



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Gaining views from pupils with autism about their participation in drama classes

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Accessible Summary

- Pupils with autism were interviewed about their participation in drama classes.
- Interview approaches were devised so that the pupils could give their views.
- These approaches used different ways to engage the pupils including widge symbols, photographs and video.
- The information the pupils gave was important in building an understanding of what they take away from drama sessions.

Summary

Pupils with autism (aged 16–18) were interviewed as part of a study examining the participation of individuals with autism in drama education. This paper reflects on the approaches devised to gain views from ten pupils with autism who communicated in different ways. The procedure for gaining views from the pupils is explained, and the views they give are outlined. The pupils were able to identify aspects of drama education that they liked and did not like; share goals of drama education and communicate feelings about drama education. The views are discussed in terms of how they inform understandings of individuals with autism as well as their participation in drama education. Challenges specific to gaining views from a group of pupils with autism are considered and implications for future research presented.

Keywords Autism, education, ethics, research

Background

This paper considers an approach devised to gain views from pupils with autism about their participation in drama education. The right for children and young people to express opinions and for their opinions to be heard is recognised in both national and international legislation (DDA 1995; UN 1989). In schools, listening to the voice of pupils should be core in developing improvement strategies (DCSF 2008). For particular subject areas, gaining pupil views about their participation can help teachers gain insights into their own practice, and pupils become more aware about what and how they are learning (Innes *et al.* 2001).

In research about people with learning difficulties, it is widely recognised that the individuals themselves are the experts about their own lives and that they should be asked directly whether their views or experiences are to be understood (Alderson 2004; Beresford 1997; Minkes *et al.* 1995; Tarleton *et al.* 2004). In the case of people with autism, studies with a focus on personal accounts found that they helped in the understanding of individual experiences as well as providing professionals with an important source of information on which to develop practice and enhance services (Bagatell 2007; Barrett 2006; Billington 2006). However, eliciting views from people with autism can be challenging.

Autism is a complex condition. It is characterised by a triad of impairments in social interaction, social communication and social imagination which can be accompanied by a restricted range of interests (Wing & Gould 1979), but the ways in which autism manifests across individuals varies greatly. Studies that have focused on gaining and valuing the views of individuals with autism tend to focus on individuals with strong verbal communication (Bagatell 2007; Barrett 2006; Billington 2006). However, approximately one-third of those diagnosed with autism never develop functional speech (Howlin 1999; Mundy *et al.* 1994). How can they be enabled to give their views? Complexities arise when there is limited verbal communication (Porter 2003), but the process is exacerbated with individuals with autism by difficulties in perspective taking (Baron-Cohen *et al.* 1985; Hobson 1993). This can influence the extent to which individuals with autism attend to and understand what is being asked (Capps *et al.* 1998; Lord & Paul 1997; Whitehurst 2006), provide appropriate information (Capps *et al.* 1998) and respond to questions with an inferential or abstract component such as those drawing on the past or future, imagination or emotions (Baron-Cohen 1988; Tager-Flusberg 1992, 1993, 1994). Approaches are being devised to enable the voice of individuals with autism to be heard in research addressing their needs (Beresford *et al.* 2004; Preece 2002; Preece & Jordan 2010; Tozer 2003; Whitehurst 2006) but, with the breadth and complexity of autism, it is important to discuss and debate different approaches. Indeed, a review of good practice in autism education concludes:

We need more research to develop and disseminate good practice on accessing the pupil's voice within both mainstream and specialist schools. (Charman *et al.* 2011, p. 7).

Current study

The approach outlined in this paper formed part of a study that examined the participation of pupils with autism in

drama education (Loyd 2011). This study aimed to identify outcomes for the pupils from participation in drama education and to examine relevant teaching approaches that facilitated these outcomes. Outcomes focused on interaction and communication with other people as well as engagement in make-believe. The research used case study methodology within an interpretive paradigm. Data were gathered about ten pupils aged 16–18. This took place within one school for pupils with autism over 34 weeks through observations, interviews, questionnaires and documentation. The views of the pupils involved were important in contributing to the aims of the study because they provided a window into their experience of drama sessions. This helped the researcher understand what resonated for pupils in drama sessions and use this information alongside other data to inform outcomes and teaching approaches.

