

The Imagination Room
Teaching Drama to Children on the Autism Spectrum
One Mother's Journey to Receiving a Treasured Education

by

Demetra Hajidiacos

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Copyright © 2011 by Demetra Hajidiacos

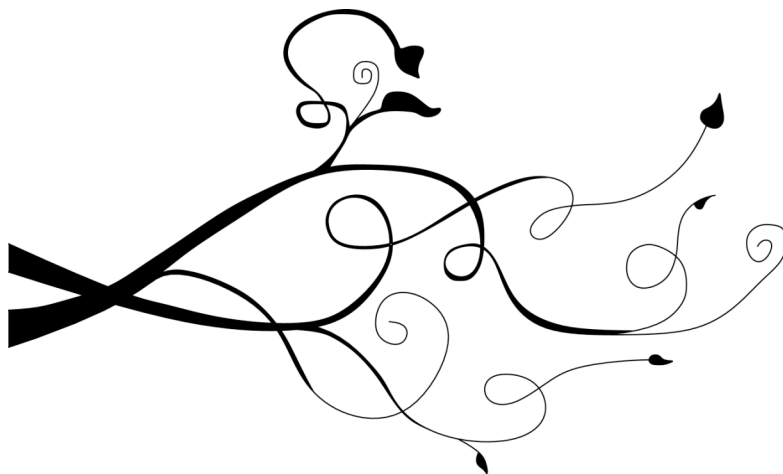
Abstract

The purpose of this autoethnography is to recount a one-year personal and professional journey of a parent/teacher/researcher as she designs and implements a teacher-led imaginative drama program for children, ages 5 – 10, with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The program uses strategies (familiar routines, picture boards, etc.) that assist children with ASD to learn new skills. Parents in the final ten-week session of the program are surveyed regarding their perceptions; 19 of the 22 students in the program participated in the 10-week study and 15 parents were present on the day the surveys were distributed and collected and completed. The researcher was specifically looking for what aspects of the program parents found valuable and what aspects needed improvement. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed that parents were satisfied with the program and would recommend it to families who have children on the autism spectrum. Key findings indicate that parents specifically appreciated the classroom structure and the teacher's knowledge of ASD. Recommendations for future improvements to the program are also discussed. The researcher discusses why a program like this is so important for children on the autism spectrum: aiding in the ability to perspective take and make friends.

Acknowledgements

A village of highly intelligent, caring and giving individuals have helped (an understatement) me bring this project to fruition. Not a day went by during the development and implementation of my “Imagination Room” classes, and later the writing of this thesis, when people didn’t say to me: “how are you doing all of this?” Well, I didn’t, alone anyway. I’ve *never* been alone in this project and the support I have felt from family, friends and the autism community over the past year has been overwhelming to say the least. It has been a long, winding road of discovery for me and for everyone who held me during this journey. I thank you all endlessly from the bottom of my heart.

This is my village: my parents, my husband, my children, my extended family, my brother Vasili Mattheos for his wonderful branch graphic that I use throughout the thesis, Dr. Francine Morin, Dr. Jennifer Katz, Dr. Beryl Peters, Pauline Broderick, Kelsey Drul, Leanne Howlett, Jaynie Mikolayanko, Yisell Gallardo, Marcie Smeltz, Rosanne Papadopoulos, Rebecca Brask, Kent Suss, Leslee Silverman, Jessee Havey, the “Theatre School”, Cairn Moore, Alison McLean, Corrie Purvis, Leanne VanAmstel, Colleen Nelson, Claire Hebert, Michelle Lawrence, Kim Yong, Autism Society of Manitoba, Asperberger Manitoba, St. Amant’s ABA Program, the many amazing children who entered the Imagination Room this year and believed with me, all their wonderful parents, siblings, grandparents and educational assistants....and of course the woman whose work inspired me to embark on this journey in the first place, Dorothy Heathcote.



Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband and our two beautiful children.

We are a family like no other.

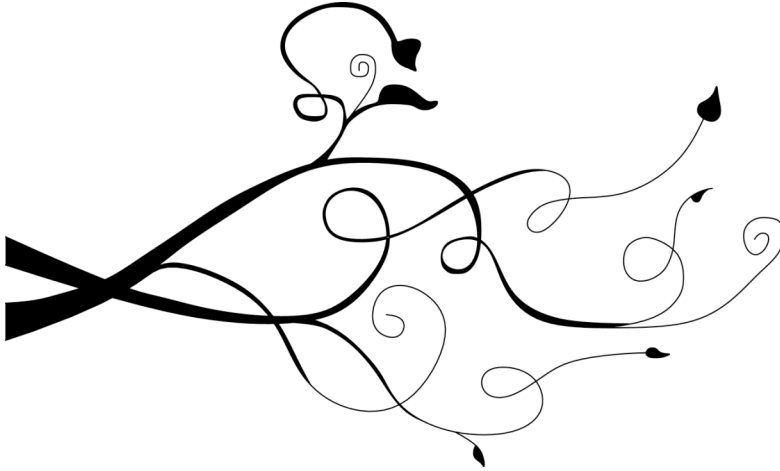
You three are my compass in all that I do in this life.

You make me want to be a better person everyday I am blessed to spend with you.

Thank you for the love you shower on me daily

that inexplicably has no end.





“Imagination is more important than knowledge.”

Albert Einstein¹

¹ As quoted during a 1929 interview for *The Saturday Evening Post* (Nilsson, 2010).

Table of Contents

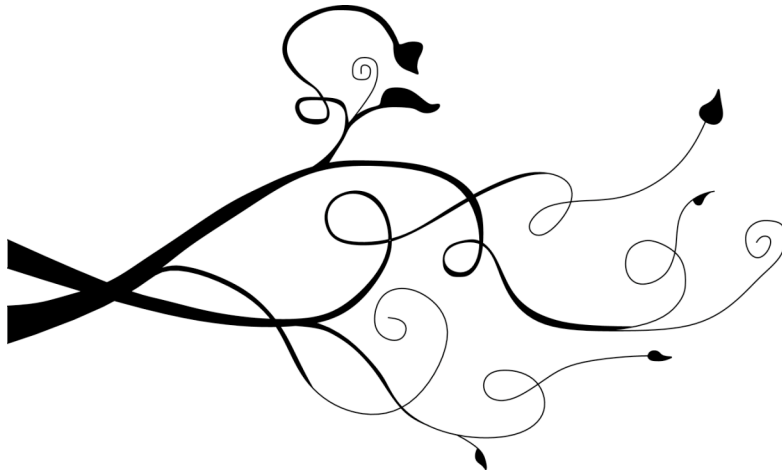
Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Dedication	4
List of Tables	9
Part I: Introduction	10
Autism	11
What is Autism?	11
What is Theory of Mind?	13
How do Children with Autism Learn New Skills?	17
Drama in Education	26
What is Drama in Education?	26
Who is Dorothy Heathcote?	28
What about Inclusion?	31
Autism and Play	35
What is the Purpose of this Study?	36
Why this Study?	37
Part II: Methodology	39
Autoethnography	39
Description of the Program	46
Recruitment of Participants	52
Description of the Participants	52
Description of Setting	54

	7
Data Collection	54
Data Analysis	55
Analysis and Interpretation of Survey Data	57
Standards of Quality	63
Ethical Concerns	64
Limitations of this Study	67
Part III: The Autoethnographic Journey	70
Chapter 1: I am a Parent	70
Αυτισμός/Autism: Detection, Diagnosis and a Mild Sedative for Mother	71
Intervention Therapies: The Good, the Bad and the Very Expensive	86
Mounting Dorothy Heathcote’s Horse	94
Chapter 2: I am a Teacher	100
Creating an Environment Conducive to Learning	101
Structuring Teacher-Led Imaginative Play in the Classroom	105
And Action! A Lesson Comes to Life	114
Chapter 3: I am a Researcher	119
Parents Speak Out about the “Imagination Room”	120
Conclusion and Recommendations for the Future	126
The Boy in the Blue Shirt: A Poem of Hope	135
References	136
Appendices	153
Appendix A: Letter to the “Theatre School”	154

Appendix B: Parent/Child Consent Form	155
Appendix C: Parent Observation Form	159
Appendix D: Photographs of Picture Lesson Boards	160
Appendix E: Letter to Parents about the “Imagination Room” Program	165
Appendix F: Weekly Parent Emails	169
Appendix G: Individual Background Information Form	179
Appendix H: Weekly Craft	184
Appendix I: Drama Award	185
Appendix J: Certificates	186

List of Tables

Table 1: Thematic Summary of Parents' Positive Comments Regarding Lessons	59
Table 2: Thematic Summary of Parents' Constructive Comments Regarding Lessons	60
Table 3: Thematic Summary of Parents' Positive Comments Regarding the Program	61
Table 4: Thematic Summary of Parents' Constructive Comments Regarding the Program	62



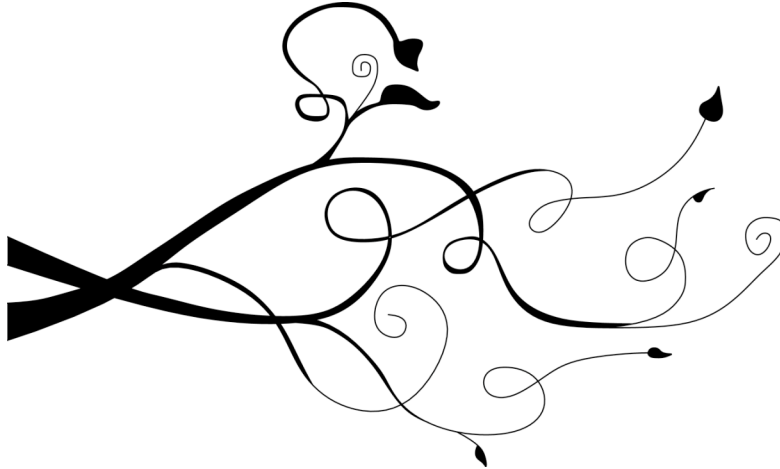
Part I: Introduction

If you are reading this, you have taken the first step on a journey with me, the parent/teacher/researcher. It is a journey of discovery. We are all travelers. And like all good travelers we need the appropriate gear. The following are terms that will be referred to on this journey. It is important that all us travelers:

- a) understand the meaning of these terms and
- b) recognize the significance these terms will have on our journey.

Please feel free to come back to these terms at any point in our travels when you may feel left behind, lost, alone, confused or abandoned. All good travelers need a map and a working compass. This is our map; your inner voice is your compass. Let's begin.





Autism

What is Autism?

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR), autism is a pervasive developmental disorder “characterized by severe deficits and pervasive impairment in multiple areas of development” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 40) including: impairments in reciprocal social interaction; impairment in communication; and the presence of stereotyped behavior, interests and activities. Is it important to note that while the DSM-IV-TR uses the term “Autistic Disorder” (p. 40), a more commonly held term in the North American medical community this past decade is “Autism Spectrum Disorder” as proposed in the draft DSM-V. Both terms are correct, however, and used interchangeably in the literature.

The DSM-IV-TR lists five pervasive development disorders including: Autistic Disorder, Rett’s Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified.

Autism is most often identified in the first years of a child’s life (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) and is typically diagnosed as a result of children

presenting delays in the following areas prior to age three: social interaction, language as used in social communication and symbolic or imaginative play.

A combination of the following behavioral symptoms may also be present: hyperactivity, short attention span, impulsivity, aggressiveness, self-injurious behaviors (head banging, finger, hand or wrist biting), temper tantrums, odd responses to sensory stimuli (sound, touch, light, odour), high threshold to pain, fascinations with certain stimuli, abnormalities in eating, abnormalities in sleeping, abnormalities in mood or affect (giggling or weeping for no apparent reason), lack of fear in response to real danger and excessive fear in response to harmless objects. Infants may: fail to cuddle; be indifferent or have an aversion to affection; lack eye contact, facial responsiveness and/or smiles or not respond to even their parents' voices (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention website, current estimates show that an average of 1 in 110 children in the United States have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (www.cdc.gov/Features/CountingAutism/). Autism is of “great concern to the practicing pediatrician because of an astonishing 556% reported increase in pediatric prevalence between 1991 to 1997, to a prevalence higher than that of spina bifida, cancer, or Down syndrome” (Mhule, Trentacost & Rapin, 2004, p. 472).

It's unclear what the prognosis of these children will be (Howlin, 2003; Szatmari, Bryson, Boyle & Streiner, 2003) however studies have shown that IQ scores and early intervention therapies contribute to positive outcomes (Szatmari et al., 2003). And while a commonly held belief is that early language development leads to a more favorable

prognosis, this theory has never actually been proven (Howlin, 2003; Szatmari et al., 2003).



This is important for our journey because...

There's a reason why popular culture literature surrounding the topic of autism, including the mass media as well as parent support/advocacy group websites, utilize a familiar variation of scattered puzzle pieces as a defining graphic. Autism is complex and puzzling. The number of children currently diagnosed with an ASD in North America is staggering and no two children on the autism spectrum are alike.

My son has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as well do all the beautiful children that I teach. I struggle with the word "autistic" (even though it is not technically inappropriate to use the term) as well as the unfounded notion that children who are slow to develop language have a less favorable prognosis than those that develop language early on. In fact, it has been documented that some of the world's most brilliant individuals including Albert Einstein himself were late-talkers (Sowell, 2001) and perhaps even "autistic".

What is Theory of Mind?

Theory of mind is "the ability to attribute inner states to oneself and others, and to understand the role played by those inner states on people's behaviour, including perhaps role playing, cooperation, and deception" (Bosacki, Macgillivray & Moore, 2011, p. 1). Individuals on the autism spectrum are said to lack the ability to understand other people's mental states (Kaland et al., 2002) and have "a sort of mind-blindness" (Smukler, 2005, p. 11) that includes problems with: recognizing emotions (Ashwin, Chapman, Colle & Baron-Cohen, 2006), vocal cues (Chevallier, Noveck, Happé &

Wilson, 2011), perspective taking (Ricard, Girouard & Décarie, 1999) and self-awareness (Williams, 2010).

This “mind-blindness” or, lack of theory of mind, may be due to a brain abnormality (Frith, 2001) that, among other things, affects a child’s imagination (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999; Low, Goddard & Melser, 2009). A lack of theory of mind is also responsible for underdeveloped play skills and social abilities in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Manning & Wainwright, 2010).

Creative impairments in children with ASD are associated with a lack of Theory of Mind and include the inability to create imaginative stories (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 2000) or write personal narratives (Brown & Klein, 2011). A pilot investigation conducted by a theatrical intervention program, Social Emotional NeuroScience Endocrinology (SENSE), paired eight children with ASD with eight typically developing peers. The study was designed to improve socio-emotional functioning in the children with ASD. The intervention was:

embedded in a full musical theatre production. Participants showed some improvement in face identification and theory of mind skills. The intervention shows potential promise in improving the socioemotional functioning in children with ASD through the utilization of peers, video and behavioral modeling, and a community-based theatrical setting. (Corbett et al., 2011, p. 505)

A child’s pretend play (also referred to as imaginative play or symbolic play) skills are also affected by a theory of mind deficit (Charman, 1997; Lillard, 1993). Sensory integrated-based therapy, implemented by an occupational therapist, using imaginative practices have aided in “a feeling of belonging and its embodiment” (Park, 2008, p. 234).

It has also been suggested that because imaginative play is such an important skill for children with ASD to master, educators should consider incorporating it into a student's individualized education program (Mastrangelo, 2009).

Social skills training groups have proven to be successful interventions for children on the autism spectrum (Weiss & Harris, 2001) and have demonstrated results in increasing “the frequency of, time engaged in, and duration of social interactions, as well as the responsivity of students and peers to each other” (Kamps et al., 1992, p. 281).

Peer play interventions that provide modeling and practice have also seen successful results in the acquisition of skills (Cotugno, 2009; O'Connor & Stagnitti, 2011; Prendeville, Prelock & Unwin, 2006; Weiss & Harris, 2001) and have been considered “effective in improving core social deficits in individuals with ASD” (Cotugno, 2009, p. 1268). In one study, mothers observed an improvement in “spontaneous unsupervised social interactions” in their children as a result of home-based play dates (Frankel, Gorospe, Chang & Sugar, 2010). This is significant considering children with autism have been documented to have the ability to produce pretend play but are less likely to do so spontaneously and in less structured settings (Jarrold, 2003).

It has also been documented that structured classroom/group interventions, whereby children with ASD are taught pretend play skills through teacher modeling and repetition, result in children producing spontaneous pretend play of their own (Jarrold, Boucher & Smith, 1993; Sherrat, 2002; Wofberg & Schuler, 1993). The research is limited but indicates that children on the autism spectrum have the capacity to learn symbolic play, a deficit that otherwise set them apart from their typically developing peers.

In helping us understand how we as educators can help children overcome this deficit in theory of mind and still develop pretend play and social skills, Dr. Solomon, a leader in the field of play therapy and children with ASD suggests that an appropriate starting point in teaching play to a child with autism is paying particular attention to the child's own interests (Solomon, Necheles, Ferch & Bruckman, 2007). He believes that children on the spectrum learn play and socialization skills best when they are engaged in an activity that begins with their own interests. He states in his video produced by The Play Project®, *Be Your Child's Best Play Partner*, "the child's love of others depends on others doing what *he* loves."



This is important for our journey because...

As I mentioned in the previous section, I am the mother of a child on the autism spectrum. I'm also a drama teacher who understands the merit of having children work collaboratively in an ensemble environment to create drama. It becomes a promising prospect to me that social skills groups targeting deficits in theory of mind, through the use of functional play, helps children produce more elaborate and sustained play with peers as a result. It's also exciting to note that children who were taught socio-dramatic (Thorp, Stahmer & Schreibman, 1995) and symbolic (Stahmer, 1995) play in a structured environment displayed improvements in skills that were generalized into other settings.

It was sad for me to read that a study analyzing video footage of children on the spectrum playing alongside footage of children without autism playing, noted that the children with autism "were rated as showing less playful pretend involving self-conscious awareness of pretending, investment in symbolic meanings given to materials, creativity and fun" (Hobson, Lee & Hobson, 2009, p. 12). In the study conducted by Thorp and

colleagues (1995) analyzing socio-dramatic play, although children were able to generalize their imaginative play in other settings they were less likely to engage play partners to participate in their play.

How do Children with Autism Learn New Skills?

Numerous early intervention therapies have demonstrated results in producing positive learning outcomes, both academically and socially, for children on the autism spectrum. These interventions include, but are not limited to: Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Relationship Development Intervention (RDI), Individual Difference, Relationship-based therapy (DIR/Floortime), speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and music therapy.

