

Queensmill School

Research & Development Newsletter

The Creative Arts

How the creative arts can support the education and development of children with autism

Increasingly, researchers in child development are focusing greater attention on the contribution of the arts (drama, music, dance and art) to the development of cognitive and social skill such as attention, engagement, motivation, emotion regulation and the understanding of others. As we know, these are many of the skills that children with autism can find challenging. So what does some of the research show about how the creative arts can support the development and education of children and young people with autism?

A recent systematic review of the research literature on the use of music as a therapeutic intervention with children with autism reported improvement in interpersonal skills, social skills, and cognitive skills. The specific benefits included: increased attention to task; increased vocalisation, verbalisation, gesture, and vocabulary comprehension; increased communication and social skills; enhanced body awareness and coordination; improved self-care skills; and reduced anxiety. Research on music in a special school classroom has also supported the area of relationship building. Some of the activities in the study included: singing the names of learners in the class; body percussion; microphone songs; call and responses on drums; vocal imitation; big drum sensory activity; changing the words of songs and making up song commentaries.

As with music therapy and education, drama classes aim to provide creative, enjoyable, and engaging opportunities for children with autism to spend time on developing a wide range of social skills in the safety of the classroom. Drama education functions on the basis of the creation of a fictional context (i.e., a pretend situation), which playfully captures the attention of the participants and encourages interaction and communication with others. Opportunities are there to, for example, experiment with perspective taking by developing characters and deciding how those characters will respond in different situations. By collaborating with other pupils to make creative decisions, children with autism can develop skills in negotiating and social problem solving.

Welcome and Update from R&D Board

Welcome to the autumn edition of the Queensmill R&D newsletter for this academic year.

Welcome to the first edition of the Queensmill R&D newsletter for this academic year.

It has been a busy term with a number of research projects starting at Queensmill such as the Paediatric Autism Communication Trial Generalised, and master's project by Aymeline Bel, Teacher and Early Years Middle Manager at Queensmill, looking at whether the use of drama strategies promote joint attention skills in pupils on the autism spectrum.

Linked to Aymeline's research project, this issue of the newsletter will explore current research in the creative arts and how Queensmill are developing projects and collaborations with other professionals within the arts in order to integrate these approaches.

**Caroline Bulmer,
Research & Development Coordinator**



Drama at Queensmill

At Queensmill there are a number of creative art activities offered as part of the curriculum, such as weekly drama sessions, music sessions and previously Arts Award. These provide the students the opportunity to develop skills in the following areas: creativity, attention, engagement, motivation, emotion regulation, understanding of others, and so on.

I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.

Oscar Wilde



Queensmill student exploring *The Tempest* during a drama session with Shakespeare's Schools Project.

As a part of our new creative arts department, Queensmill students have been participating in weekly drama sessions. Sessions consist of games, songs and sensory worlds inspired by a theatrical text. The games aim to encourage creative initiations from the students which are then transformed into a personalised structured performance for each class. These performances combine drama, music and dance into a flexible framework which continually responds to the student's contributions. The sessions are a place for our students to have fun and be playful while developing confidence and pride in what they have created.

In order to assess the impact of these sessions on our students we have created learning objectives inspired by the SCERTS joint attention assessment criteria. Students are observed at the beginning, middle and end of projects and progress in joint attention skills is graded against the assessment criteria form. This

is all further supported by a research project led by Aymeline Bel (further information on the next page).

IMPACT CASE STUDIES

Emotional regulation

Pupil case study 1: One to one sessions with this student has shown how entering a creative world can contribute to a reduction in anxious behaviours. The student can be extremely anxious and often performs behaviours or movements which demonstrate this such as circling and blowing on his hands. He is extremely passionate and motivated by Drama and as soon as we are working on a character or monologue there is a notable reduction in these behaviours. It is as if as soon as he enters into the character he is able to focus on the exercise and ignore other non-related impulses. His mum commented on how he managed his own behaviour during his last performance. She said as soon as he began speaking his body relaxed, he appeared to be more grounded in his physicality and less susceptible to his impulses.

Communication

Pupil case study 2: In every day school life this student speaks in a quiet, mumbled voice and it is often very difficult to understand him. However, in drama sessions his vocal qualities are noticeably different. It appears that, when transforming into another character, he is able to speak in a loud, confident and articulate voice. Initially, it was only while he was performing however, with time, the student began using this voice when speaking to adults as himself during the drama sessions. When he began delivering lines of text, his face was turned down and he directed the sound towards himself. However, the concept of the performer and audience dialogue encouraged him to look up and make eye contact with his peers while speaking. He now requires much less prompting in order to direct the text out towards the audience and there have been noticeable differences in the amount of eye contact he gives during sessions.

Confidence

Pupil case study 3: This student is usually very shy and quiet during the school day. Having become familiar with certain games, he now not only initiates games he likes by performing relevant gestures, but has also started to make playful contributions in the games. He is choosing different props and is exploring different, louder vocal qualities when reading aloud. The repetition has allowed the student to feel comfortable within sessions and therefore more able to explore different creative choices.

