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Drama Approaches to Enhance Communication Skills in Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

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Abstract

Communication is an important aspect in life. Every day we use varied forms of communication to communicate meaning to one another. Whether we are acquiring information or disbursing information, communication plays a vital key in education. Many children with special needs may find it extremely difficult to cope in schools for various reasons and one of them is the inability to communicate effectively among their peers and people around them. This paper examines the literature on drama approaches in relation to children with special educational needs (SEN), particularly children diagnosed with dyslexia and Speech and Language Impairment. Through this literature review, we hope teachers and educators alike would find drama as the bridge to foster and enhance communications skills among children with SEN.

Keywords: drama, dyslexia, speech and language impairment, communication

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INTRODUCTION

Students with speech and language impairment tend to have difficulties in social interactions and communication skills (Ashely, 2007). Speech and Language Impairment is defined as an individual having significant difficulties in using language to express themselves, hence having a compelling deficit in the field of language in the absence of any primary cause (Jarvis & Watts, 2012). Children diagnosed with speech language impairment often have communication problems, which may then affect their social behaviour (Law et al., 2013). According to Turkington and Harris (2006), "People with speech and language disorders have trouble producing speech sounds, using spoken language to communicate, or understanding what other people say" (p. 74). Hence, this can create boundaries in forming new relationships and in turn, it may then affect their social behaviour.

Speech language impairments (SLI) do share common traits with dyslexia, therefore sharing a common link. Studies have found significant co-morbidities between SLI and dyslexia (Newbury et al., 2011). It was found that approximately 43% of children diagnosed with SLI, are also diagnosed with dyslexia (Snowling et al., 2000). Whereas, 55% of children diagnosed with dyslexia met the diagnostic criteria for SLI (McArthur et al., 2000). This finding has led to the proposition that SLI and dyslexia may share some aetiological factors or, that they may constitute distinct manifestations of the same underlying cognitive deficit (Pennington & Bishop, 2009).

The term "Dyslexia" originated back in the late 1800s, where a range of neurological issues accounted for spelling and reading difficulties in individuals (Spafford & Grosser, 1996). There are many theories and arguments to the definition of dyslexia. Hinshelwood (1917) reported two cases of congenital word blindness (today known as dyslexia) and noted that there were often several cases in one family and that the symptoms were closely related to those that appeared in adults who had lost the ability to read due to brain injuries. Orton (1937) preferred to use the term developmental rather than congenital, because the former could include both the hereditary tendency and environmental factors for word blindness. Over the years, many researchers have shown interest in SEN and the term 'word blindness' has evolved into dyslexia. Rose (2009) defines dyslexia as "a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling" (p. 30). A further definition of dyslexia is given by Reid (2016), which defined it as deficiencies in the literacy aspect, affecting the individual in areas such as reading, writing and spelling as well as having a negative impact on cognitive processes.

Dyslexia is a complicated syndrome, as it is not just based on one symptom, for example, it is not only poor spelling and reading (Mather & Wendling, 2011). Some characteristics of dyslexia includes difficulties in oral language and communication skills. Individuals with dyslexia may have problems with pronouncing words or communicating

what is on their mind (Thomson & Gilchrist, 1997). Another set of difficulties that may arise are in cases such as having a weakness in working memory, executive function, and attention (Hultquist, 2006).

Therefore, the purpose for this literature review is to examine the literature on the drama approaches in relation to children with special educational needs (SEN), particularly children diagnosed with dyslexia and SLI. A child with SEN may require alternative approaches to education that not only accommodate their conditions but also toward creating ways for them to further develop their own capacity to learn. For instance, when a child with SEN has difficulties in communicating, their education may require expertise in addressing such issues and finding methods to connect with them. Through this literature review of exploring drama activities as a tool to enhance communication skills with children with special learning needs, it is intended that educators, curriculum developers and parents would be more receptive of including drama activities as a part of their children's learning journey.

LITERATURE REVIEW: DIFFICULTIES FACED BY STUDENTS WITH SEN

Low Self-esteem

Self-esteem can be associated more with emotional security. It is the impression of one's self and how that individual assumes how others view him (Reid, 2011). According to Gross and MacIveen (1998), "Self-esteem has been defined as the extent to which we like or approve of ourselves or how worthwhile we think we are" (p. 402).