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). In the 1960's, California based psychologist Dr. O. Ivor Lovaas pioneered the world's most widely accepted early-intervention therapy for children with autism, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). The practice, based on discrete-trial training, aims to “decrease severe challenging behaviors and establish communicative language” (Smith & Eiseketh, 2011, p. 375) in young children diagnosed with autism.

In his decades of research dedicated to helping children with autism and their families, Lovaas (1993) believed that:

Effective treatment for severe behavioral disorders is seen to require early intervention carried out during all or most of the child's waking hours, addressing all significant behaviors in all the child's environments, by all significant persons, for many years. (p. 617)

ABA is extensively held in the scientific community as best practice for children diagnosed with autism (Foxx, 2008; Granpeesheh, Tarbox & Dixon, 2009; Hayward, Eikeseth, Gale & Morgan, 2009; Smith & Eiseketh, 2011; Vismara & Rogers, 2010). In addition to reducing problem behaviours and increasing communication in children, ABA also decreases stress in families (McConachie & Diggle, 2007) and assists children in acquiring play skills (Ingersoll & Schreibman, 2006; Reagon & Higbee, 2009; Stahmer, Ingersoll & Carter, 2003).

In a 2006 study, conducted at the University of California, children were taught imitation skills using a naturalistic behavioral intervention. The children not only showed improvement in their imitation skills, as a result, but were able to generalize their skills in other novel settings (Ingersoll & Schreibman, 2006). Other studies have shown similar results in children diagnosed with autism. Outcomes conclude that children with autism learn imitation skills through repetition and reinforcement (Murdock & Hobbs, 2010; Stephens, 2008). In the Ingersoll and Schreibman (2006) study the children's acquisition of imitation skills led to "social-communicative behaviors, including language, pretend play and joint attention" (p. 487) and "two of the children exhibited robust increases in their spontaneous language despite the fact that language was never specifically targeted" (p. 501).

A typical ABA curriculum in North America takes place in a structured environment and is administered by a parent or tutor. Key elements of the program include positive reinforcement, (Carr, Severtson & Lepper, 2009; Kroeger & Sorensen, 2010; Koegel, Singh & Koegel, 2010); verbal prompting and script fading (Krantz & McClannahan, 1993, 1998; Sarakoff, Taylor & Poulson, 2001), and picture activity

schedules (Betz, Higbee & Reagon, 2008; Bryan & Gast, 2000; Krantz & McClannahan, 1993; O'Reilly, Sigafos, Lancioni, Edrisinha & Andrew, 2005; Watanabe & Sturme, 2003) in order to teach children appropriate social responses, self-help skills and academic skills such as math, reading and writing. Data is taken in order to track and tailor programs to each individual child. When a skill is mastered, another is introduced.

The most common attribute of ABA therapy is the use of Discrete Trial Training, which involves breaking a task into small manageable steps and repeating that task until it is learned. Rewards (like food or toys) are given for producing the correct response. Punishment is not used (Siff Exkorn, 2005).

ABA therapy starts off at home in a one-to-one setting and is later transitioned into preschool and school settings. The first skills that children learn include sitting independently in a chair or pointing to a desired object (Maurice, Green & Luce, 1996, p. 66). More advanced skills include asking and answering "Wh" questions or following instructions in a group setting (Maurice, Green, & Luce, 1996).

Lovaas (1987) published a legendary study that involved a clinical trial of 19 preschoolers diagnosed with autism who received 40 hours of one-to-one intensive ABA therapy per week. The results were that 47% of the children "achieved normal intellectual and educational functioning" (p.7). Shortly after his study, Lovass was criticized in his choice of outcome measures, criteria for subject selection and method for assigning control groups (Schopler, Short & Mesibov, 1989) but Lovaas and his colleagues maintained that the research utilized unbiased control groups and multiple pretreatment and follow-up measures (Lovaas, Smith & McEachin, 1989). In 1993 Lovaas conducted a follow-up study.

Results showed that the experimental group preserved its gains over the control group. The 9 experimental subjects who had achieved the best outcomes at age 7 received particularly extensive evaluations indicating that 8 of them were indistinguishable from average children on tests of intelligence and adaptive behavior. Thus, behavioral treatment may produce long-lasting and significant gains for many young children with autism. (p. 373)

DIR/Floortime. The (Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-based) DIR/Floortime approach was developed by the distinguished pediatric psychiatrist and author Dr. Stanley Greenspan as an alternative to the behavioral models being offered in the country for decades that were only, in his opinion, targeting children's deficits and not tapping into their real potential (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006). Greenspan believed that children learn through play and the key to unlocking autism is to find a way to engage a child during his/her isolated play and bring that child into the "shared world" (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006, p. 65).

Greenspan's obituary in *The Washington Post* quoted the famous psychiatrist as once saying he had learning difficulties as a child and it taught him two things: "One, that kids have different learning styles that are real and need to be paid attention to. And two, that people have an enormous capacity to use their strengths to compensate for any areas of vulnerability" (Brown, 2010).

Greenspan & Wieder (2006) write:

The goal of treatment within the DIR/Floortime model is to build foundations for healthy development, rather than to work only on surface behavior and symptoms. With this approach, children master critical abilities missed or derailed along their

developmental path – namely, the ability to relate to others with warmth and pleasure, communicate purposefully and meaningfully (first with gestures and then often with words), and, to varying degrees, think logically and creatively. A significant number of children treated in this way have broken new ground, mastering abilities formerly thought unattainable by children with ASD. (p. x – xi)

The DIR/Floortime model takes place, as it sounds, on the floor, playing and taking into account each individual child's differences, which may include sensory sensitivities or preferences. The model involves a series of “circles of communications” (Wieder & Wieder, 2005, p. 61) whereby an adult seizes his/her opportunity to become involved in what the child is doing, in isolation, and create a meaningful back and forth exchange. The adult opens the circle and the child closes the circle. A circle may begin with an adult simply copying what a child is doing to (later on) more elaborate forms of pretend play where the adult speaks for dolls and dinosaurs followed by the child adding his own ideas to the “pretend drama” (p. 61). Greenspan believed in having many props available for the child to choose from (including everyday objects) and building imaginative play from the ground up simply by following the child's lead.

In 1993 Greenspan conducted a study of 20 children and their families who were engaged in the DIR/Floortime model and found that when compared to a socioeconomic status-matched group of peers, with no history of developmental challenges, “we found there were no differences between the DIR/Floortime intervention group and the ‘typical’ peer comparison group in terms of emotional, social, and intellectual functioning” (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006). A 10 – 15 year follow up study (since the start of

treatments) found that 16 of the 20 children from the original study not only maintained their initial gains, “but made further progress and were overall equipped to handle the stressors of adolescence and life events” (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006, p. 42).

In a 2007 pilot study for parents of young children with autism involved in the PLAY Project Home Consultation program, which is based on the principles of Greenspan’s DIR/Floortime model, 68 children completed a 8-12 month program of 15 hours of parent led floor-time play. The results showed that 45.5 % of the children made “good to very good functional developmental progress” (Solomon, Necheles, Ferch & Bruckman, 2007). It was determined in the study that, even as a result of certain limitations, the PLAY Project® home-consultative model is a cost-effective intervention for young children with autism.

Relationship Development Intervention (RDI). Created in 1995 by Dr. Steven E. Gutstein and his wife Dr. Rachelle Sheeley, RDI is a family-based remediation program. Through guided practice and experience sharing, parents teach their children to think dynamically and break static routines. RDI, is an invitational model that does not use extrinsic rewards. The model operates on the philosophy that “shared enjoyment” of an activity is a reward in itself (Gutstein, 2000, 2009; Gutstein, Burgess & Montfort, 2007; Gutstein, Gustein & Baird, 2007; Gustein & Sheely 2002).

RDI is a strategic curriculum with six phases that include: novice, apprentice, challenger, voyager, explorer and partner (Gutstein & Sheely, 2002, 2006). The curriculum guides parents through the framing of everyday activities (baking, laundry, walking) that help children problem solve, build communication and form relationships through guided-participation and scaffolding. The theory is that the “apprentice” will

then become the “master” through strengthening episodic memory and establishing critical executive functioning deficits that individuals on the spectrum inherently lack.

An RDI consultant coaches parents through activities (in the child’s absence) and later watches video footage of parents doing homework activities with their child. Consultants give parents weekly feedback on videos as the family continues to work through the curriculum on their own at home.

While RDI has not received peer review by the scientific community it also has not received any negative publicity and is an alternative to parents who either cannot afford, do not have access to or do not believe in the ABA model. A study conducted by Gutstein in 2007 followed 16 children who participated in RDI therapy between 2000 – 2005. The results state that after that five-year period all 16 children had lost their diagnosis of autism (Gutstein, 2009; Gutstein, Burgess & Montfort, 2007). The study, to date, has not received any peer review.

Speech and language therapy. Inadequate language (Rapin & Dunn, 2003), language and communications disorders (Fernandez, Cardoso, Sassi, Amato & Sousa-Morato, 2008) and delayed language development (Rapin, Dunn & Saul, 1997) are “essential features of the autistic spectrum disorders, and are part of the diagnostic criteria” (Fernandez et al., 2008).

Speech therapists assist children with autism to communicate both verbally and non-verbally using various techniques including: social stories, individual therapy, small group therapy, games, activities, American Sign Language, communication boards, Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS) or Voice Output Communication Devices (Siff Exkorn, 2005).

Occupational therapy. Occupational therapy assists children with autism who have difficulty with sensory, motor, neuromuscular, and or/visual skills (Siff Exkorn, 2005). Children may require help learning to: balance their body weight, respond to touch, communicate with others and accomplish daily tasks (p. 107). Occupational therapists use a technique known as Sensory Integration Therapy to help children better process sensory information such as tactile (touch), auditory (hearing), vestibular (sense of movement), and proprioceptive (body position)” (p. 109). Studies have shown that Sensory Integration Therapy is an effective treatment for young children with autism who experience sensory issues (Marco, Hinkley, Hill & Nagarajan, 2011; Pfeifer, Koenig, Kinnealey, Sheppard & Henderson, 2011; Roley, Bissel & Clark, 2009).

Music Therapy. Recent studies have shown that intervention therapy involving music assists children with autism to develop language skills (Lim, 2010; Wan, Demaine, Zipse, Norton & Schlaug, 2010; Wan & Schlaug, 2010). Music therapy can be conducted in both a private and group settings and may involve: singing, movement, instruments and story telling. Since many children with autism love music, music making “may enhance their ability to focus and interact with others, thereby fostering the development of communication and social skills” (Wan et al., 2010, p.161).

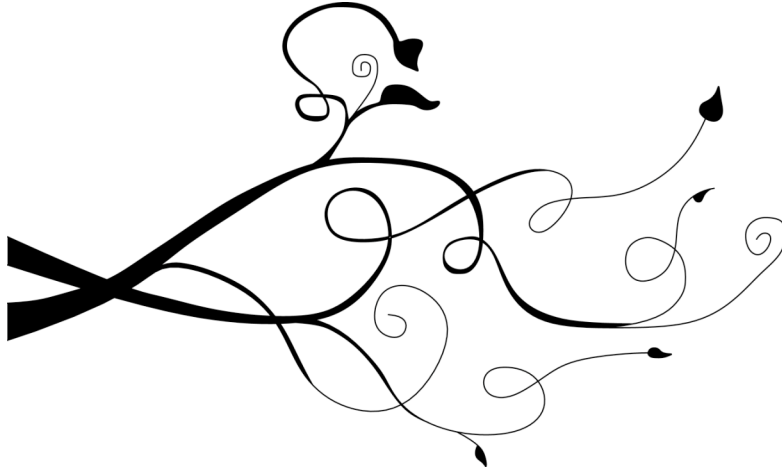


This is important for our journey because...

The child/parent participants in this study will have come in contact with one, some or all of the above therapy interventions. As a teacher-researcher in this study, I have a working understanding of all of the above interventions. I have actively participated in all of these therapies with my son at different times/intervals since his diagnosis and I have also received training in ABA, DIR/Floortime and RDI in clinician

guided workshop settings. All of the above interventions have, in part, influenced the way that I structure and conduct my lessons as well as the manner in which I interact with my students.





Drama in Education

What is Drama in Education?

Drama in education otherwise referred to as classroom drama, teacher-led improvisational drama, creative drama, drama for understanding, role drama, group drama, process drama, drama as a medium for learning, contextual drama and story drama involves “student and teacher in role play, based on a theme, issue, concept, and/or topic working towards some critical crisis or challenge” (Norman, 2002, p. 1).

Drama in education differs from theatre in that there is no script and no audience. Anderson (2004) writes:

[D]rama in education often involves the entire class in improvised roles within an imagined context...For those of us with an image of drama as skits and scripts, the practice of drama in education can be difficult to grasp. To help explain their approach, practitioners of drama in education often point out their emphasis of process over product. In a staged theater production, there is often more of a focus on rehearsal as a means to an end (that end being the performance). In drama in education, the process is the end in itself. The learning emerges out of

the choices and decisions made during the development or improvisation. (p. 282)

Historically researchers have noted the similarity in improvised classroom drama and John Dewey's constructivist philosophy (Bolton, 1985; Rasmussen, 2010) in its experiential form. Bolton (1985) writes that in the 1970's when England was "swing(ing) away from the 'empty pitcher' model of education" (p. 152) into a more child centered new movement in education:

Teachers with a flair for drama thus found themselves as banner carriers for the new education movement and drama was introduced into schools under the shibboleths of "child-centeredness," "activity-method," and "self-expression."...What excited the early progressives about drama was not innovation in terms of curriculum content but the learning process. Children, it was correctly argued, would enjoy learning facts if they were illustrated in this attractively active way. (p. 152)

Today, in the joint field of special needs studies and drama education it is argued that structured teacher-led drama with children on the autism spectrum provides similar unique learning opportunities including "developing purposeful play and sharing in and creating representations in play narratives with others" (Peter, 2003, p. 23). The narrative that the teacher drives in "teacher-in-role" (Peter, 2009) drama is directly related to the development of relationships, patterning, sequencing, problem solving and "more effective participation in a social world" (Peter, 2009, p. 9).

In the field of drama in education, drama is a learning medium (a tool) that promotes problem solving and team building skills among children. It is separate and

apart from performance art (Wagner, 1986). It is classroom based and teacher led, teaching students skills appropriate to the group's needs like listening, cooperating, subject area knowledge or modifying "antisocial behaviour" (Wagner, 1986, p. 57).

Who is Dorothy Heathcote?

The time-honoured techniques of British drama educator Dorothy Heathcote are most often aligned synonymously with the term Drama in Education. Heathcote was a trailblazer for using drama as a medium for learning in the classroom. In the 70's, Betty Jane Wagner (1985a), a former student of Heathcote, wrote a biographical account of the classroom drama heiress in diverse settings that included her work with children of all ages and abilities, including children with developmental disabilities, and adults that ranged from police officers to those with psychiatric disorders who had been institutionalized (Wagner, 1985a). The book is appropriately entitled *Drama as a Learning Medium*. Wagner (1985a) writes:

She does not use children to produce plays. Instead, she uses drama to expand their awareness, to enable them to look at reality through fantasy, to see below the surface of actions to their meaning. She is interested, not in making plays with children, but in, as she terms it, burnishing children through the play. She does this not by heaping more information on them but by enabling them to use what they already know. (p. 21)

Her work is held in the utmost esteem by drama educators and her mode of teacher-led imaginative drama is entirely her own. Bolton (1985) writes that the life and work of Dorothy Heathcote:

represent a Herculean attempt to bring dramatic form back to classroom drama, to redefine the relationship between drama and education, and to recast the role of the teacher...Heathcote understands that all artists (and therefore all children for she treats them as fellow artists) must look outward before they can look inward. Neither art nor education are about subjectivity. She does not automatically offer children freedom to express themselves, believing that the right to express oneself must be earned. It is not given. (p.154)

In role, Heathcote would have her students become participants in the imaginary world that she had them believe. Her term for this was “The One Big Lie” (Wagner, 1985a, p. 67) and it is the cement that holds together any classroom drama. Wagner (1985a) writes of a classroom episode whereby a six-year-old boy is reluctant to believe in the imaginary circumstances of the drama:

Heathcote concentrated on him. “I’m going to bring out a big horse now; do you think you’ll be able to believe it?” She went out of the room and came back with her hands on reins that came from a horse’s head as far above hers as an ordinary horse’s head would be above the heads of those six-year-olds...No good though. The boy said scornfully, “There’s no horse there.” Then she appealed to the group to help him see it as she held firmly onto the reins and reached up to pat the horse’s neck. “What a pity we can’t get on with the play because you don’t see my horse,” she shrugged. (p. 67)

In the end, on Heathcote’s instruction, the other six-year-olds become the teachers and describe the horse to the little boy and finally bring him around to not only believing in the horse but being the one to lead the horse by the reins in the ensuing drama.

The children moving seamlessly from a position of apprentice to mentor in the drama has been coined Heathcote's "Mantle of an Expert" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1994; Heathcote & Herbert, 1985; Wagner, 1985a; Wagner, 1985b). Heathcote and Herbert (1985) write:

When the mantle of the expert is used in drama, the teacher assumes a fictional role which places the student in a position of being "the one who knows" or the expert in a particular branch of human knowledge...A sociological/anthropological system of education, mantle of the expert enables teaching and learning at all levels of the curriculum...As a system of teaching it derives its syllabus and its structure from the matrix of society. Thus it is socially based, concentrating on groups of people rather than on the individual. Instead of confronting children with their own developing state of social emotional growth, these energies are deflected in work-based tasks related to the problems of the group. Mantle of the expert can also be seen as a communication system that allows learning to take place simultaneously at conceptual, personal, and social levels. (p. 173)

This approach to teaching and learning can be linked to educational theorist Paulo Freire (1970/2007) who in the 70's denounced the ethos of "banking" a child's education or stuffing a child full of information that the educator deemed appropriate knowledge for the child. He saw the child as the oppressed and the teacher as the oppressor. He believed in a liberated education where the captives become free to learn what they yearn to know. Freire (1970/2007) writes:

We must realize that the aspirations, the motives, and the objectives implicit in the meaningful thematics are *human* aspirations, motives and objectives. They do not exist “out there” somewhere, as static entities; *they are occurring*. They are historical as human beings themselves...Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character. (p. 107)

It's a learning that happens through doing, as Dewey (1938/1997) would argue is the only education worth receiving, but it is also an education based on the teacher walking alongside the student, positioning the student in a position of power and ultimately handing over the reins to his/her own education.



This is important for our journey because...

I find the work of Dorothy Heathcote and Paulo Freire immensely inspiring and refreshingly similar in a lot of ways. What is important to note is that they are both incredibly determined to give students what they yearn. They understand that teachers are learners and our students are teachers and that education is an organic process that begins with situated-learning and ends wherever the students take us. It is very much my philosophy of teaching. It is guided sometimes by us and sometimes by the students. We walk together towards a common goal of the highest level of learning; the learning that takes place within ourselves.

