BACKGROUND
• Approximately 7 million children in the U.S. account for students in the public school system that have a diagnosed disability (Scheuerefer, 2020).
• The act of theater has been utilized as an intervention to improve social participation among adolescents with disabilities (Bailey et al., 2021; Corbett et al., 2016; Zgza et al., 2018).

THEORY
• There is an innate need of all individuals to achieve connection with others and establish a sense of self-esteem through peer relations and meaningful roles in society (Maslow, 1943).
• Creative occupations allow integration of the body and mind while working that surpasses other therapeutic techniques (Lemert, et al., 2016).

CAPSTONE SITE
• There is limited access for students with disabilities to participate in forms of creative art.
• Many of these students have difficulty socially interacting with peers and have limited opportunity to do so compared to typically developing peers.

PROJECT PURPOSE
• Establish a creative arts program within a school for students with special needs that evaluates the effectiveness of the arts towards improving social participation among peers.

METHODS

RECRUITMENT
• Students in Jasper High School’s special education department through volunteer sampling.
• Consent to participate in the program and the surveys was obtained by all participants and their caregivers through a consent form.

INCLUSION CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPANTS
• Age 12-18
• Diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or another form of intellectual disability (ID)
• Primary language of English
• No exclusions based on race or gender

PARTICIPANTS
• JHS special education department students (n = 17)

PROJECT PROCEDURES
• Participants that chose to participate engaged in an 8-week, 2 hour, 3 times weekly theater program with the purpose of improving social participation abilities.

OUTCOMES MEASURED
• Data was collected via an investigator-created pretext and posttest survey.
  • Section 1 collected demographic information from the participants including age, gender, race, and diagnoses.
  • Section 2 measured verbal communication skills.
  • Section 3 measured nonverbal communication skills.
  • Sections 2 and 3 included 5-point Likert scale questions designed to assess various social participation abilities of participants.
  • 17 total responses

Survey gathered site mentor’s perspective of social skill level pre intervention and post intervention.
• Participants were allowed to answer open ended narrative responses.

DATA ANALYSIS
• Participants were divided into homogeneous groups based on IQ score.
• Participants were assessed on ten verbal communication skills and ten nonverbal communication skills.
• Data was input into Qualtrics platform and analyzed for changes noted between pre/post intervention.
• Paired sample t-tests were conducted using data from baseline to post-intervention using a 95% confidence interval.

RESULTS

PARTICIPANTS
• 47% female
• 53% male

OUTCOMES MEASURED
• 47% ASD
• 35% IQ below 20
• 35% IQ 20-40
• 30% IQ 46-55

Verbal Communication Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Pre-Intervention</th>
<th>Post-Intervention</th>
<th>Δ Value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00167</td>
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<td>1.59</td>
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Nonverbal Communication Skills

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Discussion

• Overall, statistics for the entire group showed improvement in an overarching social skill assessment score.
• Findings of this study add to the growing literature and support the results of previous studies.

• (Agnihotri et al., 2013; Bailey et al., 2021; Corbett et al., 2016; Zgza et al., 2018).
• Statistical data and narrative responses yielded positive outcomes.
• Both verbal and nonverbal communication skills appeared equally improved by the program.
• All participants found the program helpful and recommended it.
• Participants reported being excited and proud of the outcome.
• Greater results of theater intervention may be seen in:
  • Females
  • Adolescents with ID
  • Participants that have an IQ between 20-55
• Most improved verbal communication skills:
  • Responding appropriately to language and facial expressions
  • Clearly conveying thoughts in a fluid manner
  • Using correct speaking volume, inflection, and pacing
• Most improved nonverbal communication skills:
  • Coordinated body language
  • Eye contact
• Students able to better communicate with peers increases the opportunities they have throughout their school for inclusion, friendship, involvement in extra curriculars, which can increase their quality of life.

LIMITATIONS
• Small sample size
• Lack of variety in diagnoses
• Lack of control group
• Investigator-created survey
• Possible bias in survey responses

FUTURE RESEARCH
• Implementation can be widespread among a variety of career paths to achieve improvement in the social participation abilities of adolescents with disabilities.
• Interventions that incorporate role play, mini plays, or even skits could potentially reap similar benefits as the results of this study.

REFERENCES
• Results of this study are consistent with previous literature and are an addition to the growing evidence that supports the use of theater to improve social skills.
• Both statistical data and narrative responses of this study display evidence for the feasibility and effectiveness of a school-based theater intervention for adolescents with ASD and intellectual disabilities to improve their verbal and nonverbal social participation skills.
• Various professionals can find ways to implement aspects of this study to create a fun, exciting, and unique way to meet goals of clients.

CONCLUSION

• Overall, this research project was a success.
• The nearly 7 million students in the U.S., for which data is available,

For more information, please visit: org.ezproxy3.lhl.uab.edu/10.1007/s10803-015-9776-9

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