

To Teachers:

- Can you share a memorable moment with a student who has ASD?
- What challenges have you faced while working with these students, and how did you overcome them?
- How do you celebrate small victories with students who have ASD?

To Peers:

- How does it feel to be diagnosed with ASD?
- Do you take medication? What happens if you don't?
- How has your life changed because of ASD?

Using the data obtained from interviews, forums, news, magazines, and YouTube, students generate a script that aligns with their artistic intentions, using the exact wording, sentences, and phrases from their interviews.

⁴ Chiu, P., & Chiu, P. (2019, February 24). Nearly half of Hong Kong parents of autistic children have witnessed them being picked on or told to behave, survey shows. South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/2187488/nearly-half-hong-kong-parents-autistic-children-have>

Performance Considerations

For their performances, students may choose to present their “characters” exactly as the interviewees or to make artistic alterations for enhanced entertainment. However, it is crucial to discuss performance “ethics” with students if they opt for artistic adjustments. All performers must ensure that they respect their interviewees at all times. *Questions to consider include: Will these alterations change the meaning of the interviewees' words? Could they leave a negative impression on the audience or hurt the feelings of the interviewees?*

The final performance is presented to the year group that selected drama as an elective. This performance serves as a powerful platform for both the ensemble and the audience to understand the perspectives of parents and teachers of ASD students. ASD students also expressed that they felt heard and understood during the performance, reinforcing their sense of belonging within the community. However, a greater impact could be achieved if the performance were shared with other year groups and stakeholders.

Classroom Activity: Using Carousel Techniques to Enhance Learning

For teachers who have less time in the year to undergo the aforementioned unit, the "Carousel Station" technique can be applied in the drama/all classroom to engage students in a structured yet dynamic learning environment, particularly for those with ASD who may become overwhelmed by certain topics or experiences. For example, the use of lighting and sound in theatre can amplify sensory experiences, heightening emotional responses for ASD students.

During a lesson on "Basic Use of Lighting," we organized a carousel of activities involving four different stations where students engaged in hands-on exploration of lighting possibilities. The stations are located in the 4 corners of the room. Instructions were provided verbally and broken down into manageable steps on their worksheets. After each station, students reflected on their learning in process journals. This practical approach effectively made abstract concepts more tangible. By rotating through different activities, students maintained interest and focus while reducing the likelihood of overwhelm. Working in small groups also allowed them to build confidence in expressing their thoughts without the pressure of a larger audience.

Classroom Arrangement to Cater to Diverse Needs

Apart from curriculum planning and lesson activities, establishing a set routine for students can provide great comfort and support especially to students on the autism spectrum. One way to do it is through our classroom arrangement.

The drama room, often an open space without tables and chairs, can be strategically transformed to encourage independence, higher-order thinking and creativity. It can be organized into areas representing different learning targets, such as a “reflection area,” “experimentation area,” “challenge area,” and “extra support area.” The extra support area could include visual prompts, such as images, terminology definitions, and sentence starters, while the challenge area offers conceptual and debatable questions for students seeking extension activities.

By implementing these strategies, we can create an inclusive and supportive drama classroom that meets the unique needs of all students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while supporting students with ASD in the drama classroom can be challenging, using drama as a pedagogical tool is a highly effective and engaging way to foster an inclusive learning environment. By using drama as a pedagogical approach, teachers can help students enhance communication, social skills, and develop necessary empathy to integrate into our wider society. Ultimately, these strategies empower students to express themselves creatively, creating a supportive community and safe environment that values diversity and promotes understanding.