What about Inclusion?

Colette Conroy (2009) argues in her survey of the history of disability arts in the United Kingdom that community based theatre programs dedicated to the disabled, while

in themselves serve as a kind of inclusion into the arts, are also a topic of controversy.

She writes:

Disability arts are intrinsically political...Disability is a framing device – a way of framing bodies and people. In one sense it is an old-fashioned humanist model. It tries to find that which we all share and value and it has all the advantages that that offers. (p. 11)

And while, in her paper, Conroy is speaking of adult theatre groups for the disabled, and not drama classes taught to children on the autism spectrum, the implication that my program (in choosing to group children with ASD in order to teach imaginative play skills in a special education setting) might too be considered intrinsically political, is a valuable point worth exploring here.

There are a number of books on the market today that serve as primers on how to teach imaginative play skills and/or drama to children on the autism spectrum. These texts have been written by teachers and therapists who have experience working with children living with an ASD (Beyer & Gammeltoft, 1998; Conn, 2007; Gammeltoft & Nordenhof, 2007; Levine & Chedd, 2007; Moor, 2002; Nelson, 2010; Schneider, 2007; Sherratt & Peter, 2002; Wolf, 2005; Wolfberg, 2009).

Out of the ten books reviewed for the purpose of this study: three encourage teaching imaginative play skills through adult facilitation, either one-on-one or in small groups of two or three (Beyer & Gammeltoft, 1998; Gammeltoft & Nordenhof, 2007; Nelson, 2010); one introduces an integrated (inclusive) play group approach (Wolfberg, 2009) and five encourage the development of special education groups dedicated

exclusively to teaching drama to children on the autism spectrum (Conn, 2007; Levine & Chedd, 2007; Schneider, 2007; Sherratt & Peter, 2002; Wolf, 2005).

Out of the five books that present curriculums for teaching exclusive drama programs geared towards children on the spectrum, one mentions the possible inclusion of neurotypical peers or “guest actors” (Schneider, 2007, p. 25), four mention transferability of lessons into an inclusive classroom setting (Conn, 2007; Levine & Chedd, 2007; Schneider, 2007; Wolf, 2005) and one made no mention of inclusion at all (Sherratt & Peter, 2002).

Important to garner from this diverse body of popular literature is that all the authors stressed the importance of a structured setting, planning lessons based on developmental ability and the need for a progressive curriculum of topics that moves in a systematic manner from simple imitation to more complex imaginative activities (Beyer & Gammeltoft, 1998; Conn, 2007; Gammeltoft & Nordenhof, 2007; Levine & Chedd, 2007; Moor, 2002; Nelson, 2010; Schneider, 2007; Sherratt & Peter, 2002; Wolf, 2005; Wolfberg, 2009).

The universal argument to support students with autism learning subject material in an inclusive environment is that students with autism will learn skills through observing their typical peers and conversely their classmates will learn acceptance and ways of better communicating with children who have an ASD in their classroom (Eldar, Talmor, Wolf-Zukerman, 2010). This philosophy does not come without its pitfalls however, namely the apprehension some teachers have in their ability to be positive participants in the education of a child with an ASD (Idol, 2006). There is also the camp that believes that children with ASD should be segregated in special education classes for

the sole purpose of receiving the education they require in order to target their deficits. This approach is being referred to as “best practice” by some parent advocacy groups (Lynch & Irvine, 2009) and on the opposite side of the fence it is considered to be an alarming trend in our school systems (Marks, 2007).

And while this researcher is a firm believer in full inclusion in not only classroom settings but recreational programs as well, the argument to support students with autism learning imaginative play skills and drama, at least in the beginning stages, in a special education environment is that children with autism learn skills differently than their typical peers and require tasks to be broken down into manageable steps. This need requires specialized teaching in a structured environment that is strategic and developmentally appropriate. Conn (2007) writes,

It is important to take a developmental perspective in working with autism. To anyone who has worked in this area, it is apparent that children with autism can and do develop. As a teacher and therapist, I have known many children who, though lacking in most areas of social communication when young, have nevertheless gone on to develop skills in verbal communication, sociability, curiosity and playfulness. (p. xxvii)

And in writing about the importance for specialized programs for children with ASD, Sherratt and Peter (2002) write that “without intervention, impairments experienced by children with autism in communication, social interaction and flexible thinking will undermine their real potential play competence and subsequent development” (p. 5).

However, if the literature states, children on the autism spectrum learn through imitation and in structured settings, then why not just put children with ASD in a pretend-

play group with peers who excel at pretend-play? Why segregate and create specific programming for children with ASD in this area when as parents we campaign for inclusion in all other aspects of our children's lives including school, sports, camps and birthday parties? Don't we *want* our children to be included? Why are we grouping them and "segregating" them from their typically developing peers?

In a lecture that I attended delivered by the world-renowned developmental pediatrician and autism specialist, Dr. Richard Solomon, he lamented that while his P.L.A.Y. Project® has enjoyed huge successes, nothing is harder than the process that begins it all. What he asks parents to do is the hardest thing in the world: look into their child's eyes and *really* see where their child is at in his development. He then quoted the words of his late mentor Dr. Stanley Greenspan, "we have to meet children where they *are* and take them where they need to go." While he said this he was cupping his hands and lifting them upward.

Autism and Play

According to Pamela J. Wolfberg (2009), a leader in the field of play and imagination in children with autism, archaeological findings support the notion that play has existed since the beginning of time and that "almost every culture provided toys for play throughout history. As early as the classical period in Western civilization, humans have struggled to understand play and its meaning for society" (p. 27).

In the 1920's Sigmund Freud was the first to suggest that play may lead to treatment of certain childhood disorders (Wolfberg, 2009, p. 31). In the 1960's and 1970's Vygotsky and Piaget conceptualized play as "social activity in which children construct shared meanings and transform their understanding of the skills, values, and

knowledge inherent to their culture” (Wolfberg, 2009, p. 32) and that play in early childhood led to social competence, cognition, memory and abstract thought (Wolfberg, 2009).

Sherratt and Peter (2006) leaders in the field of dramatic play and children with autism state that “children with autism tend not to learn ‘by osmosis’, simply through exposure to situations in their environment; their inability to perceive meaning mitigates against purposeful involvement, both in the real world and in make-believe” (p. 5).

Sherratt and Peter (2006) believe that Vygotsky’s theory that children learn appropriate cultural skills that include turn-taking and conversational skills is not something that children with autism are able to attain without the intervention of adults or peers. It is a notion that is also held by Solomon (2011), Greenspan and Wieder (2006) and Gutstein (2009) and is the impetus behind The P.L.A.Y. Project, DIR/Floortime and Relationship Development Intervention (RDI).

What is the Purpose of this Study?

The purpose of this study is to tell a three-part story of a parent/teacher/researcher. The story will be informed by my personal experiences with having a son on the autism spectrum as well as my journey to develop a drama course to specifically meet the needs of children with ASD. My story has three chapters: “I am a Parent”, “I am a Teacher” and “I am a Researcher.” In these three chapters I share how children with autism learn differently from other children and why a program like mine is so integral for children who have difficulty with perspective taking and making friends. I hope my work helps open a channel in the field of dramatic play and autism that will serve other children in communities far away from my own and inspire more educators to do what I have done,

start programs for children with autism, proactively helping them in their efforts to learn socialization and play skills through drama or any other medium for that matter.

This type of research/storytelling, whereby a researcher recounts a personal and professional journey, is known as autoethnography. Autoethnography is a branch of qualitative research. It contains rich details of individuals, actions and settings, as well as descriptions of the writer's thoughts, in order for the reader to experience the researcher's journey as realistically as possible. This mode of research will afford readers, who do not live with autism, the opportunity to experience it through my eyes.

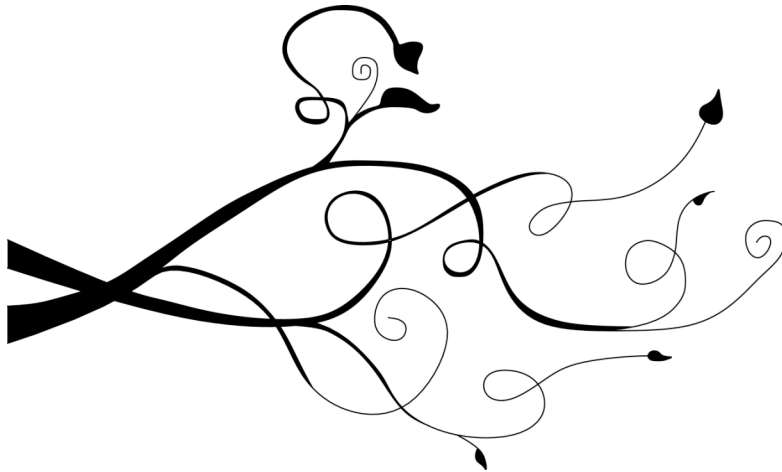
In this study I design a teacher-led imaginative drama course intended to meet the specific needs of children on the autism spectrum (using picture boards and breaking down tasks, establishing routines and using a wealth of costumes and props, etc.). I also recount a personal and professional one-year journey of creating and implementing a new drama program designed for children ages 5 – 10 (with age-division). A focus is on the children's reactions to my lessons in the final ten-week session of the school year, their parent's written comments on an observation form created to evaluate the program and my discoveries as a parent/teacher/researcher during that time frame. In my parent survey I was specifically wanting to learn what parents thought was valuable about the program and what needed improvement because their input would help me grow as an educator and therefore help me to better serve children with autism in the drama classroom.

Why this Study?

Play is “so vital in children's social development” (Gommeltoft & Nordenhoff, 2007, p. 7) and yet has “such a low priority in working with children with autism” (p. 7).

Just recently The P.L.A.Y. Project spearheaded by Dr. Solomon (2011) has begun a large-scale government funded study on the effectiveness of the organization's play-based therapy on children with autism spectrum disorder. To date, only the Lovaas (1987) study has enjoyed acclamation from the scientific community, resulting in widespread government funding to ABA therapies nation wide. As mentioned by Dr. Solomon in a recent autism conference, play therapy is not something that children typically receive funding for in North America, if anywhere. Not enough research has been done. Not enough studies such as this one have been conducted.





Part II: Methodology

This is not a traditional qualitative research study. It is one deeply rooted in interpretive design, branched from arts-based educational research and bloomed as a result of the gardener, whose job it is to care for the seeds planted within her fenced property. This chapter describes the various seeds brought to fruition by the gardener and the seeds that were left in her satchel for another planting year. All seeds are acknowledged for the part they have played and will one day play in the gardener's plan for her garden. Where weeds are present the gardener shovels deep to pull them from the root. Gardens are forever popping weeds and grow in the direction of the sun.

Autoethnography

In the first ever journal article written about autism entitled "Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact," Dr. Leo Kanner (1943) writes,

Since 1938, there have come to our attention a number of children whose condition differs so markedly and uniquely from anything reported so far, that each case merits – and, I hope, will eventually receive – a detailed consideration of its fascinating peculiarities. (p. 217)

At that time Kanner wrote a comprehensive paper relaying in detail the symptoms of 11 young children in his care as a physician. Over half a century later his paper reads like a science fiction novel with all the sparks and controversy that are inherent in a great work of art. In particular, his historical implication that the children may have contacted this bizarre condition as a result of cold parents with bad marriages being thrown into his concluding statements is a cliffhanger even by scientific standards. It's the first ever paper written about this puzzling disorder; it's been quoted by scientists around the world; it was written by the "Father of Autism" himself and, while it has never been defined as such, it reads like a well-appointed autoethnography. Kanner (1943) writes,

Donald was brought for another check-up in April 1941...Once inside, he did not even glance at the three physicians present (two of whom he well remembered from his previous visit) but immediately made for the desk and handled papers and books...He then helped himself to pencil and paper and wrote and drew pages and pages full of letters of the alphabet and a few simple designs. He arranged the letters in two or three lines, reading them in vertical rather than horizontal succession, and was very much pleased with the result...Later he said, "Where is my mother?"

"Why do you want her?" he was asked.

"I want to hug her around the neck."

He used pronouns adequately and his sentences were grammatically correct. The major part of his "conversation" consisted of questions of an obsessive nature...When asked to subtract 4 from 10, he answered: "I'll draw a hexagon." He was still extremely autistic. (p. 222)

Much has happened in the world of research since Kanner's study was first published in the 1940's. Science and art continue to form a separation, like oil and water, and yet today a paper with no citations, containing dialogue and the inner thoughts of the scientist conducting the study would find better company on a daytime soap opera than in a scientific or humanities journal.

No matter how outdated Kanner's statements are that cold parents and "abysmal" marriages would lead to children developing autism, one has to admire his choice to tell the story of his research in the form of first-person narration, using his own practitioner-researcher perspective as the lens to the children. We are painted a picture of the children, their mood, the environment and even their parents whose marriages were "dismal failures" (p. 250) in a way that otherwise would have been impossible to convey.

So what is Autoethnography? Autoethnography is defined as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). The story you are about to read "intentionally combine(s) fictional and ethnographic scenes" (Ellis, 2004, p. xx) and is an example of an autoethnographic study. In discussing personal, you will hear "mother", "son", "husband"; in discussing cultural you will hear "Oprah" and "Jenny McCarthy"², in discussing social you will hear "community", "education" and "drama"; and in discussing political you will hear "autistic", "recovered" and "indistinguishable."

These sets of themes as well as others that will surface throughout this work will *not* be highlighted *or* subtitled like you may find in a traditional qualitative study³ or a

² Jenny McCarthy (2007, 2008) was interviewed by Oprah when promoting her books on Autism.

³ Creswell (2007) describes qualitative design in his book *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. This study does not follow any of his recognized designs.

Brechtian⁴ inspired work; instead these interconnected themes will be uncovered from time to time like buried pebbles on the stone laden path that paves this journey.

Carolyn Ellis (2004) explains, in her novel *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel About Autoethnography*, what characterizes an autoethnographic work: “Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection portrayed in dialogue, scenes, characterization, and plot. Thus autoethnography claims the conventions of literary writing (p. xix).”

I have carefully chosen this mode of inquiry to frame my final thesis project in education because I feel compelled as a parent/teacher/researcher to share my ongoing personal and professional journey of introspection and discovery through autism and drama education. I believe this journey is an important one and I want to walk my readers through it in a way that is inviting and inclusive to all. Muncey (2010) writes: “Autoethnographies are characterized by artistically constructed pieces of ‘text’ that evoke the imagination and increase the reader’s understanding” (p. 8).

This is a project that interconnects personal experience with scholarly knowledge. A journey through both the autism and the imagination/play literature and consequent theory in motion would be difficult to recount in a traditional research design without missing out on the pieces of the journey that bring home true enlightenment.

I hope this arts-based educational research project (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008) will find a broad audience and speak to not only stakeholders in the field of education but also parents and autism advocates, as well as therapists and clinicians working with children on the autism spectrum. Eisner (2004) writes:

⁴ Bertolt Brecht wrote postrealistic drama that “was concerned with demonstration rather than empathy, with criticism not catharsis. The actor displays the character and demonstrates the incidents” (Harrop & Epstein, 2000, p. 312).

After all, the aim of research is not to advance the careers of researchers but to make a difference in the lives of students. That aspiration is not only realized by sharing conclusions about matters of fact, but by changing perspectives on how we see and interpret the world. Arts-based educational research can contribute significantly to a re-visioning of education. That contribution could be, in the long run, its most important. (p. 26)

I anticipate this work will in the end benefit who Dr. Eisner points out *should* be served through research, and that is students. While the personal journey I take in the beginning steps of this story may not seem to provide any immediate benefit for students, it lays the groundwork for the path I end up traveling and is an important part of the overall process.

Ellis (2004) writes that one of the most powerful outcomes of autoethnography is the “move toward social change” (p. 254). She writes:

Increased self-understanding sometimes can provide a quicker and more successful route to social change than changing laws or other macropolitical structures, or espousing general cultural political theories. Stories that invite me into the lives of activists – to feel what they feel, see what they see, and do what they do – stimulate me to want to be involved in movements I care about. (p.254)

And so for purposes of understanding, I feel it is important to draw attention to these two terms and invite the reader to take a moment to see them as I see them:

Autism

Autoethnography

Both words are derived from the Greek ‘Αυτος’ meaning ‘self’ (Siff Exkorn, 2006, p.6). The former has a negative connotation in our society as a “silent, withdrawn head-banger” (Notbohm, 2005, p. 1). The later is struggling to be seen as a legitimate mode of research having been called by some “too subjective or too indulgent” (Muncey, 2010, p. 3). This study attempts to unite the two misunderstood twins, using the one to envelop the other in this introspective journey as parent/educator/researcher.

While some of the events recorded in these pages occurred as true-to-life as they are portrayed, it is important to note that names, dates, places and events have been altered and in some instances composite characters have been introduced in order to protect individual identities while also allowing for a more pleasurable reading experience. As Ellis (2004) explains: “Composite characters work in a long, personal text where you want to compress time and don’t want to introduce all the participants” (p. 175).

Humor is employed often in this text as a deliberate literary device and as an inherent part of the “life rhythm” (Langer, 1985, p. 456) but it is not meant to detract from the serious issue at hand. According to the Society for Research in Child Development, “rates for autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are now estimated at about 1 in 110 children in the U.S.” (Lord & Bishop, 2010, p. 1). Autism Speaks Canada states on it’s website that 1:70 boys in Canada have been diagnosed with ASD and that autism “is more prevalent than pediatric cancer, AIDS and diabetes combined” (www.autismspeaks.ca). Autism Society Canada’s website states “autism is the most common neurological disorder affecting children and one of the most common developmental disabilities affecting Canadians in general” (www.autismsocietycanada.ca).

The personal purpose of this study is to take a walk through the thorny trail of autism and find a crossing by a brook somewhere quiet where I might have an opportunity to search in my own pockets for a contribution to the autism puzzle. What may I offer as a parent/teacher/researcher to the literature? What might others learn from my experiences?

This is a story of a drama educator who finds out she has a child on the autism spectrum. She sets off on a road, while at first not even knowing it, which leads to a new way of combining what she knows about drama education and what she has now learned about this puzzling disorder called autism. She becomes aware of a community of families who want much the same thing she wants for her child, to play with peers. Her discovery leads to a terrifying personal and professional leap of faith to unite families like hers with a common purpose of teaching the children to play imaginatively with each other.

