



Imagining Autism



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'Imagining Autism'¹ was an AHRC funded interdisciplinary collaboration between Drama, Psychology and the Tizard Centre at the University of Kent (September 2011-March 2014). The project investigated the potential of drama to be used as an intervention for autism to facilitate communication, social interaction and imagination. How far could participatory performance practices impact upon these areas of deficit, often referred to as the 'triad of impairments' in autism? As these three areas are fundamental to performance practice (what we refer to as the drama 'triad' of communication, interaction and imagination), the central hypothesis was that exposure to a programme of practical workshops could effect positive change, facilitating language, sociability, empathy (theory of mind) and creativity. Performance, we speculated (with interacting bodily, auditory, temporal and spatial elements), was a means of accessing the cognitive, physical and perceptual processing involved in autism as an atypical neuropsychology. The embodied qualities of participatory, immersive performance create an opening into the autistic child's world. Since the highly visual, kinetic and aural qualities of autistic perception are also the qualities of contemporary performance, the project also investigated how drama might help us to understand the imagination in relation to autism.

The psychologists led the evaluation of the project, developing a range of measures to assess the responses of the participants (22 children with a diagnosis of autism) and to measure any changes in their behaviour and autistic symptoms². As in other intervention evaluations, the main outcome variable was the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS). In addition, the evaluation used measures of theory of mind, imitation, emotion recognition as well as observations of spontaneous social activity and play and ratings by parents and staff of attention, social engagement, communication and play-based activities.

The practice-based methods involved a series of immersive installations, contained within the 'pod', a portable tent like structure (functioning like an interactive multi-sensory room). The 'environments' (forest, arctic, outer space, under water, under the city), were designed to facilitate communication (verbal and physical), social interaction (with practitioners and peers), imagination (participating in fictional frameworks) and creativity

(through improvisation). Working in conjunction with performers, autistic participants (in groups of 4, aged 7-12) encountered a range of stimuli, triggers and responsive technologies to include physical action, puppetry, lighting, sound, costume and masks, digital media (eg live feed) and responsive technologies. These elements were designed to help participants develop 'felt' understanding through experiential, physical and immersive media. The approach emphasised the importance of presence and 'being' (rather than acting) as a means to work intuitively and creatively. The training methods emphasized the importance of play, turn-taking, liveness, open space, physicality, improvisation, shared attention, responding to the other, reading non-verbal cues and working as an ensemble. The multi-sensory environments were highly stimulating (in contrast to the prevalence of low arousal learning environments for autism), whilst the participatory and process based approaches emphasised autonomy, authorship, and offered a license to play creatively (often overlooked post diagnosis). Psychologists were able to establish proof of concept that the methods positively impacted upon language, social interaction, empathy and imagination³. The research is leading to new understandings of the imagination in autistic children and how it is differently inflected from the neurotypical child, particularly in terms of visual and auditory perceptual processes, awareness of time and space, physical and verbal modes of creative expression and responses to objects and interactive media. Understanding autism in terms of difference, rather than deficit, is in accordance with the social model of disability. As Bruce Mills has suggested: 'In the continuum that marks the different cognitive processes that produce 'art' we might begin to refine an understanding of the imagination in relation to autism[]The nature of play- and its symbolic and imaginative dimensions- might vary in relation to the particular manner in which the "player" processes the world.'⁴

A further element of this practice-based research was the collaboration with the film artist, Sarah Turner, to create an experimental film documentary exploring the imagination in autism⁵. As the work developed, the participants emerged as co-devisers and performers, authors and choreographers. The film, like the 'pod' is positioned in between the neurotypical world and the atypical cognitive and perceptual experience of

autism. Within the pod, we are situated in the now/here of nowhere, the special time of performance, conceptualized in terms of 'presence' in contemporary theatre where performance is about itself, spectators are participants and realist modes of representation are supplanted by alternative modes of perception. The film, like the project, 'refashions' and 'extends' the world to explore the phenomenology of the autistic experience. Fundamental to the project's approach has been a focus on empathic engagement with autism as difference and the use of drama as a means of tapping into the experience of perceiving differently. Playing with puppets, finding your clown and experiencing "the world upside down" are some of the practical approaches developed by the project team for training practitioners as well as being disseminated through workshops for teachers and careworkers. The team have worked with as many 60-70 staff in a single workshop, exploring different ways of engaging with space, objects and people.

