



## Education in the North

<http://abdn.ac.uk/eitn>

### Feature

Can drama help young people with autism to understand the non-verbal behaviours of others and to communicate their own emotional states through non-verbal behaviour?

Anne Valyo ([a.h.valyo@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:a.h.valyo@abdn.ac.uk))

School of Education, University of Aberdeen

Date Available online: 1<sup>st</sup> October 2014

**To cite this article:** VALYO, A., (2014). Can drama help young people with autism to understand the non-verbal behaviours of others and to communicate their own emotional states through non-verbal behaviour? *Education in the North*, **21**(Special Issue), pp. 68-71

## Can drama help young people with autism to understand the non-verbal behaviours of others and to communicate their own emotional states through non-verbal behaviour?

Anne Valyo, University of Aberdeen

---

This proposed project was first mooted by Dr Jackie Ravet, Senior Lecturer in Education, University of Aberdeen in conjunction with Dr Justin Williams, Senior Lecturer (Clinical) and Dr James Cusack, research fellow. My involvement came about through being a lecturer teaching Drama at the university. However my interest in children and young people who had been diagnosed as non-typical began much earlier.

While studying for my drama qualification I was fortunate in participating in workshops in the RSMAD in Glasgow led by Dorothy Heathcote who herself had worked with children with mental and physical disabilities. Her approach to teaching used not only the Mantle of the Expert where children are “given” expertise in being cobblers, factory workers, etc. but also in creating a variety of imaginary contexts for severely disabled children using a physical approach e.g. fanning their faces so that they could be outside on a windy day, encouraging them to touch different textures, shapes, etc. Further experience in Social Work teaching drama and social skills to vulnerable adults, also known as trainees, with mental disabilities had shown me the benefits drama can bring to enable people with communication problems to live, work and interact with confidence in their communities. (McClintock, 1984). This was mainly done through improvisation and role-play beginning with the trainees imitating their favourite characters from TV programmes.

Following this positive experience my work in schools further encouraged my interest in the benefits of drama for children and young people. On an ad hoc basis I would recognise that pupils benefited from actually “doing” drama where kinaesthetic learning seemed to impact upon cognitive learning. Actually becoming another person, or taking on a role, enabled pupils to say or do things confidently in that role that they would not have done as themselves. One pupil who had a speech disorder found that being in role as a concerned resident at a public meeting overcame this and he not only spoke clearly in that role in front of his classmates but also on camera for an educational video.

After becoming a lecturer in the University of Aberdeen I was privileged to be asked to lead the implementation of a project to determine the effects of the arts on the practice of student teachers. Having worked on Curriculum for Excellence writing the Drama Experiences and Outcomes, I was completely convinced of the ability of the arts to help students understand the nature of the whole curriculum. Upon my return to University I was delighted to help implement ATLAC (Arts as a tool for learning across the curriculum). ATLAC came out of the excellent work done in Chicago (Burnaford, 2006) with students who were disengaged from learning and who were predicted not to graduate High School. After teaching English and Maths through rap, hip hop and other current aspects of youth culture their graduation rates greatly improved. In ATLAC our student teachers learned how to enhance their teaching of other areas of the curriculum through the arts and thus enrich pupils’ knowledge and understanding. This joint project between Aberdeen City Arts Education Team, Scottish Arts (now Creative Scotland) and the University of Aberdeen was on the efficacy or otherwise of using the arts to teach other curricular areas in a creative and imaginative way. (Das, Sigauke, Aderibigbe, Gray, 2009) This project appeared to have increased creativity in lesson planning and the student teachers who were followed into their first year of teaching continued to use such an interdisciplinary approach. This research certainly impressed the education faculty in the Universidad de San Andres in Buenos Aires who contacted Aberdeen University and asked to have ATLAC

project representatives visit and perform workshops and lectures using this approach in order to help teachers in Argentina think creatively by using the arts to teach across the curriculum. Crear Vale la Pena, an organisation working for social transformation through the arts, was also involved in this sharing of ideas and began building a body of research to substantiate the use of the arts to engender successful learners who in turn would become confident individuals, effective contributors to society and responsible citizens who would then be able to vote for social change. If this sounds familiar it is because it echoes the four capacities of our own Scottish Curriculum for Excellence.