Autoethnographic texts are lately gaining great interest from scholars for “help(ing) transform researchers and readers (listeners) in the process” (Chang, p.53), however, there are certain pitfalls that Chang (2008) warns all autoethnographers should avoid including:

“(1) excessive focus on self in isolation from others; (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and (5) inappropriate application of the label “autoethnography.” (p. 54)

I intend on laying the groundwork for a data-inspired autoethnographic novel that is honest in my portrayal of personal and professional experiences. Chang (2008) writes:

Teacher research pieces reveal not only the authors' teaching practices but also the cultural assumptions they bring to self-examination. As teachers face increasing cultural diversity in the classroom, their interest in using self-narratives as cultural texts to analyze themselves and others will only grow. (p. 38)

I genuinely hope this proves to be the case in this autoethnographic study as I embark on an uncharted journey to uncovering the power of drama in education.

Description of the Program

My classes are taught at a local theatre school for children referred to in this study as the "Theatre School." The program description in the school's brochure is one that I wrote. It states:

This year The Theatre School is excited to offer two new class selections that are designed to meet the specific needs of children on the autism spectrum. Your children will laugh, learn and rejoice in the power of dramatic play. Seasoned drama educator and author Demetra Hajidiacos will take your children on a magical journey they won't soon forget! Dress-up, puppets, crafts, songs and storytelling will nurture creativity and assist children in developing social skills. Children currently enrolled in an intensive intervention program such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) and Developmental, Individual Difference, Relationship-based therapy (DIR/Floortime) will benefit most from these classes. Weekly lesson plans will

go home with families and may be shared with consultants, tutors, therapists and other caregivers to continue the fun at home!

These courses were created with the intention of using teacher-led improvisational drama to teach imaginative play skills to children on the autism spectrum. Specifically, I want to know what children and parents liked about the program and what parents feel needs improvement. Parents surveyed are those whose children participated in term three of the Theatre School's pilot year of the program, which in this study will be referred to as "The Imagination Room: Drama for Children on the Autism Spectrum". As this study is an autoethnographic one, my personal experiences will predate the actual 10-week study and will penetrate the narrative throughout.

The lesson plans that I implement in the Imagination Room program employ Heathcote's "Mantle of an Expert" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1994; Heathcote & Herbert, 1985; Wagner, 1985a, 1985b) approach, explained in Part I of this paper. The program also implements teaching techniques adapted from the three main modes of autism intervention currently being offered in our city: ABA, RDI and DIR/Floortime, also explained in detail in Part I of this paper. The theme of the 10-week term was "Oh the places we'll go and the people we'll meet" inspired by the Dr. Seuss (1990) classic *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*. Ten structured one-hour lessons all closely followed the same format:

1. The children entered the room and sat in a circle that was clearly marked by green painter's tape on the floor.
2. The children selected a puppet from the centre of the circle.

3. The children followed my lead to warm up the puppets' voices: we sang the letter "a" in a high and low register and said words and phrases like "hello" and "I'm so glad you came today" in a high and low register.

4. We sang our Hello Song:

Hello "Student A's name"

Hello "Student B's name"

Hello "Student C's name"

We're glad you came today.

We repeated the refrain until everyone's name had been sung.

5. We then reviewed the picture lesson board for the class. A student volunteer would help me introduce the lesson. The student was given a long finger-pointer and asked to stand on an "X" marked on the carpet in green tape beside the white board (a portable white board that I would prop on a chair at the front of the class). The student read the lesson heading and pointed to each picture saying what he/she saw. I would then thank the student for his/her help and would fill in the other pertinent information about the lesson. Below is the exact lesson board used in Week 9: The Jungle. For all 10 lesson boards used in this 10-week course please see Appendix D: Photographs of Picture Lesson Boards.

Week 9: The Jungle



6. We then proceeded to pretend! We visited a bee farm, went to a birthday party, explored the jungle etc). Wearing a headset microphone (so the children knew to look and listen to me and not be distracted by smaller, less important sounds) I led the children through and imaginative tale always asking for their help and saying things like: “what’s that over there?” or “where do you think we should go next?” etc. The important thing to note here is that I needed to take one suggestion, praise that student and go with that idea even though other students may have had several other ideas. I tried to give equal opportunity to students by making sure all students were given an opportunity to contribute to the story somewhere even if I had to prompt a response from less verbal children by giving two options by giving two word options like: “pizza or spaghetti?”. All students were praised for contributions made, waiting their turn and going with a peer’s contribution

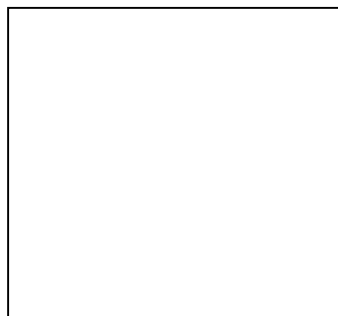
instead of their own. Turn-taking therefore became a hidden curriculum of the program and was integrated into all aspects of the lessons.

7. At the end of the dramatic component of the lesson, students completed a craft that exemplified their favourite part of the journey. The craft was more of a reflective journal activity. I thought it more appropriate to call it a “craft”. Students were given colourful markers, pencil crayons, crayons and stickers to decorate their craft. When students completed their craft they were asked to raise their hand and the teaching assistant would give them a sticker. Students with stickers, indicating that they were finished, were allowed to move into the circle where 2 or 3 games were set up for the children to play with. When all the students had completed their crafts I would sing “Toys, away, toys away, it’s time to put the toys away.” Students would then clean up and sit in the circle. Below is an exact replica of the weekly craft. For a full size version please see Appendix H: Weekly Craft.

Name: _____

Today, my favourite part of drama class was when:

Here's what it looked like:



8. The children then all took turns sitting on the teacher's chair at the head of the circle and presented their craft. As a group we then gave that student a "quiet hooray" in lieu of applause as some of the students had sensory issues and did not like loud noises.
9. After each student had an opportunity to present his/her craft, our teaching assistant would read a story that tied into the lesson's theme.
10. We then sang our goodbye song with our puppet friends:

The more we get together, together, together
The more we get together the happier we'll be.
With "Student A's name" and "Student B's name" and
"Student C's name" and "Student D's name."

We repeated the refrain until everyone's name had been sung.
11. Students then picked a fun treat from the treat box (a plastic container filled with party favors including stickers, toys , games and an organic lollipop).
12. One by one I then excused each student and gave them a high five at the door before turning them over to a parent or guardian waiting in the hallway outside the classroom.
13. At the end of each week an email was sent home to parents outlining the lesson and inviting parents to share my lesson ideas with therapists, tutors and respite workers working with their child at home. Please see Appendix F: Weekly Parent Emails for a complete list of emails from the 10-week session.

Recruitment of Participants

Other than myself, the teacher-researcher, there are two groups of participants in this study whose thoughts and actions inform my autoethnographic journey. The first group is the children that I teach and the second group is their parents. All participants are volunteers. None have been compensated for their participation in the study. A small gift card was given to the participants as a show of thanks for participation in the study.

The children in the study were registered in my Imagination Room program at the Theatre School. Participation in the study was not a prerequisite for children being registered in the program.

Parents were invited to participate in the study through a verbal and written invitation presented to them by my teaching assistant in the Theatre School lobby. They agreed to participate in the study via written informed consent. Please see Appendix B: Parent/Child Consent Form.

Parents of the children gave permission for their children to participate in the study via written informed consent (please see appendices for Parent/Child Consent Form). In addition to their parents' consent to have them participate, my students voiced their consent verbally to me.

Description of Participants

The children in this study range in age from 5 – 10 years old. There is a mix of male and female students with a predominate male population. The children have a formal diagnosis of either: autism, autism spectrum disorder or Asperger's disorder. The children range from highly verbal to non-verbal.

There were two classes. One class was for children aged 5 – 7 years old and the other was for children aged 8 – 10 years old. Out of the 22 children registered in both classes, 19 children participated in the study. That's a participation rate of 86%. There were 16 boys and 3 girls in the study. The mean age of the boys in the study was 6.75 years. The mean age of the girls in the study was 7 years.

Out of the 19 children that participated in the study, 16 were present on the last day of classes when parents were asked to observe a lesson and provide feedback on both the lesson plan and the program as a whole. Therefore 15 parents filled out the "Parent Observation Form" on that day. One mother filled out a form for both of her children and my husband filled out a form for our child. Out of the families surveyed (one survey per family), the mean number of courses the children had taken with me was 2.3.

As the parent/teacher/researcher in this study I have four years of reading, learning and teaching my son how to play as my credentials. I am a drama educator, a parent of two children (one who is not on the autism spectrum), a published author and former newspaper journalist. I have taught theatre and drama for over a decade to children from the ages of 3 – 17 and adults from the ages of 18 – 65. In addition to my Bachelor of Education degree, I have an Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree in theater directing and have directed and assistant directed over 25 productions in my career. I have also reviewed theatre professionally for three of the major media outlets in our city. I have taught in the private and public sector including the two largest private theatre schools in our city and the city's only public performing arts high school where I headed the theatre department and taught Improv, Drama, Musical Theatre, Theatre Production and the sole International Baccalaureate Theatre Arts program in the province. I have

also written study guides for teachers and taught a course entitled “Drama in Education” designed for pre-service teachers.

Description of Setting

Aside from various everyday settings that I frequent in the story, my classes all take place in the same studio in the Theatre School, a local theatre school for children. The non-descript room has three solid surface walls and one wall of windows overlooking the train tracks. By the windows there are two office tables covered in pink tablecloths that are used for craft time. There is a circle marked in green tape on the floor. At the front of the circle leaning on a chair is the picture lesson board.

Parents of the children are asked to wait in the lobby downstairs during class. The lobby is a spacious waiting area surrounded by large windows. At the end of class parents wait outside the studio in a narrow hallway, waiting for their children to be dismissed one by one by the teacher.

The narrator lives in a manicured suburban neighborhood mainly inhabited by upper-middle class families and retired couples somewhere in the United States. There are more doctors on her block than there are in the local emergency room at any given time and most children in the neighborhood are bussed out to private schools at 8 a.m. sharp.

Data Collection

There are three data sources in this study: my personal journal, my teaching journal and the Parent Observation Form. In the case of my personal journal I recorded, in pen, my thoughts and feelings throughout this seven-year process (since the birth of

my son). In the case of my teaching journal I recorded, in pen, classroom observations throughout this ten-week process.

Appendix C: Parent Observation Form, contains the form used in the study. The form comprised of open-ended questions sought to uncover parents' perceptions of the class they observed (Class #10 – the last class of the ten-week session) and the program as a whole. The form was distributed and collected by my teaching assistant on the last class. It took parents approximately 15 – 20 minutes to complete. I remained in the lobby during that time. Parents had read the course description (distributed via email) prior to the commencement of the course, as well as read weekly emails that summarized my lesson plans.

The form was comprised of four close-ended questions and four open-ended questions. The close ended questions asked gender, age, number of courses taken with the instructor and whether parents would recommend the course to other families who have children on the autism spectrum. The open-ended questions asked parents to list three things they liked about the lesson and the program as a whole as well as three things the parents felt needed improvement in the lesson and the program as a whole. The form asked the questions that I as the parent/teacher/researcher wanted answered for my own personal development as a teacher in this program. I was not looking for parents to reveal improvements in their child's pretend play skills. That was not the intent of this study.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the three data sources in this study (my personal journal, my teaching journal and the Parent Observation Form) without any preconceived outcomes in mind. I

was, however, looking to discover what lesson ideas worked and did not work and what parents thought was useful and not useful about the program.

In analyzing both my personal and teaching journal I used thematic analysis to search for common themes in units of text, and compared them to one another. To give a specific example, in the story I talk about the discovery that the children sat in a circle when I put a green line on the floor outlining the circle. It was discovered when looking through my teaching journal that when students were visually guided by an outline of green tape on the floor: “stand behind the green line, stand on the green line etc.” students were more apt to follow my instructions. Using thematic analysis I also uncovered several such properties in my journals and those discoveries penetrate my narrative throughout.

In analyzing the Parent Observation Forms, I again used thematic analysis and employed a “coding paradigm or logic diagram (i.e., a visual model) in which the researcher identifies a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 67). I read carefully for emerging themes (in this case similar and repeated comments) that the parents had about the program: both positive and negative. These comments are revealed in Table 1 to Table 4 presented on pages 50 to 53 as well as in Chapter 3 of the story under the heading “Parents Speak Out about the Imagination Room.”

My reflections of the parents’ comments have affected my decisions in regards to program planning for the upcoming year. In response to comments such as students needing more one-on one time and parents needing feedback on student progress I have reflected and created an Individual Background Information Form (Appendix G) to help guide this conversation. Other comments, both positive and constructive, penetrate the

discussion found in Chapter 3 of the story under the heading “Conclusion and Recommendations for the Future.”

The data collated from the parent responses was coded as outlined in the tables below. The codes were based on central themes that were emerging from the parent responses and were consistent throughout both positive and constructive comments. The 11 codes used (found on the left hand of the table) were also consistent with the initial intent of the research (questions outlined in the Parent Observation Form). Each individual response on the forms was placed in the table under the code that most accurately reflected the message the parent was trying to convey about the class and program as a whole. Organizing the data in this way, makes it is easy to identify the most important themes from the parent responses. The data could then be summarized reflecting the basic themes of the coding.

The information in each code was then reflected upon. The positive responses regarding the lesson contained the most responses and several categories appeared to be important, including social interaction, inclusion, engagement, skill acquisition, emotional response, and organization of the lesson. However, the positive responses relating to the program as a whole were more homogenous amongst the categories with no specific categories appearing more important than the others. In the constructive comments, organization of and variety in the lesson were most commented on. For the program as a whole, variety was the most heavily commented on category.

Analysis and Interpretation of Survey Data

From the survey data, the parents focused mainly on the teacher’s ability to address the core deficits of autism, which one can surmise is the most important quality

of a program that is offered for children on the autism spectrum. The teacher's ability to address these core deficits received numerous positive responses, specifically when parents observed the individual lesson. The positive responses support the initial intent of creating this program, to address the individualized needs of children on the autism spectrum.

The constructive responses focus on the class structure: organization and variety of the activities themselves. There did not appear to be any serious concerns, and the suggestions were aimed at improvement rather than overt criticisms of the lesson or program. The positive responses in general outweighed the constructive comments, especially with regards to the teacher's ability to address the core deficits of autism.

Table 1

Thematic Summary of Parents' Positive Comments Regarding Lessons

Category	Characteristic Responses
The Teacher	<p>"Demetra is very positive."</p> <p>"The teacher really engaged the kids."</p>
Social interaction	<p>"Student participation/input."</p> <p>"Social interaction."</p> <p>"Gives (child) a chance to interact with children...who see the world similarly to her."</p> <p>"Sharing." (X 2)</p> <p>"It was interactive."</p> <p>"Got him engaged with others, even if for a short time."</p> <p>"The interaction."</p> <p>"Great connection of parent/child."</p> <p>"My child was engaged for a whole hour."</p>
Inclusion	<p>"Participation of family members."</p> <p>"All children are treated "normal" unlike school."</p> <p>"Everyone is given a chance to shine."</p>
Communication	"Public speaking."
Skill acquisition	<p>"Focuses on a skill that our kids almost universally need help with (imagination)."</p> <p>"Got him using his imagination."</p> <p>"Helped him with the idea of "going with the flow" when small changes were made."</p> <p>"Boat ride-life jackets- absolute rule in our house."</p> <p>"Children learn to use imagination."</p> <p>"Increase imagination."</p> <p>"Increased ability to sit in circle on floor."</p> <p>"Using imagination."</p>
Sensory adaptation	"Quiet hoorays - (excitement without noise)."
Emotional response	<p>"Fun."</p> <p>"Craft time."</p> <p>"Class/teachers sensitive and responsive to individual kid's needs despite having so many children in one class."</p> <p>"Fishing- super fun and easy to relate to."</p> <p>"My child loved it."</p>
Organization	<p>"The structure of each activity, so the children know what to expect."</p> <p>"Active, it's packed into one hour."</p> <p>"It is structured."</p> <p>"Relevant and fun topic."</p> <p>"Craft, story."</p>
Variety	"The variety of activities."
Creativity	<p>"Very creative, the craft portion of each session."</p> <p>"It was creative."</p> <p>"Fishing, liked the fishing rods."</p>

Table 2

Thematic Summary of Parents' Constructive Comments Regarding Lessons

Category	Characteristic Responses
The Teacher	"More one on one attention for some."
Communication	"More focus on quieter children, not just those yelling out. But remind as well as encouraging quiet ones."
Skill acquisition	"Turn taking opportunities."
Sensory adaptation	"Noise level (minor)."
Organization	"Sibling participation somewhat intrusive." "Organization." "Maybe a bit more time for craft."
Increased Dramatic Play and Movement	"More pretend play (x2)." "More role play." "Physical movement." "More exercises -puppets, etc, some lost interest."
Miscellaneous	"Umm... nothing."

Table 3

Thematic Summary of Parents' Positive Comments Regarding the Program

Category	Characteristic Responses
The Teacher	<p>“Demetra really "gets it" because she lives it.”</p> <p>“The presenter/teacher.”</p>
Social interaction	<p>“Great group dynamics.”</p> <p>“Helped with interacting with a group.”</p>
Communication	<p>“Helped with talking in front of groups.”</p>
Skill acquisition	<p>“Developed his communication skills.”</p> <p>“Developed his imagination skills.”</p>
Sensory adaptation	<p>“Excitement without noise.”</p>
Emotional response	<p>“(Child) always looked forward to class.”</p> <p>“She loves it and has learned communication.”</p> <p>“My child loved it.”</p>
Organization	<p>“I like the flow of the class.”</p> <p>“I like the time spent singing.”</p> <p>“Play time with kids together.”</p> <p>“The structured lesson helped reinforce learning.”</p>
Variety	<p>“The different themes and topics.”</p> <p>“The diversity of children.”</p> <p>“Lots of story time.”</p> <p>“Crafts.”</p>
Uniqueness	<p>“There is nothing else like it.”</p>

Table 4

Thematic Summary of Parents' Constructive Comments Regarding the Program

Category	Characteristic Responses
The Teacher	"More one on one attention for some."
Social interaction	"Perhaps some small 2 minute segment where two of the children can interact with each other."
Communication	"More focus on quieter children, not just those yelling out. But remind as well as encouraging quiet ones."
Assessment	"Feedback of student progress."
Variety	"Games (let children have a chance to bring a game/activity to share with peers)." "More role play." "Perhaps more costume play, more short skits, more props."
No Constructive Comments	"Again, nothing!" "I have no criticisms at this time!" "I've got nothing for you. Sorry!"
Frequency	"It should be everyday."
Marketing and promotion	"It needs to be advertised more through schools, media, "St. John's Hospital."

