Imagining Autism:
Drama, Performance and Intermediality as Interventions for Autistic Spectrum Conditions

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Background

This project is a collaboration between the disciplines of drama and psychology.

The main aim is to test the hypothesis that the difficulties in communication, social interaction, imagination which characterise autism (can be ameliorated through drama-based interventions using participatory and interactive sessions.

The project sets out to establish proof on concept for the intervention and to identify the best evaluation measures to use for a larger scale efficacy trial.

The project uses drama techniques as an intervention for autism to facilitate language and communication, sociability and empathy and imagination and creativity, working with up to 24 children aged 7-11, with an autism diagnosis.

The project aims

The project aims to find out:

☐ To what extent can Autistic Spectrum Conditions be ameliorated through drama?
☐ How can interactive performance practices be used to enhance our understanding of the autistic imagination?
☐ In what ways and to what extent do children with autism engage with these creative interactions e.g. imitation, symbolic play, imagination and embodied understanding?

Secondly, the evaluation of the project is aiming to explore:

☐ How can this best be evaluated?
☐ Do such interventions result in improved spontaneous ability in the areas of imitation, imagination, emotional recognition, empathy, language and communication, social skills (e.g. eye contact, joint attention, initiating social contact, responding to social contact)
☐ Can this effect be generalized? i.e. Does performance on basic cognitive tasks indicate that the intervention exerts widespread change on mental functioning in addition to any change in the triad of impairments?
☐ Which demographic and diagnostic subtypes are most responsive to the intervention? i.e. do all children respond in the same way to the different elements of the intervention or are there differences by age, background, severity of intellectual disability etc.)

Evaluation

The evaluation combines a multiple baseline design with a repeated measures pre-post intervention design. The intervention has been delivered to 3 groups of 6-8 children.

The measures evaluate diagnosis and adaptive functioning, cognitive functioning, social imagination, socialisation and social communication. The Autism Diagnostic Observation Scale (ADOS) is the main outcome measure along with observations of children in class and during free time using a mixed methods observational approach, combining momentary time sampling and interval recording techniques.

Ratings of social skills, imagination and play have also been made by teachers and parents. Interviews with families and teachers have also explored perceived changes following intervention.

Progress report

All school’s have received the drama intervention. The evaluation team have completed the final-follow up data collection and analysis of the data is underway. The project will be completed by March 2014.

The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and is based at the University of Kent. Imagining Autism is a collaboration between the School of Arts, the Tizard Centre, the Department of Psychology and the Gulbenkian Theatre.