Students with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, tend to have a high rate of depression and low self-esteem as compared to students without any learning difficulties (Banks & Woolfson, 2008). In a study by Senerath (2019), levels of self-esteem were studied in a sample of children diagnosed with dyslexia and compared to the group without dyslexia. The study consisted of 30 students, aged between 10 to 11 years old. The children were given three types of questionnaires. The findings showed that children with dyslexia had significantly lower self-esteem as compared to children without dyslexia.

In a study by Lindsay et al. (2002), a group of children comprising of 52 boys and 17 girls diagnosed with SLI between the ages of 6-11 years old were sampled. The procedure included children completing a measure of self-esteem. In this study, it showed that children diagnosed with SLI between the ages of 10 years to 11 years old, not only possessed academic difficulties but also curtailed estimations of their educational abilities and their competency in social interactions (Lindsay et al., 2002).

In summary, Senerath (2019) and Lindsay et al. (2002) have shown consistent outcomes that children diagnosed with dyslexia and SLI have lower self-esteem.

A generalisation of the disability may also cause one to neglect important aspects of identified issues for the individual. In a study by MacMaster (2002), other people's expectation, attitude, and behaviour often changes upon realising that the child has been classified under a diagnosis. Hence, using such labels causes feelings of inferiority amongst students, as they would feel they are not part of the group, hence leading to lower self-esteem (MacMaster, 2002). When a child is not accepted by his peers and often experiences rejection, it can lead to the occurrence of emotional problems (Georgiadi et al., 2012).

It has also been noted that in dyslexia, one of the most hidden aspects is the emotional side (Sako, 2016). Parents and educators may be efficient in noting down areas of weaknesses in academic work and reading, however, they may miss noticing elements such as low self-esteem feelings and motivation, which develops over time (Sako, 2016).

Anxiety

Beesdo, et al. (2009) refers anxiety to the brain response to danger, an event that an organism will actively try to avoid. Children with anxiety may exhibit avoidance and have difficulties in communicating cognition and emotions (McCathie & Spence, 1991).

According to Schultz and Heimberg (2011), anxiety may increase when in a situation in which one feels powerless and has no control, for example being asked to read in front of others, being unable to bounce the ball in sports or not being able to answer a question in class.

Students with speech language impairment (SLI) are more likely to experience general anxiety as compared to their peers without SLI (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2010). In a study by Beitchman et al. (2001), a cohort of children with SLI from 5 to 19 years of age were assessed for psychiatric comorbidity. It was found that participants with SLI had higher rates of anxiety disorders (Beitchman et al., 2001). Conti-Ramsden and Botting (2008) also found increased general anxiety symptoms amongst adolescents with SLI regardless of the severity of their language and communication difficulties.

Children with dyslexia do tend to experience low self-esteem, anxiety, and emotional instability due to the long-term experience of learning frustration, which further affects their learning motivation and emotional state (Huang et al., 2020). Huang et al.(2020) also mentioned that many individuals diagnosed with dyslexia have experienced failure, despite spending many hours in special classes and putting in their best effort in the assigned task. Their progress may not be acceptable or on par with their peers, hence causing them to feel frustrated and demotivated.

In research by Orton (2010), most pre-schoolers were excited and well-adjusted with aspects of school. Their emotional problems only start to develop when they realised that their reading instruction does not match their learning needs (Orton, 2010). This may then cause them to be fearful of school causing them to feel anxious when faced with a reading task. Individuals with dyslexia do feel anxious when they are placed in a situation where they feel incompetent, such as school activities like reading aloud, having discussions or having to complete a writing task (Alexander-Passe, 2015).

In another study, Tsovili (2004) studied how anxiety played a part in the lives of adolescents with dyslexia and it was found that adolescents with dyslexia had higher reading anxiety in comparison to those not diagnosed with dyslexia. This suggests that adolescents with dyslexia viewed reading as an extremely stressful task, thus causing anxiety. An increased risk of anxiety and lower motivation is manifested when there is a decrease in self-esteem (Battle, 2004). Dyslexia has been linked to negative attributes such as low self-esteem, anxiety and generally behavioural issues (Boyes, et al., 2020).