Participants

The study involved ten pupils aged 16–18 based at a further education unit of a school for pupils diagnosed with autism. The school was chosen because of its uniqueness in offering a drama curriculum on an intensive and ongoing basis throughout the school year. Of the ten pupils, six were female and four were male. They communicated in different ways with four pupils using verbal language as their main mode of communication; four using occasional words, but predominantly nonverbal and two who did not use verbal language to communicate. Details of pupil ages and scores on Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scales (VABS) (Sparrow *et al.* 2005) at the beginning of the study are shown in Table 1 for familiarisation purposes. Pupil names have been changed for the purposes of anonymity.

Ethical approval and consent

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education, University of London. It was conducted within the guidelines of the ethical mission statements of research partners the National Autistic

Table 1 Characteristics of the pupils participating in drama

Participant	Gender	Age at the beginning of the research	VABS adaptive behaviour composite	VABS social skills composite	VABS communication skills composite
Ben	Male	18 years, 4 months	85	73	113
Fran	Female	17 years, 5 months	73	76	74
Claire	Female	18 years, 1 month	64	64	67
Alice	Female	18 years, 8 months	57	60	59
Deborah	Female	17 years, 11 months	57	63	52
Jacob	Male	17 years, 1 month	57	65	45
Eddie	Male	17 years, 6 months	56	64	43
Gina	Female	16 years, 11 months	55	52	57
Harry	Male	16 years, 1 month	55	56	52
Isy	Female	16 years, 2 months	52	49	45

Society, Research Autism and the research sponsor the Economic and Social Research Council.

Consent was gained from the head teacher of the further education unit and parents of pupils involved as well as from the pupils themselves through dedicated approaches devised specifically for the research (Loyd 2012).

The process of gaining views

Data collection included the observation of pupils in drama and other curricular areas over a 34-week period. The interviews with pupils were carried out during week 17, half way through the observation period. This timing was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it gave the researcher time to observe each pupil and see how she/he communicated in different contexts. Secondly, it enabled pupils to become familiar with the researcher which helped to build trust and alleviate anxiety (Beresford *et al.* 2004; Cameron & Murphy 2007; Grove *et al.* 1999; Porter *et al.* 2001; Watson *et al.* 2006). In addition to observing pupils, advice and support was sought from class teachers, the school speech and language therapist and the school psychologist. These different sources of information enabled the researcher to understand more clearly how each pupil communicated and comprehended and allowed for a tailored interview approach to be developed. During this process, the researcher was reflective and transparent in determining how and why particular approaches were used for pupils. This is an important consideration in interpretive research where researcher subjective positioning needs to be managed (Mason 2002; O'Leary 2004).

The interview approach was multimodal to enable pupils to access the questions in different ways and to allow them to respond in the way in which they preferred to communicate (Minkes *et al.* 1995; Murphy 1998; Peeters 2000). Some of the pupils, for example, preferred to communicate verbally with single words or sentences, whereas others preferred to point to symbols or pictures to show their response to questions or aspects they liked or disliked. The approach built on research which suggests visual approaches are more accessible and less stressful for individuals with autism than verbal approaches (Preece 2002). It allowed all the pupils to be asked the same questions which facilitated analysis, but incorporated flexibility within it for pupils to expand on their answers if they wished. The interview approach had four parts, and together there were 16 core questions.