Standards of Quality

There are several ways that autoethnographic work can be assessed for quality. Bochner (2000) argues that conflicts over which criteria to apply in evaluating ethnography “usually boil down to differences in values that are contingent on human choices” (p. 266). Richardson (2000) argues that ethnography, as a whole, should be evaluated using five criteria: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of reality (p. 253). Ellis (2004) who speaks specifically to the genre of autoethnography states that she is more concerned about the “move inward towards social change” (p. 254). She argues that an increase in self-understanding for the researcher “sometimes can provide a quicker and more successful route to social change than changing laws or other macropolitical structures, or espousing general cultural-political theories” (p. 254).

I go back to why I selected this genre to begin with. I want to invite the reader in to experience a journey with me, the parent/teacher/researcher. However not all journeys are created equal and therefore an element of quality beyond the structuring of a solid study is, in my opinion, arriving somewhere at the end of this journey that is altogether a different place than where I was originally. And that kind of transformative journey through literature, practice and personal experiences is in itself a testament to the value of autoethnographic research. So here I align myself with Ellis (2004) in saying that an increase in self-understanding is altogether what I am walking toward in this study. I am also, however, holding myself to the five standards of quality that Richardson (2000) argues are integral to all ethnographic work because as Bochner (2000) states, while there is conflict in arriving at a set of criteria, it is clear that there needs to be criteria.

Richardson (2000) believes that ethnography can be scientific and literary, objective, true and imagined (p. 253). She recognizes the dichotomy but maintains that ethnography should be held to “high and difficult standards” (p. 254). In her five criteria, Richardson (2000) states that substantive contribution should demonstrate the author’s “deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective” (p. 254). In the area of aesthetic merit she believes the text should be “artistically shaped, satisfying (and) complex” (p. 254). Reflexivity refers to an “adequate self-awareness and self exposure”; impact refers to the researcher’s ability to inspire others and expressing a reality speaks to “a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the ‘real’” (p. 254). She goes on to explain that “creative arts is one lens through which to view the world; analytical/science is another. We see better with two lenses. We see best with both lenses focused and magnified” (p. 254).

Ethical Concerns

In her methodological novel, *The Ethnographic I*, Ellis (2004) surveys the contributions theorists have made to the field of autoethnography and juxtaposes their views in a fictitious graduate course that she is teaching on Autoethnography. The most striking element of her work, to me, is when she criticizes her own research and identifies the mistakes she made as a novice researcher along her journey to understanding what comprises good autoethnographic research. Ellis remembers a time when she wrote a book on the “Fisher Folk” and “all hell broke loose” (p. 147) when an undergraduate professor of hers later read parts of the work to the people that she studied. Ellis had written that her subjects “smelled like fish, that their children had sex at a young age, that they were uneducated – and because I had revealed what they thought were casual

conversations between us” (p. 147). She later states that a researcher should always assume that “everyone you write about *will* read what you write” (p. 150).

There is a great deal of responsibility associated with research to begin with. In the area of disability studies and the arts the mandate for superior care when it comes to participants becomes even more critical. Ignagni and Church (2008) write “arts-informed methods may enable disability studies to more fully democratize knowledge production. They offer more and different opportunities for a greater diversity of disabled people to participate in the research process” (p. 633). I argue that this research is an opportunity for parents of children with ASD to become greater participants in research directed towards their children.

When I first began teaching my classes in September of this year I was almost immediately approached by researchers who were interested in conducting a study on theory of mind and children with ASD. The study was to monitor the children’s eye movements during a storytelling session. I was asked if I could hand out the invitations to my families. I declined. The researchers persisted and followed up with an email and a phone call to my employer. They wanted an explanation as to why their information could not be casually distributed to my students. My employer approached me to draw together an appropriate response to deliver to The University. The only explanation I could offer my employer is that my students had come to The Theatre School to learn drama. While it would be convenient for The University to form a relationship with us to distribute all their information about current and future studies I had not begun this venture in order to become a messenger for The University’s studies. They would have to find an alternative method of recruiting participants because I would not now or in

future be their liaison. I was quickly supported in my decision and my employer contacted the University to let them know that our students had come to The Theatre School to learn drama and we would not be distributing their information, not now nor in the future. I was rattled by what I felt to be an imposing process (pressure to participate in a study) but satisfied with the support my superiors had shown me.

The reason I tell this story is from a need to deconstruct the strange emotion that overcame me during the barrage of polite emails from The University. I instinctively became protective of my son; that wasn't a surprise to me. But I also became equally protective of *all* of the children. A mere three weeks into teaching my new classes I had become one with the families who had come to The Theatre School to learn drama through my guidance and alongside me. I suppose I always knew in theory I was a part of this group (not just as a teacher but as a parent), but until I felt the maternal impulse to protect my students from outsiders wanting to look in, my body didn't really know that I was apart of this group. It was an absolute turn in the road for me and my journey to personal and professional growth was well underway.

My son, who is also my heart, is in this group of participants. My son's friends (yes he now has friends) are in this group of participants. My friends' children are in this group of participants (because they trust me and they came to me with their children who are *their* hearts). Parents who have been bringing their children to see me every week for the duration of a school year are a part of this group of participants. The fear that a novice autoethnographer may not understand the importance of confidentiality and accountability with a group of special needs children and their families is simply not going to be an issue here.

The privacy of my participants is extremely important to me. The Parent Observation Form that parents completed is anonymous. Only I have access to the completed surveys. Pseudonyms are used in the story to disguise the participants. The story takes place in an unnamed city in the United States. The names and likenesses of my participants will never be revealed nor will the location of the study.

The participants, as mentioned earlier, were not compensated but a small gift card was given to all my students (whether they participated in the study or not) on the final day of classes. Feedback and debriefing was sent via email weekly throughout the study and in addition participants may request to read my final thesis or a summary of the results. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time.

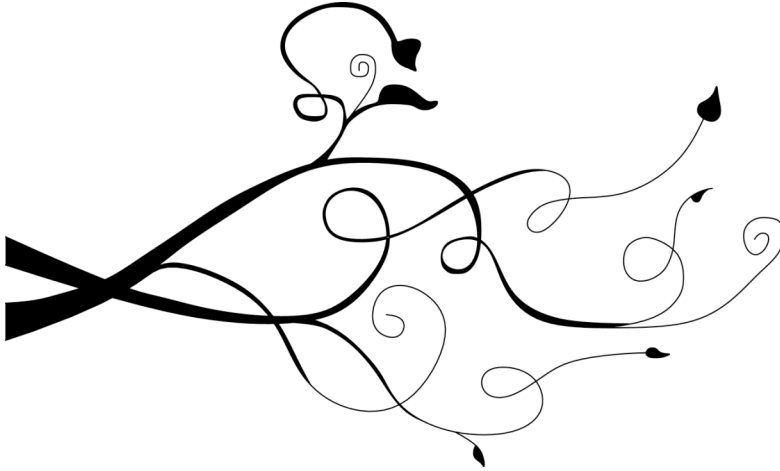
Limitations of Methodology

There are three main limitations to this study that should be noted here. Firstly, the 19 students who participated in this study ranged from children who had taken one course with me to students who had taken up to three courses with me. While I was *not* assessing students' aptitude for pretend play in this study, the parents who have known me for longer may have felt more obligated to say nice things about me and my program. In order to better categorize parents' comments I did, however, ask on the Parent Observation Form how many classes their children had taken with me this year. I didn't note any such pattern in the results. Helping to counter this sense of obligation is the fact that parents were paying for their children to take the course; so the assumption would be that if parents were unsatisfied in any way they would feel inclined to state this on their Parent Observation Form.

Secondly, while I was able to learn from my teaching journal and correct future lesson structures within this ten-week session (again the example of the circle outlined with a green line), I was unable to duplicate lessons with other groups of children to see how changes to specific lessons would have created better results in the flow and expansion of the drama.

Thirdly, as stated earlier, autoethnography can sometimes be viewed as overly subjective: findings are limited to context and not generalizable; data analysis is done by one person; interpretation of the data is subjective and biased. As far as the limitations of this particular study: there is no triangulation of the data; professional perspectives on the program were not included and my own narrative style does not lend itself to replicability. Subjectivity in this type of interpretive research is indeed the thorn at the end of a wonderfully blooming rose but at its height it unveils an intricate world that has the potential to elicit “a quicker and more successful route to social change” (Ellis, 2004, p. 254).

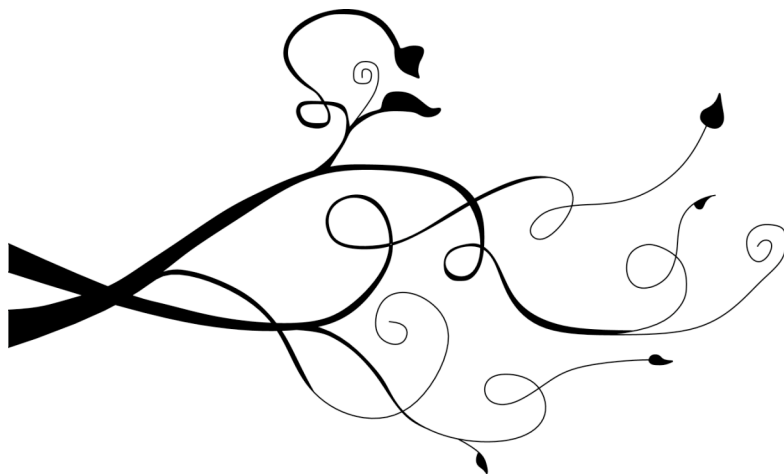




Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference

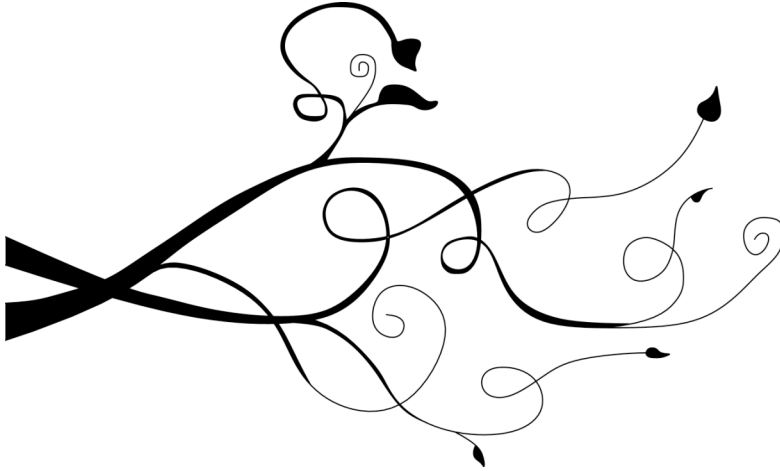
From *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost⁵

⁵ American poet Robert Frost (1896) is best known for his extensive body of poetry that utilizes nature as a metaphorical device to analyze humanity. He is also my favorite poet and his poem *The Road Not Taken* has laid the philosophical groundwork for this walk.



Part 3: The Autoethnographic Journey

I am a Parent...



Chapter 1

~ Αυτισμος/Autism: Detection, Diagnosis and a Mild Sedative for Mother ~

I sink deeply under the plush down comforter my mother gave us as a wedding shower gift. On that warm day, just three short years ago, I wore a pretty cream pantsuit and plum lipstick as I joked at the microphone how Ric and I bought a house down the street from my mom and around the corner from my brother.

“Had we lived on a Hutterite colony we’d be no closer,” I said while delicately biting my glossy bottom lip. A room full of carefully dressed ladies unexpectedly laughed full-heartedly in the basement of St. Anthony’s church that afternoon. It has always been my gift to lift the tension in any room.

My eyes sting from extended dryness and my nose, that has been stuffed up since I was a preschooler, is now painfully parched.

Without even having cracked the binding I know full well that my life will never be the same again. On the first page I read, “When your child is diagnosed with cancer, neighbors stop by your home bringing precooked meals, hugs, and support. When your child is diagnosed with autism, families who see you in the supermarket will slip away

down another aisle” (McCarthy, 2007, p. ix). There is no comforter in the world that can take away the chill that invades me.

“Don’t read *that*,” he hazily grumbles from the other side of the bed. He being my husband, the medical doctor.

My pulse stops. I know what deer feel like.

“Well when you’re done reading about how a stripper cured her son, turn off the light will you,” he adds with just as much vigor as before.

“The forward is from a doctor – ”

“There’s no *real* doctor that would add his name to that book.”

I ignore the doctor as is customary these days and read on:

Autism is a disorder that now affects one in a hundred and fifty children. When I was in medical school, this disorder affected one in ten thousand children. These children have problems with language development and usage. They have rituals and repetitive behaviors. They have problems understanding how to interact socially. The spectrum of severity is broad. Some are severely afflicted and need institutional care, while others are only “brushed” with the disorder and grow up, work, marry, and have children of their own. (McCarthy, 2007, p. ix)

For a moment I cling to the word “brushed” and then breathe.

“His name is Dr. Feinberg and he’s the Medical Director of Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital at UCLA” (McCarthy, 2007, p. xiii) I make sure to retort before turning my back fully and switching off the light.

It’s February 2007. I have just given birth to a beautiful baby girl named Amelia via c-section. Two weeks after bringing her home from the hospital, and still healing

from a knife to the gut, my son, Mason, aged 2 ½, is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).



I wish I had toothpicks to hold my eyes open during the 90-minute video at St. John's Special Needs Hospital my husband and I are forced to watch as part of our orientation to their world renowned Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) program. The heater is making a sound. My coffee is bitter and the window, for whatever reason is open a crack. It's late February.

A father in a sweater vest from a local advocacy group reads verbatim from a crumpled piece of loose leaf. He tells us that autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by “unusual behaviors within three domains: reciprocal social interaction, communication, and restricted, repetitive interests and behaviours” (Lord & Bishop, 2010, p. 4). He goes on to explain that the American Psychiatric Association (2000) categorizes autistic disorder as a pervasive developmental disorder in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV). According to the DSM-IV there are five pervasive developmental disorders: autistic disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, Asperger's disorder, Rett's disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified.

Every time I hear the word “autistic” repeated with perfect intonation a stab is felt in my rib cage.

I much rather preferred the other week when we were crawling around on that grungy carpet in the soundproof/double-mirrored room at the Children's Institute while being introduced to the work of Stanley Greenspan, the (Developmental, Individual-Difference, Relationship Based) DIR/Floortime approach (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006).

Having been a drama teacher in a previous life, my husband and the clinicians mutually concluded after the daylong workshop that I was welcome to come back tomorrow and teach the practicum myself, blindfolded. And while the compliment was comforting, the repeated reprimands throughout the morning to stand back and give my husband an opportunity to engage our son in play was not. There was something weird and wrong about being benched at the play workshop.

“You’re too good,” the short little man, who sounded like he was from the Bronx, blurted out during mine and Mason’s fun-filled hide-and-seek game.

“Step back; you’re masking his deficits. We won’t know what to work on. Give your husband a turn.”

At that moment I tried to conjure up anything that would have been more awkward for me than watching my science-achiever husband crawl around on all fours in his dress pants and pager trying wholeheartedly to get our little guy to notice his funny hat. After several failed attempts, Ric finally retreated and Mason, not needing to look up to smell his golden opportunity, quickly relocated to a happy corner where he and a sponge brick, he had all of a sudden become attached to, could be alone together.

It wasn’t fair. If someone had handed me a math equation, Ric would have been the first to throw me a life preserver.

“No! Don’t do it! She was never able to memorize the multiplication table! She tried but coooouldn’t. Too many numbers. Have mercy people!” I could just see him jumping outside of his skin and leaping to my rescue.

We compensated for each other's shortcomings; it had always been our marital code. I pick the drapery fabric and make the fancy triangle hors d'oeuvres for dinner parties. Ric files the taxes. At home we know our roles.

"These kids do that," said the little man.

"They become attached to and preoccupied with unusual things like door handles and fans or pieces of objects like the wheels of a toy car or well that sponge."

I kept hearing the word "they" like he was describing this tribe of alien babies that are involuntarily pushed through the doors of this padded room day after day so that teary-eyed moms and dads can learn how to blow bubbles and crawl through multi-coloured tunnels with exaggerated smiles on their faces. The reading glasses on his head didn't help take away from the feeling that this was just some all too bizarre mad science experiment.

I glance over and spot a trio of middle-aged women dressed in comfortable-fit clothing seated behind the double-sided mirror. They have concerned looks on their faces and are making notations in their folders.

I taste my stomach gasses.

When we are released I can tell my husband needs a whiskey even though I'd never actually seen him drink anything resembling one before. He settles for a cigarette instead. There is no time for stiff drinks or wallowing in self-pity anyway. We are on the Autism Tour Bus shopping for therapies for our son. It's a bus all us parents with a diagnosis must travel; no refunds allowed. Our next stop is ABA, the only therapy with empirical evidence purporting to improve children's "IQ scores, language skills, school

performance...ability to adapt (and) socialization skills” (Harvard Mental Health Letter, p. 5).

We wonder if this stale video will ever end. It occurs to us to fast forward the tape since no one else is in the room but utter guilt makes us sit through the entire sermon. The dad in the video with the v-neck sweater continues reading his speech from his now crumpled piece of paper. He has a son with autism he tells us and judging by his attire we assume his son has a PhD and is married with kids of his own by now or living in an adult group home. It wasn't clear which way it had gone for him.

Regardless of his son's outcome something drove this sweater-vested man to be St. John's spokesperson and it definitely wasn't the coffee. I gaze at him more closely now and even though he is trapped inside this dated video I feel like I know him somehow. He continues to inform us that Lovaas (1987) published a legendary study that involved a clinical trial of 19 preschoolers diagnosed with autism who received 40 hours of one-to-one intensive ABA therapy per week. The results were that 47% of the children “achieved normal intellectual and educational functioning” (p.7). In 1993 Lovaas and his colleagues conducted a follow-up study and results showed that their earlier results were long-lasting and that out of the 9 children who had received the best results, 8 of them were “indistinguishable from average children on tests of intelligence and adaptive behaviour” (p. 373).

I sit up.

“Ric, did he say indistinguishable?”

Cold room. Bad speaker. Bitter coffee. Sign us up.



I spent the majority of those first years, after the diagnosis, scavenging online for an overnight cure. That wasn't the case for Ric. He, and his science community knew, that there was no pill, just hard work. Bathroom breaks and nursing were the only real-time events that pulled me, the non-scientist, away from that monitor. Mason was involved in a therapy day that began at 8 a.m. and ended at 5 p.m. Amelia thankfully knew that her contribution to mission "Cure Mason" was to eat and sleep.

The little man from the Bronx said my son would retreat into himself and become preoccupied with unusual behaviours; perseveration he called it. But I was the one that had convinced myself 15 minutes in the shower was 15 minutes I was not utilizing to its fullest potential finding a cure on the all-reliable World Wide Web.