In a study by Zupparado et al. (2021), a sample size of 47 children and adolescents, aged between 8-18 years old, were studied to explore self-esteem, anxiety and behavioural problems as clinical manifestations that could be associated with dyslexia. The findings showed that students with dyslexia showed higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem as compared to classmates without dyslexia. The higher levels of anxiety in dyslexia were found in social anxiety. The findings aligned with previous research (Nelson & Harwood, 2011) that suggested that children and adolescents with dyslexia also displayed social-emotional issues, beyond the typically noted academic difficulties with reading and writing associated with dyslexia.

Difficulties in Social Interaction

Social interactions encompass a combination of verbal cues and non-verbal cues like gestures or body movements and help to form friendships and build rapport with one another. When a child is diagnosed with SLI, he or she may have difficulties in the area of social interaction; this is because the child might tend to have difficulties in verbalising his or her thoughts due to his or her impairment, hence lacking in communication skills (Daulay, 2022).

A child diagnosed with SLI would not feel so confident talking to their peers who are at the same age as them, because of their difficulties, hence, children with SLI would rather communicate with children who are younger than they are or even older than them, like adults (Marton, 2008).

According to Redmond and Rice (1998) theoretical framework, children diagnosed with SLI who have deficiencies in language and communication are obstructed in their involvement in social settings; hence, these children are more likely to be rejected by

their peers than typically developing children. In addition, studies are progressively demonstrating that children diagnosed with SLI have more obstacles in their communication in a social setting than can be described by their language deficit alone (Adams et al., 2009).

Dyslexia often affects oral language functioning as well. A child with dyslexia may have difficulties finding the right words to say, may stammer, or may even require more processing time to answer a question (Kong, 2012). Children with dyslexia do face communication problems, which in turn leads to social interaction difficulties, as they are unable to comprehend social cues such as interpreting what others are thinking and feeling (Kalsoom et al., 2020). Hence, this puts the children at a disadvantage when they enter school as the use of language becomes more central to their relationships with peers.

Anger

According to Plummer (2008), there are countless children who are able to deal with their diagnosis of SLI with such great perseverance, on the other hand, there are those who are deeply agitated by deeply rooted anger reactions, because of their struggles in communicating effectively.

In a recent study by Yasir et al. (2023), a study on the role of self-esteem and aggression was conducted. It was carried out on a sample size of 56 primary and secondary school students, among which 28 students were diagnosed with dyslexia and 28 were non-dyslexic. The findings revealed that anger traits were higher among students with dyslexia than non-dyslexic students. It was also found that students without dyslexia were better able to control their anger as compared to students with dyslexia, as the findings showed that students with dyslexia tend to express their anger more than controlling it. The levels of self-esteem were also found to be lower in students with dyslexia than students without dyslexia.

Children with SLI and dyslexia often are unable to express themselves or describe complicated emotions due to their lack of vocabulary, hence having limited management over their emotions (Bishop & Snowling, 2004). Many of the emotional problems caused by dyslexia and SLI occur out of frustration with school or social situations (St Clair et al., 2011).

The Approach – Drama Activities

Drama

Children with dyslexia often suffer from anger, frustration, and low self-esteem (Kaiser, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to identify and take appropriate actions to not only help

children overcome their difficulties, but to cater as well to their social-emotional learning needs (Kaiser, 2020).

Drama can be a suitable intervention that can be used with children diagnosed with SLI or dyslexia, because activities included can be both verbal and non-verbal. Children with SLI and dyslexia are overwhelmed with communication issues and difficulties in expressing themselves (Rice, 2020). Hence, with drama, it does not solely rely on cognitive and verbal skills, but instead it comprises other skills such as mime, improvisation, role-play and tableaux.

With drama, children need to take on the role of others, where they learn to relate to the problems of others, as well as learning to work together harmoniously in a team and learning to communicate effectively (Azlina et al., 2021).

Improvisation

According to Holden (1981), drama involves activities such as improvisation in which individuals use his or her imagination to transport themselves into another situation. Improvisation provides an opportunity for a child to express himself with body movements and words, by using his imagination (Ho, 2020). Improvisation is unscripted and requires the actors to narrate lines or act in spontaneity. It is a performance that is not practised but instead invented by the performers themselves on the spot. According to Dougill (1987), the adoption of drama aids in the cultivation of the developmental of the individual in a socially, intellectually and linguistically useful way.