The first part of the interview involved seven questions asking pupils about likes and dislikes in school, likes and dislikes in drama, activities and goals in drama and performances and feelings about performances. The interview approach was inspired by Murphy's approach to help people with communication difficulties think about issues and express their views – Talking Mats™ (Murphy 1998). Talking

Mats have been used with individuals with severe and complex needs in research, including those with autism, and the approach has been found to be useful in capturing viewpoints (Germain 2002; Whitehurst 2006; Wright 2008). Widgit literacy symbols that the pupils were familiar with were employed (Detheridge *et al.* 2002) and topics, options and feelings were investigated. Rather than asking direct questions that can be confusing for individuals with autism, questions were put into a sentence format and three options were offered to complete the sentence. The start of the sentence was placed on to the top of a piece of paper and three options with which the pupil could complete the sentence were put below the paper. The researcher read the start of the sentence to the pupil and asked the pupil to choose a response or responses from the three options. Table 2 sets out the questions asked in part one in a sentence format with an example of options. The researcher encouraged pupils to talk more broadly around each question area.

The second part involved five questions using photographs that can help individuals with autism recall activities in which they have participated (Beresford *et al.* 2004; Preece 2002). The pupil was given three photographs of herself/himself in drama and asked to describe what was happening in the picture and then to choose her/his favourite and least favourite picture from the three options. The researcher asked a question followed by a sentence for the pupil to complete. For example, 'Tell me what is happening in this picture? Fran is...'. Where verbal communication was not the main way of communicating for a pupil or where prompting was needed, symbols linked to the activity in the photograph

Table 2 Questions asked in part one of the interview approach with an example of options

Question number	Question in sentence format	Options
1.	I like...	Work experience Drama Computer
2.	I do not like...	Work experience Drama Computer
3.	In drama, I like...	Stretching Drama games Performance
4.	In drama, I do not like...	Stretching Drama games Performance
5.	Drama helps me to...	Work with friends Learn new dances Feel good
6.	In the performance, I can...	Show new dances Entertain people Work with friends
7.	In the performance, I feel...	Happy Nervous Excited

were placed near the photographs for the pupil to choose by pointing. Pupils were encouraged to explain their choice of the picture they liked and disliked. This approach repeated some of the question areas covered in the first part and was a way of enhancing the trustworthiness of responses (Beresford 1997; Germain 2002).

The third part used video. The researcher asked each pupil to watch a two-minute video of herself/himself in drama. While she/he was watching it, the pupil was asked what was happening in the video and who she/he was with. Where verbal communication was not the main way of communicating for a pupil or where prompting was needed, the researcher placed words and symbols linked to the activity in the video near the computer for the pupil to choose by pointing. This part of the interview engaged pupils in another activity while asking questions taking pressure off the interview situation. Such an approach has been recommended as a way of enhancing the trustworthiness of responses (Beresford *et al.* 2004; Donaldson 1978). Also, it was another approach to support the pupils in recalling and reflecting on activities in which they have participated. The video was repeated if the pupil wanted to watch it again.

The fourth part of the interview involved two theory-of-mind tests so that the researcher could compare observations during drama and other curricular areas concerning pupil abilities to recognise how themselves and other people think and feel with performance in theory-of-mind tests. This line of enquiry was incorporated because an aspect of the main study was to consider the influence of social context on perspective taking in individuals with autism and interrogate the extent to which experimental tests of theory of mind with individuals with autism accurately reflect their abilities to show theory of mind in real-world social contexts. This is of interest given debates about the relationship between performance in theory-of-mind tests and real-world competence in abilities associated with theory of mind (Chin & Bernard-Optiz 2000; Frith *et al.* 1994; Hadwin *et al.* 1997; Travis *et al.* 2001) and the small number of studies that have investigated abilities associated with theory of mind in real-world social contexts (Kremler-Sadlik 2004; Ochs *et al.* 2004). Two simple theory-of-mind tests – the ‘Sally-Anne test’ (Baron-Cohen *et al.* 1985) and the ‘Smarties test’ (Perner *et al.* 1989) – were used. These tests are common in research studies testing theory-of-mind capacity in individuals with autism.