Waking up with keyboard markings on my face to the sound of Amelia screaming was not a rare event. Being ripe for a clash with my husband before his morning coffee, even less rare.

"Why can't we give him B12 shots/put him on a gluten-free/casein-free (GF/CF) diet/take him to a Defeat Autism Now (DAN) doctor/have a homeopathic doctor examine his stool for yeast/swim with the dolphins/make him swallow Omega 3, Magnesium, B6 all in one gulp/have him adjusted by a chiropractor three times a week/give him the stinking chelation clay bath with the CUTE YELLOW DUCKY ON IT?!? Why Ric! Why the hell not?!?"

I thought a vein had popped in my left eye.

I was called irrational for looking beyond science for a miracle.

"You're crazy. You know that. You're nuts."

Door slam. Mason eating something I can't recognize from here. Room spins.

Ric choosing to ignore me for days had no affect on me. My daughter waking up one morning deciding her 20-hour a day naps were a thing of the past did. And to bring me back to real time I was put on meds. Good ones too. The kind that kept a stationary smile on my face and made crying or screaming impossible. I took a shower. I got my eyebrows waxed. I read a magazine that didn't contain the word Autism.

Those pills were great. I was getting so much done now that I didn't have to feel sorry for myself. I was taking down the light fixtures and cleaning them from the inside out, labeling all my Tupperware containers, exercising, having dinner parties and making all of Amelia's baby food from scratch using only organic plant life.

Ok, maybe the meds weren't that great.

But even when I was out of my bathrobe and looking like everything was fine I still secretly spent time at the computer, mostly at night when everyone was asleep. I was an addict. An autism info junky. And truth be told, I carried around with me a dark resentment towards Ric. It killed me inside that he had the luxury of only seeing things through the eyes of science and that stories that I read online of children recovering were of no consequence to him. And what I hated most of all was that he was right in saying that there were actual flesh and blood snake-oil salesmen out there trying to make money off of desperate mothers like me. It was a pill that was too hard for me to swallow.

I clung to the belief that someone out there was selling something that would cure Mason. I searched. I prayed. I cried. I tried whatever Ric reluctantly agreed wouldn't kill our little boy if it went wrong. I watched and waited for something, soy ice-cream, rice crackers, vitamin B6 and Magnesium, biweekly visits to the chiropractor, to take away my son's autism. It didn't.

Jenny McCarthy “recovered” her son. I bought her books. I ordered all her speech intervention DVDs online. I never missed one of her TV appearances. I did everything she told me to do. I sent her a lot of money. I wanted my son to be “recovered” and as a bonus gift I wanted long skinny legs just like hers.

I had this reoccurring daydream (sometimes while driving) of waking up one morning and finding that Mason was cured. Soy ice-cream! I knew it! Oh and we would just sail off into the distance like a big happy family, pretending this whole thing never happened. And look over there; it’s Jenny and Jim! We smile and wave from our respective yachts. Oh look and we’re wearing the same bikini. Good thing we’re also both so skinny.

“I know! I did it too Jenny! You and me both, we recovered our sons. Aren’t we amazing? Thanks for telling me about soy ice-cream. You’re the best Jen!”

“Just because some woman in Nashville claims her son was cured from a laxative, doesn’t make it so! What is wrong with you!? Get a grip already.”

That morning when Ric drove to St. Vincent, the city’s largest teaching hospital, where he sits as chief of the Internal Medicine Department, I googled “divorce.”



“Are you still crying a lot?” my buttoned-nosed family doctor asks while sitting cross-legged at her computer typing in everything I have to say with the tit-a-tat-tat of her perfectly gelled nails.

“My son can’t talk.”

She stops the tatting and looks up at me with a gentle smile. She too is a mother.

“You should take half a pill more. That might help.”

When I was a kid, I once witnessed a hooker in the dead of winter take off her six-inch heels and raise them over her shoulders when she noticed two men approaching her from either side. I was in my warm car with the windows rolled up and she startled me with her unexpected animal instincts. I felt akin to that hooker when I was thrown into the Lion's Den after my son's diagnosis. I was prepared to rip off flesh with my teeth to get him any and every therapy that would move him one word closer to "Mommy."

One night after that extra half a pill had begun penetrating into my system, I looked over at Ric and realized that I wasn't and had never been alone in this. I wasn't the only one who wanted to be acknowledged by name. We looked each other in the eyes. *Our* son couldn't talk. We were together in this.

If it wasn't for that sunny morning I was visited by a heavenly social worker who handed me 8 hours of respite time a week and told me I *had* to go out and get my nails done, shop for pillows, have a cappuccino, I quite honestly would have gone mad.

Later I found out I was the envy of all the "special" moms because my hours were nowhere near in proportion to their 3 or 4 hours of respite a week.

"What did you do?" said my friend Tammy over the phone while eating. I have 4 and I was told I might go down to 3.

"Cry. That's what I did." And when I sat and thought about it later while I was sipping my Starbucks and getting my pedicure, I cried for about 2 hours solid when the nice stranger lady came to the house. How come I only got 8?

The door slamming eventually ended when Ric and I decided as a couple to spend 3 of my 8 respite hours together having dinner, going to a movie or simply taking a walk.

We became re-acquainted with each other. We decided to agree to disagree about science and alternative therapies and we stopped fighting long enough to remember why we got married in the first place.

That unpleasant morning passed without a phone call to the lawyers just like many mornings after that. The arguments disappeared altogether for a happy period and then only came back the day the credit card bill was delivered or when I mentioned something a “doctor” had said on Oprah. But I must say, nearly 4 ½ years after our son’s initial diagnosis our differences are nearly never about autism anymore; but I have to be honest when I say that the winding road leading up to this camp has been long and hard at best. It’s actually nothing short of a miracle that after three very intense years of around-the-clock feuding we managed to stay clear of becoming one of the 80% of marriages afflicted with autism, ending in divorce (according to Oprah’s statisticians).

And in the end it turns out that not everything Jen or Oprah would have me believe is true. In fact the Centre for Autism and Related Disorders at Kennedy Krieger Institute just recently looked into this divorce rate yarn spun all over the Internet and discovered that the numbers are more like 1:2, no different from any other marriage in North America (Park, 2010). It also turns out that what didn’t kill us, relocated us to a new camp of special needs parents, the kind that are brought closer together through shared life-experiences and who are given an unexpected opportunity to gain a better understanding of self and each other (Rudy, 2008, p. 1).



I guess we always knew Mason was different. And unlike other parents who have told this story before us, we also didn’t have the luxury of being ignorant to autism.

It was an interesting time to have a child diagnosed with autism. In and around the time Mason was spinning in circles, flickering his fingers in front of his face and missing some very fundamental milestones my older brother was emailing me CNN top-story reports of children being cured of their autism. Autism was a new buzz word in North America partly because one of the most famous Playboy models of all time was infiltrating the media circuit with her full length eyelashes one talk show at a time telling heart-rendering stories of her son's recovery from autism, a lack of early intervention services and claims that her beautiful little boy acquired autism as a result ofwait for it....vaccines (McCarthy, 2007, 2008).

Oh boy. Did that ever rock the medical community and my own personal family room. It had already been proven by the doctors in lab coats that this wasn't so. But just in case I was about to get kidnapped by the vaccine frenzy Ric handed me a study published by the *New England Journal of Medicine* to read (Madsen et al., 2002). I had never been given an article to read from the *New England Journal of Medicine* before. It was quite the event I must admit. I was impressed by the big science words that I didn't understand. These people were clearly better read than Jen but they weren't moms. Moms new best I still thought. There must be something to this. But in the end I stayed quiet. I know Jen versus the *New England Journal of Medicine* would never make for good dinnertime banter in our house.

And, in retrospect, this is one of the decisions I made that probably helped save my marriage. Because while I was willing to continue fighting the good fight with the vitamins, chiropractor, diet and relationship therapy, I knew, in my heart of hearts that whatever caused this puzzling disorder, for our son at least, did not come in the form of a

vaccine shot. I have always known that something had touched my little boy very early on, maybe even before he came into this world.

“What the heck!”

I was startled. Did I do something wrong? Did I swaddle him too tight? Did I suffocate him? Oh my God! What could I possibly have - how on earth did I screw up on the first day already? What is wrong with me?!?

I quickly sat up in my hospital bed to see what the white-haired pediatrician on call was gawking at.

“I’ve never seen that happen before,” he said almost as if my child had irritated him in some way just by *being* there. He cranked his head forward like some odd bird and continued to stare at my baby boy in perplexed amazement. I had been a mother for less than 48 hours and my first-born was already having run-ins with authority.

Mason, our five-pound, six-ounce newborn was the first baby this ancient doctor had ever seen flip onto his side completely unassisted. Even I knew that wasn’t supposed to happen. And sure enough, I had the remarkable opportunity to see it too when he decided to repeat the peculiar movement. My little, little guy, who I had swaddled tightly in his baby blue blanket, as per my tutorial from the Inuit girl in the bed beside me, turned his minuscule body onto one side using a jerk of his own sheer force. When he had completed the bizarre feat we both just stood there for a moment, two strangers, watching this tiny human as he made himself comfortable in this world, resting on one shoulder, breathing deeply like a middle-aged man. It’s like he thought he was a horse and tomorrow he should attempt walking.

“You better unswaddle him,” the bird-like doctor cawed as he walked out the door never to be seen from again.

I was all alone in my hospital room looking at the world’s strongest baby and I was instantly paralyzed with fear.



Mason was always taller than the other children and the sturdiest by far. I once saw him walk right through a little girl on his way to the toy house at our Mommy-and-me class. He legitimately didn’t see her because, although she was the same age as him, she only reached his slender waist. After that, this little girl’s mother, in full view of all the other mothers, would leap and snatch her toddler anytime she saw Mason was even remotely near by. This went on for the entire “school” year. It would have been fine with me if the snatch wasn’t also accompanied by a sound she made while doing it. Every time this ridiculous woman with the bony legs and tall leather boots detected Mason was even half a room away from her perfect little angel she would start running, spilling her Starbucks on as many innocent children as were in her way. Snatch followed by a sound that resembled an animal dying. Mason was only two and at that time he hadn’t spoken a word yet.

When Mason was three years old, strangers kept asking us why our “big boy” was still in a diaper. It was always a pleasure to explain to an absolute stranger why my 40 lb toddler sitting in my grocery cart was still not potty trained, still not talking, still not in school.

“He’s only three?”

“That’s right,” I would say, politely, again and again like some Costco greeter handing out flyers.

“Two dollars for a whole tray of juice boxes?”

“That’s right.”

Besides being the tallest, Mason has also always taken the prize for being the happiest child in the room. And while the corners of his smile have never quite made it to his ears, the split on his bottom lip attests to his efforts. Whoever still believes that children on the autism spectrum are isolated and aloof needs to meet Mason in person; his broad full-toothed smile and his exuberant belly laugh when you sing him a song, chase him around the house, play a trick on him or tickle under his armpit would melt anyone’s heart.

He also adores Amelia. In public he tightly holds her hand (much in the same way an adult would do with his charge), shares his games, movies and toys with her and while he would be embarrassed if it was ever said in his presence, wraps his little arm around her tiny waist while they both sleep together at night on the same pillow.

Mason has always been a perfect little boy who is gentle, fun loving and inquisitive. Today, at the age of six, he attends regular school, reads and writes above age-level, operates an iPod better than any grown-up we know, swims underwater and dives head first from the diving board of his grandmother’s pool. He also skates, plays soccer, paints and remembers to feed his fish every day.

And while our remarkable little boy is now talking, he still struggles with communication. He required assistance in school to stay on task and he needs instructions to be broken down and sometimes be accompanied by a picture. He uses a

token system to get rewards for positive behaviour like sitting down at the table to eat dinner, kicking the ball at soccer and listening to his swimming teacher.

Mason no longer lines things up, flaps his arms, spins in circles, tantrums or makes loud noises like he once did. He enjoys regular playdates with his classmates and has attended many birthday parties this year. He attends these things granted with his ABA tutor. She reminds him to play *with* the other children as opposed to playing beside them. They enjoy his company. There is never a shortage of playdate requests. He's our beautiful perfect little boy who along with 1:70 other beautiful perfect little boys in this country falls somewhere on the autism spectrum.



~ Intervention Therapies: The Good, the Bad and the Very Expensive ~

I sat in my own warmth that seemed to have started at my toes and moved upwards along my spine, behind my ears and finally to my burning hot face.

“Yes, if you're asking, we think there's something there,” she said ever so softly.

Later I read and heard story, upon story from other moms who recalled hearing their doctor speak the exact words “your son has autism.” Reflecting on our situation, we were never really told those exact words but it was still implied and the papers were signed nonetheless.

The lovely and gentle female doctor who diagnosed our son seemed like she had been making this diagnosis at this exact developmental clinic far before I was ever born. If someone knew who had autism and who did not have autism it was certainly the kind woman standing before us.

I then heard a weak unfamiliar voice say, “What does this mean?”

Looking over my shoulder I saw a sight that frightened me more than anything I had seen so far that morning. Three hours of solid testing, whereby Mason neither pointed to or looked at the books or toys that were being flashed in front of him, was nothing compared to the sight of my husband, the stoic medical professional, red as a beet, eyes welled up with tears.

“Is he going to be normal?” finally also made its way out of his blocked throat.

I don't really remember a lot of specific answers that were given on that solemn afternoon but I do remember kindness, soft smiles and a lot of head tilting and it's never been my experience in life that any of those things mean something good is about to happen.

In the state that we live in, a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is the equivalent to an amusement park bracelet in the highly un-amusing Land of Autism. You now have the ability to access government-funded therapy, but the lines are enormous and by the time you get to the front, your child may be too tall or too short for some of the rides. And while it sounds pessimistic, without that piece of paper in hand confirming that a developmental pediatrician has seen your child and placed a bracelet on his wrist, no one will even let you into the park. And that's when you find out that even the bracelet line is backed up.

Which begs the very important question: is autism really on the rise in North America or are there just more parents who are looking for the bracelet line? It's no doubt that doctors are making an effort to detect the disorder earlier than ever before in order for children to receive needed interventions (Harvard Medical Letter, September 2010), but is it actually on the rise?

To be honest, at that point, I wasn't at all thinking globally. The only thing I was concerned about was myself or *τον αυτοσ μου* and slapping a bracelet on my son as fast as I could before anyone asked me any further questions that might cause me to get to the back of the line.

And fortunate for my husband and I, being in our respective fields of medicine and education we knew one thing in life was certain. When dealing with a public system, the squeaky wheel almost always gets the grease. And as sad as it may sound my daily phone calls made the line a bit shorter every day.

In the end, other than gratefully tapping into our state-funded Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) program, we decided to go private all around. One short home visit a month from a publicly funded Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) to see our non-verbal child seemed like a practical joke but it turns out no one was laughing. Instead we opted for two hours a week at \$100 an hour. In my next life I want to be an SLP and charge \$25 an hour so every child might have the right to speak.

We did one year of ABA therapy through the state. We were promised 40 hours a week of tutoring delivered by a team of four therapists who took turns rotating in and out of our home 7 days a week. All the programs were specific to Mason's needs. Or so we were told.

"Why is he flapping his arms like that?" my husband whispered at a crowded birthday party.

"They're teaching him how to flap his arms like a bird by repeating the activity over and over again. It's their pretend play program."

"Are they stupid? We want him to stop flapping his arms not flap them more."

So while we agreed with the philosophy of ABA on paper we were not impressed with the consultant who was assigned to our family to design Mason's programs. She seemed just a little too apathetic about our son's prognosis for our liking. We complained (well actually I tossed her out of my house and Ric made an angry phone call to the director of the program) and were promptly given a new consultant. In the years to come I learned from other parents that this was not an isolated case. Finding good people to teach our kids is something we as parents have to advocate for on an ongoing basis.

I could tell our new team leader was told a tale about me before she came to the house because every time she spoke her hands shook. While the tutors and I found it mildly amusing in private, on month three of the hand shaking I wasn't convinced this recent PhD grad was going to cure Mason so we showed her the door like her predecessor and decided to leave the program, but not before we lined up a back up plan.

"Ric, you should have seen this kid talking today. I mean he talked non-stop and he was looking at us *right* in the face."

I was so impressed after a playdate I had with my friend Sarah and her son Timothy that I paged my husband over and over again at work until he finally answered. Our plan in case of an emergency is to punch 911 in front of the house number on the call back message. That day, I stopped just short of doing that.

Sarah never did do ABA with her son Timothy. Instead she researched a form of therapy called Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) that originated in Texas and was founded by a psychologist by the name of Steven Gutstein (2000). The technique utilizes a lot of non-verbal communication and focuses on "shared enjoyment" (Siff Exhorn, 2006, p. 302).

Our son was still playing quietly, yet happily, in the corner barely making eye contact at that time. We were begging him to answer simple questions with one-word answers to no avail. Months of our 40 hour a week ABA program had been focused on Mason learning his name, address and telephone number. When someone asked him what his name was he said “Name...Mason Matthews.” When someone asked him what his address was he would say “Address...23 Sunny Creek Lane.” But if you asked him what his favorite color was or what he wanted to eat, blank stares would follow.

The birthday party arm-flapping incident was the final straw.

Three and a half days later I was on a plane to New York to take a full-week intensive course on RDI. I brought videos of Mason playing to be analyzed by a team of specialists who were trained by Dr. Gutstein himself. I was ready to fight Medusa or die trying. It was more than time to get this job done.



I had made a valiant effort but after a year of fumbling through Gutstein’s relationship intervention strategies, some that Ric and I agreed with (guided participation) and some that we did not (using non-verbal communication), we like so many other families, ended up where we started, ABA. It was very hard for us to continue turning down 40 hours a week of help when we also had Amelia to consider.

Thankfully our third kick at the can with ABA was a charm. We landed a smart and caring team and our son began to progress rapidly. Perhaps he was just ready at that time to develop. Perhaps the non-verbal communication actually worked. Who knows?

Who cares?

The point is Mason is talking and he only sees his speech therapist once a week now (his SLP has been hinting at once a month but we are not ready for that). It was a hard decision for us but we decided to not register Mason in Kindergarten last year and instead sent him to Montessori in the morning and gave him as much early-intervention therapy as we possibly could. ABA tutors accompanied him to preschool in the morning, came to our home in afternoon, in the evenings and on the weekends.

Mason entered Kindergarten this past September earning an unassisted 99% on his standardized school entry test. He might still be the tallest kid in his class but that doesn't seem to be what sets him apart from the rest anymore. One of his classmates told his mother the other week, he likes Mason because "he's the smartest kid I know."