With improvisation activities, it can increase self-esteem, create a heightened scope for compassion and help to decrease feelings of rejection (Stern, 1980). Hence, children with SEN would be given opportunities to develop their communication skills through improvisation. According to Crimmens (2006), "Drama is ideal for teaching and practising social skills for children with communication and cognitive impairments" (p. 12). In order to have good social skills, one has to have good interaction skills and cognition. Due to their impairments, children with special educational needs may be excluded in peer interaction, hence making it harder to acquire social skills (Schwab et al., 2021).

Role-play

With drama, children can also learn appropriate social behaviour and interaction skills through varied role-play activities in a group setting (McCabe, 2020). Role-play provides students the opportunities to be part of the story by taking up roles of the characters and relating to the problems of the characters (Hamzah, 2019).

However, role-play can be coined as an ideal way of life, making it an unrealistic activity. According to Amato (2010), role-play situations can be unrealistic and irrelevant to the real situations occurring in the life of a child. In addition, since role-play activities includes language use and interaction, children with SLI may struggle with role-play, as they may not have the ability to communicate (Stitch, 2010).

On the other hand, role-play provides stimulation in learning conversational interactions. Wagner (1999) views role-play as a language-based activity where learners are given the freedom to express themselves freely with the use of language while incorporating imaginativeness. It also serves as a very good form of practising conversational skills as it focuses on language and expressions.

Storytelling

Language plays an important part in the delivery of information in the classroom; it requires communicative activities and the use of oral communication strategies to facilitate learning (Jaca & Javines, 2020).

Storytelling activities comprising of group work are particularly successful in stimulating the creation of ideas, which in turn can lead to developing social interaction and thus improving communication skills (Hampshire, 1996). This author also indicated that group activities involving storytelling are particularly successful in stimulating the generation of ideas, which in turn can lead to development of social interaction.

It was found that drama could aid children with language difficulties to bridge the gap between their lack of exposure to interactions, thereby exposing them to socialisation opportunities that previously would have been denied due to their limited linguistic abilities (Peter, 2003). It was also found that different contexts within drama would offer a range of different communication possibilities, enabling participants to develop greater self-awareness (She, 2017).

Examining How Drama Helps with Self-esteem

According to Sam (1990), drama aids by re-establishing the situation, by shifting the whole process of learning by starting with the meaning and henceforth approaching the form of language. It inculcates a purposeful form of learning, gearing them up for real life situations. Many studies have proven that there is a strong link between an individual's motivation and self-esteem in respect to learning. In Stern's (1983) research, quantitative and qualitative observational research were used to study the reasons by what means and how drama works.

Stern (1983) clearly indicated that self-esteem, kinaesthetic and emotional components are imparted in communicative language teaching. In this study, it was revealed that

there was a huge increase in motivation, self-esteem, spontaneity and even a decrease in the feelings of rejection.

In another study by Oterino (2022), 18 students, 9 boys and 9 girls, aged between 12 and 13, were assessed in varied components in the drama course. The teachers used an evaluation rubric, a reflective teaching diary of longitudinal nature and audio-visual recordings of the class sessions. The assessments of the pupils were carried out by comparing the results obtained by the pupils when they performed the play at the beginning of the course with the results obtained in the play performed at the end of the course. In terms of self-esteem and confidence in speaking, students showed lack of confidence in interaction and speaking at the beginning of the drama course. With the use of drama activities, students learned to express themselves in front of an audience thus resulting in improvements in the level of confidence in speaking. The results showed that all students obtained the highest score in the self-esteem and confidence component in speaking at the end of the drama course.

Examining How Drama Helps with Anger

In drama there are two distinct concepts; the connection between perspective and expression and containment (Emunah & Johnson, 2009). Drama generates experiencing from someone else's viewpoint, viewing himself in an aspect and developing one's viewpoint (Emunah & Johnson, 2009). Hence, experiencing from a different viewpoint helps to cultivate awareness and compassion within one's self, whereas witnessing one's self in a distinct aspect, involves creating some gap that can initiate change and control (Emunah & Johnson, 2009). Although changing one's viewpoint might be impossible in reality, however in a dramatic realm, it can be facilitated in a calm and permissive manner. According to Emunah and Johnson (2009), viewing from varied perspectives empowers an individual to reflect on the past and move forward in the present terms, being aware of one's traits and understanding how actions can have a ripple effect in their surroundings. Hence, a combined effort of perspective and containment can play a significant part in anger management.