The interviews were carried out with each pupil on an individual basis. Prior to the interview, the pupil was asked by her/his class teacher whether she/he agreed to and was happy to speak with the researcher (Cameron & Murphy 2007). It was explained to the pupil that the researcher would like to talk with her/him about the further education unit, and the pupil was asked whether she/he would be happy for this to happen. On agreeing, the researcher led the pupil to a quiet room in the further education unit. The

room was set out with a table and two chairs next to each other. The researcher sat down and asked the pupil to sit next to her and gave her/him the option to sit somewhere else around the table. In some instances, pupils chose to sit on another side of the table from the researcher. The researcher then asked the pupil whether she/he was happy to be video-recorded. All pupils were happy to be video-recorded. Video was used to capture and incorporate into analysis different modes of communication. The researcher explained the process of the interview very clearly to the pupil and reassured her/him that she/he could leave the room whenever she/he wanted. Also, she/he was introduced to a ‘stop’ card so that she/he could draw the session to a close when she/he wanted (Beresford *et al.* 2004). Each question was explained to the pupil before asking it to prepare her/him for what to expect. Pupils did not have to give a response (Porter *et al.* 2001), but were given space and time to respond. The researcher repeated the pupil’s response after she/he had given it to confirm the answer. At the end of the interview, the researcher thanked the pupil and led her/him back to her/his classroom.

Findings

Likes and dislikes about drama

Drama is an activity that the pupils enjoyed. From a list of activities engaged in at school, six of the ten pupils identified drama as the activity they liked most. Within drama sessions, pupils were able to identify the parts of the session that they liked and disliked and reflect on performances in which they had been involved. Alice, for example, enjoyed ‘performance’, but did not like the daily warm up activity of ‘stretching’, and these responses correlated with her talk and engagement during drama sessions. Fran explained that she liked drama, but that she did not like rehearsals because ‘it take out too much space’ relating to the total time available which conflicts sometimes with her work experience commitments. This response linked with Fran’s conversations during drama sessions and with her class teacher where she talked about having to miss work experience because of a rehearsal. Indeed, her class teacher noted that Fran ‘just wanted to let everyone know that work experience is very important to her’. The responses were enlightening particularly for pupils who did not use speech to communicate. For example, Eddie, who scored lowest in terms of communication skills according to assessment measures used, was able to show his preference for ‘movement games’ over ‘walking’ and ‘rehearsals’ in drama sessions highlighting his growing ability to communicate his likes and dislikes to others. His class teacher noted, ‘with confidence comes a bit of rebellion with Eddie. So he won’t say yes all the time I ask something. He will say no to things’.

Activities and goals in drama

All pupils could identify what they do in drama and performances. Responses related predominantly to learning dance and drama skills for a performance. On being asked to complete the sentence, 'Drama helps me to', seven pupils chose 'learn new dances' and in response to the question 'In the performance, I can...', eight pupils chose 'show new dances' and/or 'say my lines'.

Four pupils demonstrated awareness that working with their peers was an important part of drama. These were pupils who gained higher adaptive behaviour and communication skills scores than their peers in assessment measures and are the first four pupils detailed in Table 1. Claire and Fran chose 'work with friends' as something that drama helped them to do or that they could do in a performance and Claire talked about the need to 'work together' in drama sessions. Of three photographs of Alice engaged in drama, Alice chose a photograph of herself with Harry as the picture she liked best.

Researcher: Is there a photo you like?

Alice: This one. That's me, Alice and Harry.

Ben took a slightly different stance explaining that the main thing he gained from drama and the performance was 'the ability to work with people I don't like'.

Six pupils were able to talk about make-believe elements of drama such as substituting one object for another and the roles they played beyond the drama classroom.

Researcher: Which performance is this Claire?

Claire: Christmas outerspace

Researcher: What are you doing now?

Claire: Pointing at an Intergalactic Christmas tree.

Researcher: And what is an intergalactic Christmas tree? Where is it?

Claire: It's over there.

Researcher: And what did it do?

Claire: It looks like a rocket ship. Like a tree. From outerspace. From Christmas land. Makes Christmas tree as rocket.

Claire was aware of the dual role of the Christmas tree. It is a Christmas tree and it is a rocket ship. Similarly, in explaining an improvisation as part of an interview with Ben, he said

... the customer was having her breakfast and the waiter, which was me, was, well, sleepy, yeah, he could like fall asleep instantly without even knowing.