I have always been convinced of the power of drama in helping people build self-esteem, confidence and empathy. Drama has been described as the art of being able to “walk in someone else’s shoes”. Therefore when I was asked by Dr Jackie Ravet to help with a project to find out if drama can help young people with autism to understand the non-verbal feelings and emotions of others I was eager to explore this possibility. I knew that those on the autistic spectrum were already being helped to identify feelings and emotions visible in non-verbal communications by looking at photographs of people expressing a variety of emotions as well as pictures of expressions such as happiness, sadness, anger, etc. Trestle theatre masks came into mind as they also show expression and are able to be worn to help with the adopting of a character suggested by the mask. I have used Trestle theatre masks with pupils in schools and student teachers and have noted how once they had a mask on they stayed in character more and portrayed appropriate body language to the mask worn. One particular student teacher usually giggled with embarrassment when she went into role but with a mask on she managed to stay in character and use gesture and movement to communicate her feelings relating to the expression on the mask. Also she was able to “read others” in the same way. As each mask is tangible students can feel the expression with their hands as well as see it. Once a mask is on, the student faces a mirror and can begin to think how their mask may walk, stand, wave to a friend, etc. While a mask is being worn the student is always physically reminded of their character and this appears to make it easier to remain in that character. By using mirrors we are helping students to understand and appreciate how they look in their masks and which facets of body language are appropriate to that character. If this can work so well with children, young people and student teachers then it may help those with autism identify and even imitate feelings in others through deciphering non-verbal communication with the help of the masks. If they can physically move and gesticulate in character it may become embedded as learned behaviour so that when they see it reproduced in someone else they can understand its meaning. Possibly this learning can then be transferred into improving their social competence and therefore comfort levels.

As Guldali and Ruken write (p20, Drama Magazine, summer 2013) “When socially withdrawn children do interact with their peers they appear to be less socially competent than typical children (Bohlin et al. 2005, Chen et al. 2006, Nelson et al.2005, Rubin & Krasnor. 1986) and their attempts to meet their social goals were less likely to succeed than those of their non-withdrawn peers.” They state further on in their abstract that “Drama in education encourages children to engage in dramatic contexts. That is why drama can help to develop children’s social competence and relations.” (Guldali and Ruken, 2013, p20)

### **Research Focus & Rationale**

If it is the case that people with autism have specific difficulties in relating non-verbal behaviours to more abstract social meanings, linked to difficulties with imitation and empathy, it is possible that fostering these skills through education, and specifically through drama education, may lead to some amelioration of autistic difficulties. Furthermore, whether such attempts succeed or fail may help to refine the proposed model.

This suggests the need to develop an educational drama programme that could foster an understanding of non-verbal behaviours and emotional states in a form that is accessible to pupils

with an autism spectrum condition. Such a development requires some knowledge and understanding of curricula for teaching drama, along with an appreciation of how these are experienced as challenging for pupils with autism. In the light of these challenges, the drama programme must bring structure to the physical, learning, social and communication environment by, amongst other things, establishing clear rules and routines, incorporating visual supports, building on special interests, avoiding abstractions, making use of concrete resources, phasing in new ideas slowly, and, importantly, by reducing reliance on verbal communication (Dunlop et al. 2009). The latter will be achieved most effectively by learning predominantly through imitation, movement and mime, keeping verbal interaction to a minimum.

The primary interest of the research group is how mime, movement and imitation might help young people with autism to develop an understanding of non-verbal communication and emotions in order to enhance social competence. This school-based study will build on the work of Williams et al. (2001) by bringing clinical insights into a practice community to find out whether they can inform the development of real-world educational interventions. The research will also provide an opportunity to study social learning in an educational setting in order to better understand and characterise the core elements associated with autism. Thus, the study, somewhat uniquely, has both a clinical and educational orientation and will inform autism research in both disciplines.