Mason still has problems communicating, and still requires some prompting to keep him on track (in particular when his medication has worn off) but we are all extremely impressed and feel blessed with his progress so far. In hindsight that morning in the obstetrics ward should have taught me that absolutely *anything* is possible. If a newborn can flip on his side, I surely had an untapped wonder inside of me that I never knew possible.

It was an extremely dark period in my life watching helplessly as others rewarded Mason with a piece of candy for sitting, standing or putting his hands on the table as instructed. But this was needed and it has greatly helped Mason in his ability to control his impulses and function in social situations. RDI helped us get to know Mason better and slow down the pace of our life so we could focus on *all* of our relationships. The DIR/Floortime model was also instrumental in our remembering the importance of getting down on the floor, crawling around with Mason, following *his* lead and becoming

interested in what *he* was interested in. We discovered his love of music, computers, swimming, climbing trees. Had we limited his existence to discrete trials we may have never learned these things about Mason.

To be honest, I don't know what I was looking up exactly when I came across a book by Alisa Wolf (2005) entitled *Acting For Kids on the Autism Spectrum*. I thought huh. Interesting. So I ordered it. It turned out to be for older kids and the title should have tipped me off to the notion that Wolf was teaching *theatre* and not drama but it did get me reminiscing about the years I spent teaching theatre and drama before the kids were born. It occurred to me that the piece that was missing in my son's therapy program was the piece that *I* could offer as a drama teacher.

I wondered why it had never occurred to me before to dust off my copy of *Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium* by Betty Jane Wagner (1985a). It made sense to me that if play was such a confusing area for children on the spectrum, wouldn't teaching children how to use their imaginations contribute to an increase in play skills?

Turns out I'm not the only one who had that idea. According to Pamela J. Wolfberg (2009) a leader in the field of imaginative play in children on the autism spectrum and author of the book, *Play and Imagination in Children with Autism*, a number of experimental and observational studies conducted in the seventies, eighties and nineties concluded that children with autism are capable of comprehending and producing more sophisticated forms of play (functional, symbolic, or both) and diverse play when elicited by an adult (p. 5).

But the problem for all of us parents running an ABA program at home is that we run these programs in isolation of other families. Confidentiality prevents class lists and we don't know who's out there struggling with the same issues we are struggling with. We're all trying to defeat autism in a state of *αυτισμός* if that makes any sense. Our tutors are also only trained in behavioral intervention and not DIR/Floortime or RDI approaches so when our children reach a point where they need to now focus on building relationships with other children and learn how to play imaginatively with peers, there's no program for that. There's a theatre school in town that offers all sorts of drama classes for children but none specific to our children's needs.

"I'm just gonna approach the Theatre School and ask if they would be interested in me teaching drama classes for children on the autism spectrum," I blurted out one day to my friend Bev while our kids ran around smearing finger-paint all over themselves.

"Oh my God, you should!" she insisted spitting her latte in my face. "What a *great* idea!"

I said it now. There was no turning back even if I wanted to. I went from holding Mason back a year in school, quietly tutoring him in the privacy of my own home and never once using a label to describe him (in hopes that he would one day "recover" or become "indistinguishable" from his peers) to announcing I was teaching a class for children with ASD at the Theatre School disabling my elaborate plan of remaining incognito as a mother "recovering" her son.

Next thing I knew I was pitching my idea to the skeptical Theatre School director who asked me for references, but not teaching references or theatre references (of which I had plenty) but references from autism specialists in the community. So I gave them a

list of people to phone: ABA, RDI, DIR/Floortime. If they needed more contacts I could provide that too I let him know. The school wanted to do their due diligence and make sure that my program was something that had the potential of helping children with autism in our community. After a couple of phone calls and a written recommendation my pilot program was given the green light.

Bev was *so* excited she made the colorful glossy poster herself that same day. With promises of dress-up, puppets, crafts, songs and storytelling the phone at The Theatre School rang non-stop for days. On day six I was told by the school administrator that never before had she seen such interest in a new program offered at the school. I was originally hoping to fill two classes, ages 5 -7 and ages 8 – 10, with 8 children per class (which is what I was told was the minimum number needed in order to run a class at the school). Instead we opened two additional classes to form four classes with a total of 44 students in all. When the dust finally settled, I had three weeks to figure out how the heck I was planning on doing this.



~Mounting Dorothy Heathcote's Horse~

The phone rings. It's my longtime friend and colleague Violet. She's teaching Drama in Education at the theatre college we both graduated from a decade and a half ago, a course I too had taught in another building before my kids were born. She needs to be at parent/teacher interviews at the local high school where she teaches this Thursday evening. Would I teach her college class, she asks.

"Sure. What do you want me to cover?" I say while drying and putting away some pots from the night before. It's noon. My son is playing alone in his toy room, his

animals lined up to his liking on the couch where he talks to them waiting for his ABA tutor to start her shift at 1 p.m. and play pronoun games with him.

“Stephanie will come and play pronoun games,” he repeats while I talk to Violet about her class.

“We’ve just finished covering drama in education and now we’re moving on to theatre arts, your territory.”

That was my past life. I had graduated with honors from the college’s theatre directing program and before having Mason spent 10 years teaching acting to teenagers and directing school musicals.

“Sure thing” I say.

She tells me to bring my book, a paperback I had written for drama teachers shortly after Mason was born in those early months of breastfeeding and watching a box set of CSI DVDs in 20-minute intervals throughout the night. A Google search informs me my book on teaching monologues to high school students is still in print. Too bad I can’t say the same for *Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium* by Betty Jane Wagner (1985a). The book that follows the original trailblazer of drama in education as she teaches lessons to children and adults of all ages how to “believe” (p.67) is forlornly out of print.

Violet informs me that her students have been learning from photocopies of Wagner’s book, photocopies the university had permission to make after refusing to take the book off the curriculum. Good for them. A feeling of pride runs through me when I hear that our alma mater, a college that continues to train the majority of our city’s drama

teachers, has not abandoned teaching pre-service teachers the importance of classroom drama.



“Kids don’t know how to play anymore,” my son’s kindergarten teacher professes the next morning in class while we both cut yellow pieces of construction paper in the shape of school busses and the children enjoy their 10 minutes of allotted “free play.”

She has a bowl cut.

I do a quick look around to ensure that my son is not the only one engaged in parallel play, which is still partly considered developmentally appropriate at this age. Relieved to see that he isn’t, I continue to pretend that I am there to solely cut busses.

“We used to play outside for hours until it was too dark to see and then we knew to go inside,” she continues.

“You don’t see that anymore. You don’t see kids playing outside alone without adults telling them what to do and how to do it. Everything is a scheduled activity. If it doesn’t involve a jersey or a registration form it’s not an ‘activity.’ These kids are dragged here, there and everywhere. Most of them are exhausted. Let them run in the backyard and find a stick to play with; use their imagination. And guess what, sticks are free,” she says with a smirk and right-sided head tilt.

Mason continues to play with a handful of miniature dinosaurs. He moves them about quietly imagining something. What, I don’t know.



While it's often been said in the autism community, award winning author, parent and autism activist Ellen Notbohm (2005) said it best:

Whether we like it or not, “autistic” does not yet inspire general reactions of a favorable nature, does not yet stir the casual bystander to look beyond the label to see a whole person, splendidly full of both gifts and gaffs. The broader reaction, “Uh-oh. Silent, withdrawn head-banger,” is still too common; the first assumption is one of limitations (p. 1).

If anyone ever catches the look on my face after someone has uttered the word “autistic” it's a face that once upon a time only attacked me when a certain crooked smiling little boy in my grade 5 homeroom class would jokingly grind his fingernails down Sister McTavish's green chalk board. It happened every time she would mercilessly leave us unattended. The routine was always the same. Sister McTavish, who wore a pencil straight navy blue skirt that ended just slightly past her knees, would kindly excuse herself and walk ever so quietly under the wooden crucifix that hung by one nail over the doorframe.

That was Jeffery Finley's cue to scurry to the chalkboard with his bucked teeth hanging out of his mouth. He took his usual place under the clock, pulled up his saggy blue corduroys from behind using his right hand and with the blackened fingernails on his left, God help us all. Old school. Fingernails on a chalkboard and the word “autistic.”

Labels matter. They really do. When we were kids on the playground whoever yelled, “sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me” at the top of their lungs, was usually a) just called a name and b) crying.



“What’s the difference between Drama and Theatre?” I ask a dozen Drama in Education students as we sit on the chipped black painted floor of my alma mater in the dead of winter. It’s the evening that I’m substitute teaching for Violet. Her students have just finished reading Wagner (1985a) and we’re reviewing the teaching strategies birthed by British drama educator Dorothy Heathcote in the 70’s.

After some perplexed silence, one of the drama-majors raises her hand and hesitantly says, “Theatre is a finished product and Drama is the work you do to get there?”

“O.k.” I say. “That’s a good start.”

“But not the right answer,” a young man just-audibly heckles out the corner of his crooked smile.

A warm chuckle surrounds the group.

“No, it’s not the *wrong* answer,” I say smiling. I already like them.

“You know it’s hard. It’s really hard to explain what drama is.”

I pause and pretend this wasn’t carefully planned out from the start.

“Let’s make a pizza,” I say. “Come on. Everyone get up. We’re going to make the *biggest* pizza in the world.”

And what a pizza it was.

A room full of pre-service drama teachers and I stomped out dough with our feet, “lifted” massive pots of sauce, sprinkled cheese out of huge shakers we held over our shoulders and flung pieces of pepperoni larger than my children. There was a rhythm that became inherent and we all adhered to. There was the sound of working hands and feet. There was an air of knowing.

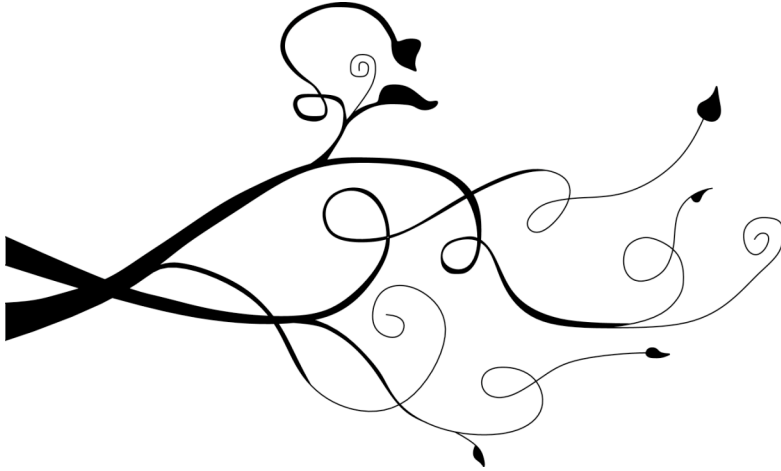
When we were finished creating, we then lifted our mammoth pizza into a colossal oven (that we opened with our feet because we now had no hands free), pushing and perspiring at moving the sheer volume of our creation.

“Believe,” I heard Heathcote whisper throughout my guiding of the students.

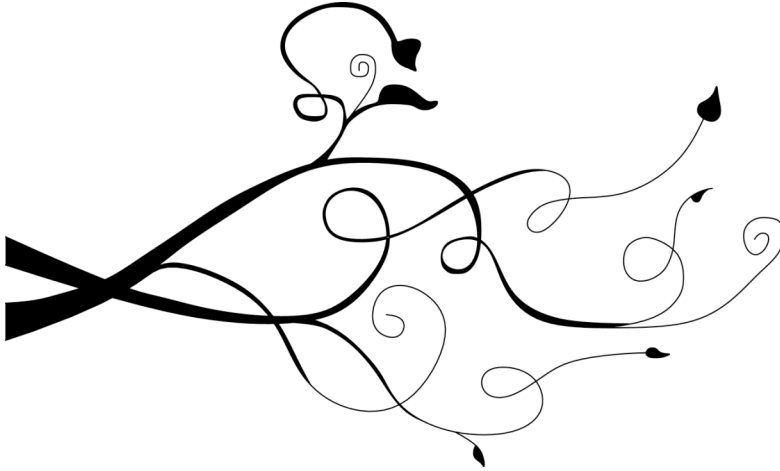
When the pizza was finally herded into the oven and we together closed the door, never to see what we had created ever again, one college student, looking like he just finished a productive workout, announced, “That was fun.”

“That was drama,” I say.





I am a Teacher...



Chapter 2

~ Creating an Environment Conducive to Learning ~

I'm shown the room where I will be teaching my "imagination" classes. The educational director gave me a choice of three rooms (game-show style) to choose from during my tour of the world-renowned children's theatre facility. The carpet throughout was warmly worn by scores of tiny pairs of feet that have cheerfully frequented the building for over a decade and a half. Although the school has never offered courses specifically geared to children on the autism spectrum, the organization has a wonderful reputation of being inclusive to all children. That was the main reason that led me there. In fact I *asked* to be there. I wanted to be in a place where Mason and children like him would be welcome, and not in name only. Children *feel* welcome. It's visceral.

I carefully pointed out that the room with the ceiling-high shelving unit, filled with tempura paint, would not be a good place for us because most of my children, I assume, will have problems with attention. Climbing might also be an issue. Only, I didn't mention that part. I was still nervous that my opportunity to teach here could be taken away at any moment if I revealed too much. It was an unfounded fear, I later

learned, but one that had been deeply and uncomfortably ingrained in me as a parent of a child on the autism spectrum. We had been denied access to certain preschools, schools and extra-curricular activities before. Where women and visible minorities may now frequent, children with autism are denied. I picture the sign on the store window from the black and white film that often plays in my head. The sign reads:

-No Autism Allowed-

Door number two revealed a chaotic cacophony of props and set pieces, more than my son's eye could see, process and handle not touching all at the same time. A treasure chest for some children, a torture chest for ours. What was behind door number three was the obvious winner. An empty room. Space to breathe, move, focus and learn.

"I figured you would pick this one," the director offered kindly as he leaned on the doorframe. Then came his confession that he already *knew* how much I dislike clutter because he had read my book. I exhaled the moment I knew he understood what I was looking for. And I exhaled again on the first day of class when I saw that I had been accommodated with an empty room yet again (drama rooms are sometimes like a box of chocolates). When it happened again and again I knew I was in a room I never wanted to leave.

Students should never be made to feel like they are invading someone's closet when they walk into a drama classroom (Hajidiacos, 2006). I truly believe that "clutter is death to creativity," (p. 38) largely because I struggle with attention issues of my own.

When a trip to the big Supermarket goes awry I often get a phone call from my husband reminding me of my name, age and place of address. He tells me I have a

husband and two beautiful children waiting for me at home. More phones ring. More wives pick up and are informed that they are not alone in this world.



I will forever remember two things from the inaugural meeting of drama teachers at the beginning of the school year. Firstly, I didn't realize how many drama teachers the school had (over thirty) and how they all fit in "my" classroom, a space I had only briefly seen on that tour of the building and one that I was discretely trying to measure with the strides of my feet while others reacquainted themselves over snacks and refreshment after a long summer apart; I physically rehearse my lessons at home so I'm aware of the space needed. I was certainly impressed with the room and had a very good feeling about it being my teaching space.

The second thing I won't forget is that when it came time to introduce myself and speak of my new program, that I created and pitched to the school many months ago, I cried.

The sound of a pin dropping.

Thirty some still adult faces, some tanned from a summer at the lake, some mid-bite into a cookie, all looked at me from around the table. It was never my intention, but I couldn't help but cry when I said how thankful I was to be given this opportunity to teach these new classes. I was overcome with emotion and for the first time in front of a crowd, at an absolute loss for words.

"I don't cry when I teach," I finally said.

Everyone in the room let out a healthy laugh, breaking the ice for good. It's always been a good thing for me that I can crack a joke because I certainly have never learned how to conceal my emotions.

It had already been a journey of epic proportions for me to be seated at the table that late summer night. I had surfaced from a place of hiding and powerlessness to a wondrous new place of creativity and educational leadership. I've always thought it a cliché, the idea that some people are just born teachers. But for those of us who are teachers, I do believe that we are united by a common peculiarity. I think what separates us from the rest is our inability to hide a lesson learned.

And so with time to reflect on that evening so many months ago I believe it was pride that overcame me in that moment. While I said I was thankful for the opportunity to be there (and meant it) I was also very proud to be there. I was proud of where I had come from and where I was choosing to continue my travels as an educator and I was proud of Mason because he was my companion on this winding road to this room that would forever bring me so much joy.

On the first day of classes when I stood in the middle of this new empty place, that Mason and I had traveled to so unexpectedly, I decided to name it the Imagination Room where I believed anything, absolutely anything, was possible.



~Structured Teacher-Led Imaginative Play in the Classroom~

I sit on a vinyl conference room floor with a group of parents who all have children with Asperger's Syndrome. It's their weekly support group meeting and I've been invited to talk about my program. At this point we're well into the third term of classes and I feel I am in a better place to reveal what is working and what we still struggle with in class. I was booked for the occasion months prior knowing I wouldn't feel comfortable talking about the program until I was closer to the completion of our pilot year. I've also respectfully told the Theatre School that I would not be speaking to the media during this pilot process even though they contacted us almost immediately after our program was announced in September. This was never meant to be an attention-seeking venture. This is a child-centered undertaking. And on this night I'm not here to promote the program but to educate. I don't work on commission.

I'm quickly informed I am the first presenter who has asked this particular group of adults to move aside the tables and chairs and sit in a circle on the floor. They're already amused and we haven't even started yet. I've taped a green circle on the floor like I do for all my classes. It took me awhile to understand that asking my students to sit in a circle was an abstract concept for them. The green line has helped me greatly this term. Circles have been a non-issue since the students have a visual point of reference to work from.

"I would like *all* of my friends to sit on the green line," is what I tell my students when we meet in circle 2 or 3 times a class. "Can you sit on the green line please?" or "Would you please sit on the green line?" are not as effective in producing results as a straight up declarative sentence with no gray area to contend with.

My time in New York learning about Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) taught me to stop pop quizzing Mason.

“What colour is this? Do you like playing with that? Do you want to play with this?”

They showed us videos upon videos of moms and dads playing out the same scenes I had been accustomed to in my own life; pop quizzing a non-verbal child as he stared off into the distance in utter disinterest.

I was watching myself on that screen.

We were then shown more uplifting videos of parents speaking in action-packed declaratives like “I really *like* what you’re wearing today” and “that sure looks like a lot of *fun*.” These parents were getting a gold star for their performance, a look or a smile, maybe even a word or two as a response. I couldn’t believe how I missed that. I’m an acting teacher. I give something to my fellow actor. He takes it and gives me something in return. Relationships are like ping pong matches. Hadn’t I been trained in this? Didn’t I teach this for a decade to hundreds upon hundreds of students?

I hadn’t been playing ping pong with Mason at all. I had been hitting him over the head with a paddle.