Attention and Engagement

It has been observed that some students participate in drama with a noticeably higher level of engagement than in other lessons.

Pupil case study 4: In the first drama lesson, this student was continually distracted wanting to explore his environment or to discuss his timetable. After three sessions, he began to sit and engage for the whole twenty minute session.

The use of intensive interaction in exercises opened up a space in which he could engage with both the characters and story line. The positive response he received after trying out characters and participating in scenes gave him the motivation to continue engaging. His confidence has grown over the weeks, and he is now performing characters with very little prompting or support. He is beginning to take ownership over his contributions, initiating interactions and enjoying these interactions immensely.

Understanding of others

Class case study: Rehearsing for a play has given Alps class the opportunity to develop their skills in working sensitively and appropriately with their peers. Rather than applying the traditional actor-director relationship we employed a more collaborative devised approach to the process. Creative decisions had to be made as a group and roles, scenes and costumes had to be shared out together. Voting systems and compromises were used to make fare decisions and this allowed the class to develop a shared ownership over the work they were creating. I believe that their shared ambition to create a good show encouraged them to solve problems efficiently and creatively. I noticed students identifying strengths and preferences of their peers and then assigning roles and responsibilities in relation to these strengths. For example, artists making set, singers creating soundtracks and actors taking the longer speeches.

Motivation

Students have been speaking about and feeling the benefit of drama outside of drama sessions also. For example:

- requesting sessions
- singing songs
- reciting lines from the plays.
- One student has led drama sessions for his family around the dinner table
- Improvement in transitions: enjoyment of drama has provided the motivation needed to transition into sessions and the knowledge that the sessions will be repeated next week has provided

Drama and Joint Attention

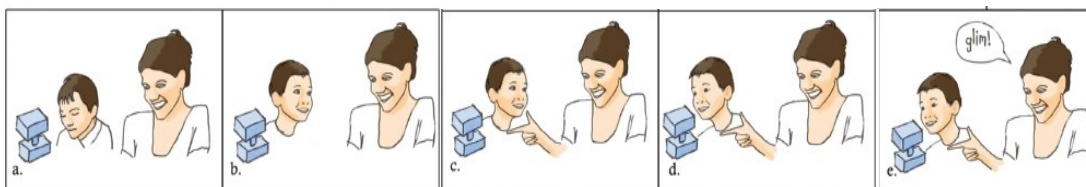


Aymeline Bel, Teacher and Early Years Middle Manager at Queensmill is carrying out a research project looking at whether the use of drama strategies promotes joint attention skills in pupils on the autism spectrum.

What is joint attention?

Joint attention is an early-developing social-communicative skill whereby two people use gestures and gaze to share attention to an object or event. Joint attention skills are crucial in the development of language. In autism this skill is often impaired, therefore, it is important to develop this skill in early intervention efforts.

Over the last two years, Queensmill organised a drama project which was hugely successful and popular with the children; so much so that weekly drama sessions started throughout the year. It was observed that the use of drama strategies (e.g. exaggerated facial expression/body language) with the children was positively impacting on their communication skills.



Drama: The Hunter Heartbeat Method

Having witnessed the impact of these sessions across one term, we are encouraged to continue our research into the arts. We are entering into a partnership with Kelly Hunter who is currently undergoing research with UCL:

The Hunter Heartbeat method is a series of sensory games developed by Kelly Hunter, director, writer, and actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company in London. The games are created for children and young people with autism and Hunter's theory on the method is that because of Shakespeare's work and exaggerated expression of emotion, it is particularly suited for drama interventions for autism. The games only need a human voice, body and another person to play with and Hunter believes the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare's verse mimics the rhythm of a heartbeat, therefore, each session begins with students tapping their chests.

"The Hunter Heartbeat (HHB) games are currently being used in pilot projects at UCL, which aim to explore the brain and cognitive systems engaged in elemental social interactions and engagement. This is part of a larger project which investigates why people with autism struggle with some aspects of social interaction, what brain mechanisms might be different in autism and how activities like HHB may be valuable as therapies and teaching tools for children at all levels on the autism spectrum" (Kelly Hunter)

We look forward to broadening our understanding of the effects drama has on our young people.



Hunter Heartbeat session

<http://kellyhunter.co.uk/shakespeares-heartbeat/the-hunter-heartbeat-method/>

Visual Arts and Music



Queensmill student exploring The Institute of Imagination pods in connection with Stop Frame Animation project.



CREATE project with secondary department at Queensmill school.

There have been various visual arts projects at Queensmill over recent years. The Institute of Imagination, a blend of art & science, worked across the school and units in conjunction with a Stop Frame Animation project.

Post 19 students also took part in a Stop Frame Animation project and received Arts Award qualifications. Through the Arts Award the pupils were able to engage in the enjoyment of creating their own mini films, learning new skills and sharing them with others.