The effects of drama on the development of anger management of 15 students, aged between 14-15 years old were analysed by Çapacioglu and Demirtaş (2020). In the study, both pre-test and post-test were used and the data was collected using the Anger Expression Scale. Drama lessons were conducted once a week for 90 minutes, in a 12-week period. The results showed that the drama activities had an extensively positive effect on the students' anger levels.

Examining How Drama Helps with Language Difficulties

The use of drama can be an inventive method in teaching English as a second language (ESL), especially to children diagnosed with SLI and dyslexia who are from ESL

backgrounds, however drama should not be used in isolation but instead in a unified form of teaching English. With the use of drama activities, it can help individuals develop their language skills and to acquire the language more deeply and naturally (Angelianawati, 2019). Learning the English language with the use of drama can provide the child an engaging way to improve his communication skills in a safe environment (Bsharat & Barahmeh, 2020).

In a study by Hamzah (2019) conducted with students at the Dyslexia Association of Singapore, the Southampton Emotional Literacy Scales (SELS) for students, and interviews with parents were conducted to explore the efficacy of a speech and drama programme in developing the social-emotional literacy of children. Out of 6 students aged between 7-11 years old, 5 students gave an improved score in the SELS Pupil Checklist after attending the speech and drama programme for a year. Also, in the parents' interviews, parents noted that they saw improvements in their child's confidence level as well as their social skills. Therefore, similar to the findings by Bsharat & Beheak (2021), drama is a powerful tool for developing communication and thinking skills, it helps students to improve and strengthen their abilities for both oral and written communication.

According to Sam (1990), drama aids by re-establishing the situation, by shifting the whole process of learning, by starting with the meaning and henceforth approaching the form of language. It inculcates a purposeful form of learning, gearing them up for real life situations.

In a study in Malaysia by Gaudart (1990) of over 300 teachers, where drama was used in teaching language in varying class abilities and capacities with diverse types of teachers, the study showed an increase in motivation in students.

With hindsight while student's motivation might increase in learning the English language, it is important to take consideration of the teacher's abilities too. When integrating drama into teaching language, teacher's fears must be addressed. Some teachers may have concerns of being incompetent in teaching drama and looking silly (Royka, 2002). Therefore, teacher's motivation needs to be taken seriously if drama is to be used as an intervention.

CONCLUSION

There is limited study in the use of drama for children with SEN (Jindal-Snape & Vettraino, 2007). As a result, this can be demanding for SEN teachers who wants to develop their practice by using drama. On the other hand, with limited studies, this can provide the teachers with the flexibility of using drama in many ways. With drama, it can lead to the formation of a teaching situation where students rarely experience failure, in turn this creates a safe environment where students are given the chance to practice important social skills (Attwood, 2006).

Active engagement in a dramatic activity can yield positive social outcomes such as a sense of belonging to a group. Although this sense of belonging can be felt by all and can be beneficial to all, it may have more of a particular importance for children with SEN (Gallagher, 2007). This may be because of the numerous times where these children may have been excluded from social situations due to their communication skills. Therefore, with drama activities, a sense of belonging can be fostered, thus helping them to enhance their communication skills.

Vygotsky (1987) states that disability is only seen as a flaw when put into a social context. Vygotsky (1987) mentions the main problem of disability is not the physical or cognitive impairment itself but its implications in the social context. The disability can affect the child's interaction with the world and the educator must not focus on the neurological factors but instead on the child's social consequences (Vygotsky, 1987). In Vygotsky's (1987) words, "A child whose development is impeded by a disability is not simply a child less developed than his peers; rather, he has developed differently" (p. 96).

Interventions that promote positive emotions may be the basis for a child's development in different aspects of life, including personal, academic, social and emotional (Mazher, 2020).

Children with dyslexia tend to have low self-esteem due to poor perceptions of themselves (Eadon, 2012). Therefore, drama can be a useful tool that allows children to express themselves emotionally, verbally, physically and socially, which in turn can build the self-esteem and emotional aspects of a child (Azlina et al., 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature review revealed that drama approaches do play an important role in enhancing communication skills in children with special educational needs. For example, drama approaches can be used to help children with anger issues, low self-esteem, social interactions and language difficulties. However, this literature review also revealed that there is limited research in using drama for children with special educational needs. On this basis, it is recommended that future research should examine the benefits of using drama approaches for children with special educational needs, aged 9-12 years old.

It is also recommended that children with special educational needs be given an opportunity to attend drama lessons so that they can learn new skills and further improve their communication skills.

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