The words 'which was me' showed clear understanding from Ben that he was playing a role.

Also, some pupils were able to show awareness that they were going to perform in front of people and referred to the impact of their performance on others. The three pupils with the highest adaptive behaviour and communication scores shown in Table 1 recognised that in the performance they could 'entertain people'. Claire expanded on what she meant by entertaining others in the student interview.

Researcher: Ok, is there anything else from these that you can do in the performance?

Claire: Show new dances. Entertain people.

Researcher: Entertain people. Because how do you feel when they watch you? What do they do?

Claire: They clap.

Researcher: They clap, they do, they are happy when they watch you. And sometimes you can make them laugh.

Claire: Yes. I play as Alice. I play with, we did the performing Alice in Wonderland and I did the flamingo dance and I made people laugh. They think I'm funny.

Claire's awareness of her impact on other people when performing was reflected in comments from her class teacher and parents. They highlighted how much Claire looked forward to family and friends coming to watch her in performances. Also, her class teacher and the school psychologist highlighted Claire's pride in being able to make people laugh.

I remember Claire saying she was very surprised and very proud of making people laugh when she did the Alice performance and to be able to say that, you know that people actually laugh, and she was really acting it marvellously, it means that she must understand that what she is doing, it's funny to the eyes of other people... that was quite a revelation.

Feelings about drama

The pupils shared feelings about drama sessions and the performance. In response to a question about how pupils felt in the performance, all pupils chose 'happy' out of a selection of options. Three pupils, who scored highest in terms of communication skills, volunteered to clarify how they felt when they were performing. Claire remarked, 'I'm not nervous, excited'. She reflected that she 'feels good' when she is performing and took pride in her performance. In contrast, Fran acknowledged that in the performance, 'I would feel nervous, I would', but afterwards she felt 'proud' and 'happy'. Ben gave more detail:

To be able to well enjoy it as well and naturally, I don't get stage frights you know which is great... I just feel

psyched up and ready to go you know and when I'm on stage I, when I'm on stage I just focus on what I have to do you know... I feel great you know.

These feelings of enjoyment, excitement and pride given by pupils were reinforced by class teachers and parents with whom these pupils shared their feelings. The parents of three pupils explained that their child was 'excited' about the performance as it approached. Deborah's parents clarified that 'she knows it is a special day or evening', and after the performance, she is 'ecstatic'. Often she would say that was 'awesome'.

Discussion of the views

The views of the pupils raised a number of important points in relation to understanding what they gain from drama education as well as informing perspectives about autism.

The pupils were able to reflect back on their engagement in drama and draw out aspects they liked and disliked. This finding builds on research which suggests that pupils with difficulties communicating verbally can still communicate their thoughts and feelings about an activity (Whitehurst 2006). Their preferences and reflections about goals and activities in drama are comparable to responses by mainstream pupils about engagement in drama and highlight the value of gaining views and listening to them to inform practice, particularly more inclusive practice (Innes *et al.* 2001; Whitehurst 2006). The finding shows that individuals with autism can reflect on what they have done in the past as well as talk about themselves engaged in activities with others which counters experimental research findings (Capps *et al.* 1992; Lee & Hobson 1998; Millward *et al.* 2000). However, these responses may reflect a heightened ability to recall events when there is emotional engagement (Hughes & Leekam 2004).

In their reflections, pupils were able to identify performances they had been part of and knew that in these performances they 'show new dances' or 'say lines'. It is unclear whether pupils 'understand these realities to be mentally based' (Lillard 1993p.367) in drama performances involving make-believe. However, data from observations suggest that even if pupils do not understand that the realities in drama are mentally based, they are still able to participate in them and make meaning from the activities in which they are involved. Conversations with pupils with stronger language abilities indicated that they do acknowledge dual status in drama and can reflect on it. These pupils were able to talk about the different roles they played in performances while at the further education unit and could talk about the dual status of props such as a Christmas tree being a rocket ship.