In developing our practice-based methods, we aimed to do three things:

- To develop performance training systems and vocabularies appropriate for practitioners to work with autism
- To free practitioners from habit, enabling them to respond in new and original ways to stimuli and to be open to play
- To engage in imaginative and empathic dialogue with autism

Just as trained musicians can find jazz improvisation difficult, so the devising methods used in contemporary performance practice involve making materials with new vocabularies that can be challenging to practitioners experienced in traditional approaches to training. In many respects, the practitioners needed to be self-abnegating, to free themselves to respond in new, non-typical ways to these encounters with difference. The Imagining Autism environments offer opportunities for sensory exploration and perceptual engagement which are attuned to the autistic consciousness, facilitating language development and communication by creating a space for experiential learning and play. The impact of these relatively short but intense encounters is evident in the feedback from parents as part of the qualitative evaluation measures:

“He started saying things he never said before. I am flabbergasted by the amount of language. Every time I wrote down something was the day after Imagining Autism and it continues.... The big changes came from Imagining Autism and not from school....The biggest change is that he now comments – eg “medicine’s empty”...He loved the sessions. School said he would skip along the corridor to go there.... He has gained confidence and the ability to communicate more. He is now having a conversation. Before I would ask and get a minimal answer.”

“He said things like “car was taking alien eyes off”, “bell was ringing the alien was crying” and started to make expressions on his face. He commented on feelings which he has never said about...For the first time in his life when he plays figures are talking to each other and he is making up a story. Imaginative play with toys is a breakthrough. He started to play with related toys after sessions eg space toys....He has gained in his imagination, he is talking more, commenting on everything. He is identifying emotions, and naming them. He gave me a kiss and a cuddle which is very rare. He is reasoning things out – we had a conversation for 15 minutes for the first time.”

The film’s length (35 minutes) is typical of the length of time spent in an environment, so the journey for the viewer has a similar duration to the time spent in the pod. In the environments, past and futures coalesce into the presence of the present; a consciousness of being ‘in the room’ as part of the blurring between the fictional world the participants inhabit within the pod (and help to create through their interactions) and the reality of our awareness of the process of making performance. This liminal temporality is crucial, offering a time and space in between neurotypical and neurodivergent realities where encounters can take place ‘in the moment’. In the creation of this film documentary, we sought, in the words of Sarah Turner, ‘to keep the documentary real, but privilege the more feeling space.’

1 'Imagining Autism: Drama, Performance and Intermediality and Interventions for Autistic Spectrum Conditions' was an AHRC funded project based at the University of Kent (October 2011-March 2014). Investigators were Professor Nicola Shaughnessy (Drama), Dr Melissa Trimmingham (Drama), Dr Julie Beadle-Brown (Tizard) and Dr David Wilkinson (Psychology). Participating Schools were St Nicholas School Canterbury (Spring term 2012), Laleham Gap, Broadstairs (Summer Term 2012) and Helen Allison School, Meopham (Autumn Term 2012). The schools covered a wide spectrum of ability. The project worked with 6-8 participants in each school, aged 7-11, with a diagnosis of autism. The intervention involved participants in weekly sessions (45 minutes) in a portable installation (the 'pod').

2 Measures

With parents: Adaptive behaviour and use of language; Executive functioning; Autism symptoms

With teachers: Use of language; Executive functioning; Autism symptoms; Strengths and difficulties

With children: Autism Diagnostic Scale (ADOS); Assessment of receptive and expressive language; Imitation; Emotion recognition; Theory of mind; Play and social interaction; Challenging behaviour; IQ; Drawings

Practitioner ratings of engagement in sessions (questionnaire designed by psychologists).

3 Although the intervention was of a low intensity and duration (45 minutes per week for one term), statistically significant changes were recorded in several areas of deficit and across the spectrum – the biggest changes were in reciprocal social interaction, emotion recognition and the severity of autistic symptoms as rated by parents and teaching staff. However significant improvements were also found for at least some of the children in socialisation, communication, imagination and play with at least some children from all three schools showing improvements in at least one area.

4 Mills, B 'Autism and the Imagination', in *Autism and Representation*, ed. Mark Osteen, 2008, 118–32. London and New York: Routledge.

5 Sarah Turner is an experimental documentary film artist whose work includes explorations of memory, identity, fiction and autobiography in *Perestroika* (2010) and *Perestroika Reconstructed* (2013).