## **Design**

The study will involve the development of a series of workshops that will support a small group of young people with autism to explore non-verbal actions and emotions through imitation, mime and movement. Each workshop will make use of face masks as a visual stimulus, with each mask expressing a different emotion (i.e. happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, anger and disgust) reflecting the reality of complex emotions. Individuals on the autism spectrum commonly find these facial expressions, and their corresponding emotional states, difficult to interpret. Through a progressive sequence of imitation and mime activities over six workshops, the masks will be used to stimulate exploration of a range of emotional expressions as well as the gestures, body language and movements associated with them. The masks will be pivotal in providing a concrete visual resource for the exploration of emotions which, ordinarily, are highly abstract and difficult for this group to access. The masks will also ensure consistency of expression of key emotions over time, thereby minimising confusion.

The workshops have been developed with the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence in mind and incorporate the seven design principles of challenge and enjoyment, breadth, progression, depth, personalisation and choice, coherence and relevance.

The workshops also relate directly to outcomes and expectations associated with the drama curriculum e.g. 'I can create, develop and sustain a character through the use of movement' (EXA 3-12A); 'I can demonstrate sensitivity in the portrayal of a character, conveying relationships and situations in a variety of different settings' (EXA 4-12A). The workshops therefore address viable educational goals and have been designed to fit into the secondary school curriculum.

## **Sample**

The research will begin as a pilot study involving a small group of up to six young people in years 1, 2 and 3 of their secondary education who have a diagnosis of High Functioning Autism or Asperger's Syndrome. Opportunities for sampling will determine the cohort since it will depend largely on which pupils fitting the criteria are available at the time of the study and are willing to participate. This

particular group would ideally be in their early teens because they might well be experiencing problems dealing with puberty where emotions run high and it is important to be able to decipher non-verbal communication. Also this research should take place at an appropriate time so as not to interfere with their exams in any way.

The pupils will be located in a single secondary school with a MICAS base (MICAS = Mainstream Integration for Children with Autistic Spectrum) since, by definition, such schools have a larger population of children on the autism spectrum. The drama programme will be delivered on the school premises during the school day over a six week period. (The school and sample have yet to be identified.)

The sample will only include young people on the autism spectrum, and not their 'neurotypical' peers, in order to minimise the level of challenge within the learning, social and communication environment for the pupil participants, and to achieve a high level autism friendly environment. The exclusion is also made because the focus of the research is squarely on autism-related issues. However, it is acknowledged that the drama workshops are likely to be valuable to other pupils in secondary schools.

To conclude, "Drama – like all the art forms – is an activity with its own inherent value. It is a powerful way of knowing, feeling, thinking and willing into the social world." (Guldali and Ruken, 2013, p20).

## References

- BURNAFORD, G., (2006). *Moving Towards a Culture of Evidence: Documentation and Action Research inside CAPE Veteran Partnerships Veteran Partnerships Report 2005-2006*. Chicago: Gail Burnaford and Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education.
- DAS, S., SIGAUKE, A., ADERBIGBE, S., and GRAY, D., (2009). *School of Education Scottish Teachers for a New Era. Arts as a Tool for Learning Across the Curriculum (ATLAC) Final Report*. Available: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/stne/uploads/files/ATLAC%20Final%20Report%20Jan%202010.pdf> [Date Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> March 2014]
- DUNLOP, A.W., TAIT, C., LEASK, A., GLASHAN L., ROBINSON, A. and MARWICK H., (2009). *The Autism Toolbox: An Autism Resource for Scottish Schools*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- GUDALI, S. and RUKIN, A.V., (2013). Does Story-Drama Benefit Pre-School Children's Psycho-social Competence? A Quasi-experimental Study in Turkey. *Drama*. **19**(2). pp.
- HEATHCOTE, D., (2000), Contexts for Active Learning. *Drama Research*. **19**. pp.
- MCCLINTOCK, A., (1984). *Drama for Mentally Handicapped Children*. London: Souvenir Press (E & A) Ltd.
- SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT. (2009). *Curriculum for Excellence. Experiences and Outcomes*. Glasgow: Scottish Government
- WILLIAMS J.H.G., (2001). Autism, imitation and mirror neurones. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioural Reviews* **25**. pp. 287-295