Some of the pupils were able to recognise that their performance could evoke feelings in others and, for two

pupils, these findings contrasted with findings from simple theory-of-mind tests. Although this point will not be expanded upon in this article, when considered alongside other sources of data gathered during the study, these findings support the view that experimental tests of theory of mind may not reflect the breadth and flexibility of perspective taking in real-world social contexts.

Discussion of the approach

The format of the interviews had its advantages and disadvantages. The different modes of communication including widgeit literacy symbols, photographs and video footage from drama sessions enabled all pupils – whether they communicated verbally or nonverbally – to participate in all parts of the interview. Pupils who communicated nonverbally were able to select responses from a choice of options using the widgeit literacy symbols by pointing to their response or by moving it to complete the sentence. With the photographs and video footage, they could reflect on what they did in drama sessions and express feelings about it as well as likes and dislikes.

Researcher: Now Eddie in the performance what can you do? In the performance, what can you do?

Eddie: Eddie points to the middle one.

Pupils who communicated verbally were able to use the visual cues to respond to the questions and then talk more broadly around their answers. By selecting responses from a choice of options, pupils did not appear to acquiesce as Stalker cautions (1998). However, pupils with more difficulty communicating verbally required questions to be repeated as well as prompting to choose one option. Additionally, all pupils volunteered to add further information about their participation in drama through extended responses to questions, comments about photographs or video footage and requests to see photographs or video footage again. The responses the pupils gave provided a window into their understanding of drama and an indication of what they found meaningful. These responses are not dissimilar from those of typical peers and are a reminder to practitioners that eliciting views from pupils can help practitioners to look beyond the 'label' a pupil may have been given and see that pupil as an individual with preferences and experiences that can be used to inform practice. A clear challenge that has been identified in previous research is that pupils, particularly those with less expressive communication, were limited to the range of symbols and photographs provided (Preece 2002; Preece & Jordan 2010). Potentially, this constrains a deeper understanding of pupil views.

Pupil anxiety is cited often as a core challenge when attempting to communicate with pupils with autism. This

research was carried out over a 34-week period, and the researcher interviewed the pupils half way through the research period. This meant that the researcher was familiar with the pupils and strategies used by staff to alleviate anxiety where it was shown. In the interview, two pupils exhibited anxiety at the start of their interviews. Initially, they sat away from the researcher and engaged in other activities. In these cases, the researcher gave the pupils time to settle and used strategies that other teachers had used to make the scenario less stressful. For example, in the case of Alice, the researcher explained what she was going to do and gave Alice space and time to respond to the questions giving lots of positive encouragement at the same time.

The trustworthiness of the responses was enhanced by comparing and contrasting them with responses to other questions in the interview which probed the same area as well as data from observations and interviews with class teachers and drama teachers. This process was carried out in a reflective and transparent way so that subjective positioning could be managed. The process of comparing and contrasting data was important for creating a rich data picture for analysis and for helping with the interpretation of views elicited by pupils for whom face-to-face communication was challenging and for whom contributions could be misinterpreted or over-interpreted (Grove *et al.* 1999; Porter *et al.* 2001; Preece 2002; Preece & Jordan 2010; Snelgrove 2005). As Grove cautions:

Whatever the context, the systematic collection of evidence across naturalistic settings and over time will allow us to be clear about the extent to which our interpretations can be validated through other sources of information, and where they cannot. (Grove *et al.* 1999, p.201).

Conclusion

Gaining views from individuals with autism is challenging, and the task for researchers is to try, and reflect on, different approaches. This is important particularly in the light of guidelines and regulations highlighting the need for views to be heard, but with limited guidance on how this can be achieved. This research is an example of one approach to enable pupils with and without verbal language to express their views. It shows that pupils with autism can express their preferences and reflections about drama, and this is important for understanding what they gain from participating in drama and for guiding future lesson planning. Also, it shows that their views are comparable to those of mainstream pupils. This point serves as a reminder for practitioners to not be constrained by the labels that may define their pupils and, instead, be freed to use pupil views to enhance how they can work meaningfully with them. The researcher hopes that sharing her experience will be useful for others working in the field.

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