What I learned from my RDI training was that the invitation to communicate (not necessarily speak) in children on the spectrum is so much stronger when we open with a declarative sentence like “Wow, it’s sure nice outside today,” rather than “Isn’t it nice outside today? What do you think? Should we go outside and play? Would you like that?” It was a steep learning curve for me to teach myself to stop pop-quizzing Mason about everything under the sun and instead giving myself the times to think before I

spoke; saying less but using my words as a tool to create windows of opportunity for Mason to communicate his wants, likes, dislikes and needs. We stopped talking and instead looked to him to lead the conversation. Take us by the hand and show us what he wanted. Point, say a word, look us in the eye to see what we were thinking. It soon became natural for me and we did find it helped greatly with all of our relationships. We talked less. We laughed more. We learned to not be terrified of the silence.

Even though Mason is quite conversational these days, I still strive to use a heavier dose of declaratives when speaking with him (it's amazing how many questions we ask as parents without even realizing it) and it's how I consciously speak to my students in the Imagination Room.

I then point out to my group of attentive parents, sitting cross-legged on the floor, that there is a reason behind the nametags they are all wearing. I explain how my students wear nametags throughout their 10-week session with me. Even though I quickly learn their names (it usually takes me a couple of weeks), I want the students to always have a visual of their friends' names. I have learned through my son's speech therapy and ABA programs that labeling is key in the beginning stages of communication. It would seem to me that if we're working on friendships, learning our friends' names is a very good place to start. In addition to children wearing nametags we refer to each other as "my friend so-and-so" and we use all the children's names when we sing hello and goodbye with our puppet friends.

"Sorry I know it's late but I wanted you to know that Carter is sitting in the circle at school for the first time ever," a proud mother tells me over the phone. It's about 9:30 p.m. I take phone calls at all hours and particularly this kind.

“You’ve made sitting in a circle fun. How did you do that?” she asks genuinely. Her son is in grade 2 and has never before shown an interest in sitting during circle time at school.

“Our puppets,” I say matter-of-factly. When I learned acting I was taught that on stage it’s our job to place the emphasis on the other person. In puppetry we place the emphasis on the puppet. I, of course, don’t tell the children this; it just comes naturally. How do you avoid looking at everyone’s puppet!

“You give everything to the puppet,” an artist friend who creates and performs children’s puppetry professionally taught me. I invited him to my house when I realized I had no puppet training and wanted to use puppets in my class.

“What do I do with them?” I asked, referring to a stack of handheld puppets I purchased on a whim.

“Whatever you do with them, it better be fun,” he told me.

“As an ice-breaker?”

“That’s what I use them for when I teach,” he also teaches at the university and not just my living room at 10 p.m.

“I throw them in a pile in the middle of the room and have my students pick through them and select the one they want. Then they just start playing with them. They just do. At first they feel silly but then everyone really gets into it.”

He concludes with a demonstration.

We play with the puppets. We look like idiots. No one is watching. Mason runs in to see what all the kaffuffle is about. He sticks his hand in a puppet and starts laughing and talking.”

“Hello. Hello! I’m a fireman. Hi fireman! Hello!”

The next morning I wait outside the toy store for the doors to open. I fill my cart full of puppets.

“When our kids sit in a circle at school, they’re self-conscious,” I tell Carter’s mom. When they’re holding a puppet they are focused on the puppets and not on themselves.”

“It also makes Carter feel secure,” his mom tells me. “Because he’s always so nervous and needs to hold on to something.”

That never occurred to me.

I don’t know why it’s always a surprise to me as a teacher that intended learning outcomes lead to even broader outcomes than were originally anticipated. It should just be a given by now. But instead it’s always a pleasant and rewarding surprise when it happens. I know those puppets are the first things the children dive towards when they walk into the classroom. And we sure have fun with them; we rehearse “their” voices and have “them” sing the songs. Who needs to be self-conscious when we have perfectly good puppet friends doing all the hard work for us?

So just as I had the pre-service teachers make a pizza (this was also my first lesson of the school year in the Imagination Room) I had the parents from the Asperger support group sing hello with our puppet friends. They laughed and felt silly. It broke the ice and created a sense of togetherness. We now had a shared experience to look back on.

“What level do your students’ function at,” one of the mothers asks me.

I knew it was coming. It always does.

“I get a lot of phone calls from parents who wonder whether or not their children are right for the program,” I say.

“And my *favourite* phone calls are from the parents with children who have Asperger’s. Those calls are the best ones,” I jest.

They laugh in anticipation.

“I’m calling because I’m not sure, maybe my child is too high functioning for your class -” I deliver in character.

“And my response always is: define high-functioning. Because if your child is high-functioning *socially* then yes you’re probably in the wrong place.”

A pregnant pause and acknowledgement of an answer well received. Even if it wasn’t necessarily the one they were looking for.

“I have children who are not very verbal but they are very social and I have children who are very verbal but not at all social. All these kids are on the same spectrum because they all struggle with the same thing. They do not understand other people’s perspectives and this hinders their ability to make and keep friends.

A general unspoken consensus is heard so loud it places a painful pressure in my ears. I review some lesson plans. I answer questions and I decide to stay for the meeting that follows, not as a presenter but as a guest. I’m intrigued at the similarities of their stories. Parents tell stories of school and home. We’re all together in this.



I inform the Theatre School that our state’s Autism Society has invited me to a meeting in order to review all the services being offered to persons with autism in our community. It was humbling to say the least that my program was included in the

category of services provided to young children on the spectrum. I was asked to talk about the program. I wore heels. I was not going to cry today.

“So what kinds of things do you do?” asks the lady beside me who runs a sports camp for children with ASD.

“Well, we pretend,” I say.

“To be trees? Can you explain? What do you pretend to do?”

I take a shallow breath, and glance over at my friend Mandy. She’s a music therapist. I had already mentioned to Mandy in the car that Sports Camp Lady would have a lot to say. She’s been around the longest and will want clarification on why there are more faces around the table.

“I should start by saying that I’m the mother of a child on the autism spectrum,” I say when it’s my turn to speak about my program. I also later learn there are other mom’s of children on the spectrum sitting around the table.

“And that I’m extremely honoured to be here representing the Theatre School.”

“How did your program get started?” pipes in Sports Camp Lady?”

O.k. it looks like I won’t be speaking uninterrupted.

“I approached the Theatre School a little over a year ago when I was in my final year of a Master of Education degree program with a specialization in curriculum, teaching and learning and it was time for me to pick a thesis topic. I’ve been a drama teacher since cell phones weighed five pounds...” only some quiet smiles but not from Sports Camp Lady.

“...and I wanted to research something that combined what I know about drama education with what I’ve learned about autism,” I intertwine my fingers as a visual aid.

“So I did some research, approached the Theatre School with a formal proposal; they heard me out, phoned some respected therapists in the community for their opinions on whether or not this was something that would be useful and went ahead and gave me a green light to do a pilot year. We hoped to have two classes of 8 children each in our first session; we ended up with 44 children who registered. We have run 8 classes since September and are in our third 10-week session of the year. We’ve taught over 60 children and next year I’m excited to say that we are no longer a pilot program but are a permanent program in the school.

Some happy faces indeed, mainly from the parents in the room. Still no smile from Sports Camp Lady.

We have a list of points we all are expected to cover.

I go on to say that we don’t segregate for the purpose of segregating. I explain how the Theatre School has always been inclusive of all children but that we see our program as a booster class for children on the spectrum who might not otherwise have taken a course at the Theatre School. I mention that our classes are booster classes and that we want our students to “graduate” from the program and become fully immersed in any and all classes at the Theatre School. I explain that I have two classroom assistants who both have a background in ABA, how some children have one-on-one assistants and some do not and that we work towards mastery and independence. I know for sure Sports Camp Lady and I are not going for drinks afterwards. She offers a camp that segregates children from other camps. I’m still trying to understand why. All the children have one-on-one assistants at her camp. It’s not a “booster” camp. It’s just a camp, for kids with autism. Can’t these kids go to a regular camp?

“My teaching is based on the work of British drama educator Dorothy Heathcote who introduced teacher-led imaginative role play. It’s closely related to John Dewey’s experiential learning model. Kids learn through doing, in particular our kids on the spectrum. So last week we pretended to visit a bee farm. I bring in a big picture board that has visuals of the lesson every week, so in this case pictures of bees on flowers, bees in hives, bee farmers and honey. We used wooden bee puppets that I made to pretend we were the bees that made the honey. Then we dressed up as bee farmers and we collected the honey. Then we ate the honey. The kids painted their bees and took them home so they could play some more. That’s how our kids learn. They have to *see* it and then they have to *do* it and then they have to *repeat* it.”

“It’s great,” says one of the OT’s whose son is in one of my classes.

And then came the questions.

“How much does it cost?”

“\$175.00 for 10 weeks.”

“Do you offer classes for children over 10?”

“No.”

“Who supplies the assistants if the children need one?”

“The families.”

“What if families want to participate but can’t afford it?”

“We have scholarships and some children come with funding from various organizations.”

“Do you have spring break camps?”

“Not at this time but maybe in the future.”

“Do you have summer camps?”

Same answer.

“Who pays you?”

“The school.”

Why did they ask *that* question?

“Oh, so your salary comes from student registrations,” the ABA parent support group leader concludes for me. Little does she, or any of the parents know, that I pay for all the props, costumes, crafts, toys and treats out of my own pocket. I have happily spent every single dollar that I have earned this year on games, treats, props and costumes for my students. Money can’t buy the joy this program gives me.

I look over and see Sports Camp Lady eating her moist blueberry muffin and sipping on piping hot coffee from a paper cup.

“We’re catering to middle-class America,” is what I notify my husband as I recline on our lush sofa diagonally with my feet up holding a brimming glass of red wine.

“Huh?”

“The kids I teach. All their parents can afford the class. That’s why they’re there,” I say.

“That’s with everything,” he concludes without lifting his eyes from his iPad.



~And Action! A Lesson Comes to Life~

I’ve promised the parents that I’m making a cake for my birthday party themed lesson. I have some allergies and some special diets (gluten free and casein free) in both

rooms. I've bought a batch of sparkles to dance it up. I see the lesson as being a dress rehearsal, a real-life social story.

“Mason, don't blow. I said don't blow.”

Who am I kidding? Every birthday is Mason's birthday. Granted it's gotten much better over the years. He's at least less likely these days to usurp the guest of honour's chair and insist everyone sings Happy Birthday to him. But just recently out of nowhere came a new birthday party ritual for Mason. It started with leaning in to blow out the birthday child's candles. That was innocent enough. But it then developed into him leaning in to blow out the candles followed by him biting right into the cake, face first.

The fact that this unfortunate stunt was getting laughs everywhere we went didn't help us teach Mason that this was not appropriate birthday party etiquette. This went on for some time. Mason would stand beside the cake expressionless waiting like a vulture and then out of nowhere: blow and bite.

Laughter.

We had tried drawing pictures and telling stories. It was no use.

“Birthday Party,” I say to Stephanie while she is tutoring my son one afternoon in the toy room. I recruited my teaching assistant for the Imagination Room from my own toy room at home. Stephanie could possibly be the best ABA tutor on the planet, but even she couldn't get this point across.

“This week, we'll stage a mock birthday party.”

Her eyes light up, “Perfect!”

I decide cupcakes will be easier. That way I don't have to worry about knives. Although we did visit a fancy restaurant in the Imagination Room already and students did not touch the forbidden knives on the table nor drink from the "adult glasses." I decide to stay on the safe side. No weapons.

"Oh this will be fun Stephanie," I tease throughout the week. I've bought all your favourite things for your birthday party. A tissue covered gift bag filled with junk from the discount store.

"Are we eating real cake?" one of my students asks on his way up the stairs to the studio. I collect the students every week from the lobby and walk them up to the Imagination Room.

"You bet," I say excitedly.

Turns out I had enough batter for cupcakes and a small cake I would use as our prop (the don't blow on this or bite into this prop). The children saw the cake on their way into the classroom. They also saw the decorations and the table set up. They sat on the green line and picked a puppet friend. We sang hello with our puppets as always. Excitement and thoughts of chocolate eating filled the air. We signed a giant card for Stephanie. It was going to be a surprise birthday party. When she knocked on the door we were ready.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY STEPHANIE!"

"Oh boy this is great. Is this for me?"

"Yes Stephanie; there's cake Stephanie; we got you a present Stephanie," pointing to the bag filled with junk.

Stephanie peeks into the bag. She tells us it's exactly what she wanted while trying to keep a straight face. It's no use she breaks out laughing.

"I told you I was *listening* Stephanie. Because you're my *friend* and I got you *all* the things you like because it's *your* birthday," I lay it on thick that this day is all about our friend Stephanie.

She starts pulling out the items one by one: oversized sun glasses, a piggy bank, a plastic flower, a statue of a bulldog that says "bienvenue." She acts surprised and excited and thankful all at once. We put it over the top by pointing out how she always wanted these things and they are her *favourite* things. We might actually be enjoying ourselves more than the children at this point.

I have the children ask Stephanie what she wants to do next. It is *her* party so we have to do what she wants. We play a parachute game and try to balance little balls on top. The activity suffers a quick and painful death. We move to the table to "light" the candles and sing Happy Birthday. We all count the candles on the cake. It turns out there are 16 of them.

"It's your sweet sixteen Stephanie!" I announce.

"You can drive a car now Stephanie," we hear from somewhere across the table. We're really having fun now. We review the etiquette surrounding the cake.

"Who's special day is this? Who's turning 16? Who opened the presents? Who's cake is this? Who blows out the candles? Do we stick our fingers or our face in Stephanie's special cake? Why not?"

"It will hurt her feelings," a voice from the crowd responds.

Good.

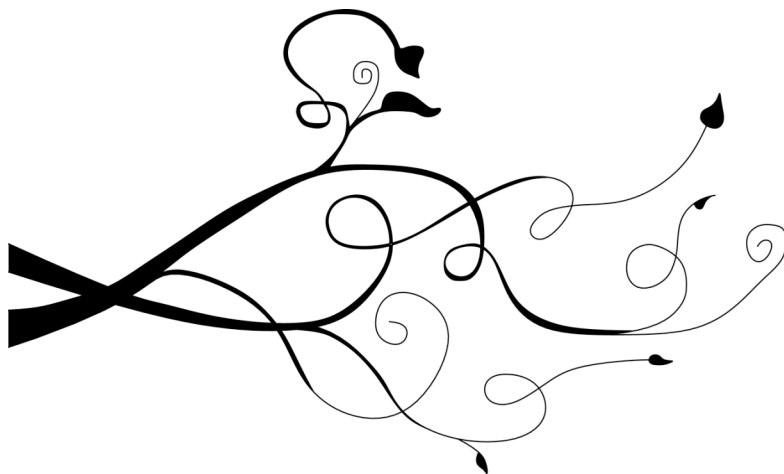
We sing with gusto. Stephanie “blows” out her candles. I take away the cake and hand out cupcakes slathered in chocolate icing and topped with mounds of sprinkles.

We then move over to the craft table where we make a craft depicting our favourite part of the drama and just like we do every week the children take turns sitting on “the magic chair” to present their craft to the class. Stephanie reads the children a story, as they sit on our story blanket, and we sing goodbye with our puppet friends. At the very end of class the children wait ever so patiently to select a treat from the treat box.

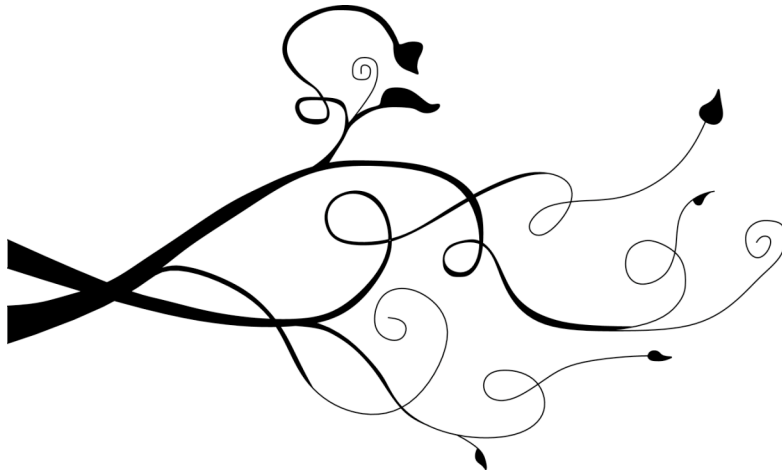
“Don’t blow Mason. Do you hear me?”

My nephew blows out his candles. The cake is taken away for cutting without Mason’s dental imprint in it.





I am a Researcher...



Chapter 3

~ Parents Speak Out about the "Imagination Room" ~

I sit at my computer with my Starbucks ready to analyze the Parent Observation Form. While I had nineteen Parent/Child Consent Forms returned to me from parents I lost a few nice folks to Cottage Country in the last couple of weeks of June. Out of the nineteen parents who gave me permission to follow their children's reactions to my lessons during these past ten weeks, fifteen attended Class #10 and completed the Parent Observation Form (one per household).

I read through my forms for the first time and see a great deal of thought and care that has gone into the answering of my open-ended questions: three things I liked about this lesson, three things I noted needed improvement in this lesson, three things I liked about this program as a whole, and three things I noted needed improvement about this program as a whole. All the parents circled "true" when asked to answer the statement: I would recommend this course to families who have children on the autism spectrum. I didn't notice answers were overly positive or harsh as a result of how old the children

were or how many classes the children had taken with me this year. Responses were pretty neutral right down the line without any major surprises.

I open a card from a parent who I have become friends with over this one year of teaching the program. Our sons have also become great friends and meet once a week for playdates outside of class. We were told our sons would not have friends. She's added a \$50 gift card knowing that I buy all the books for the class from a particular bookstore. I send her an email joking that I'll graciously accept her generous gift card and next term the books are on her.

I open an email from a parent who stated she neglected to say on her form that there *was* actually something she disliked about the program (many parents left this section blank). The cost. She wanted me to know that the program was indeed worth every penny and then some but the tuition was a barrier for families who could not afford the tuition (she also pointed out she was not one of those people). I thanked her kindly for her email and let her know that the Theater School has scholarships and bursaries (which I now realize some families might not know about) and that I will be looking into future funding for the program to make it more accessible.

It's again a reminder that not everyone is fortunate enough to provide this kind of education for their child with ASD. My five-dollar Starbucks churns in my stomach. My doctor has told me I have developed stomach problems due to stress (and an excess of expensive coffee I'm sure). My chiropractor has me sitting on a wobble seat.

"That's Old School," Ric pronounces as he walks through the kitchen watching me chart the data on drawing paper.

I know when I'm being made fun of and that's o.k. with me. That's just how I do things. I still map out my director's notes on graph paper with a ruler and a pencil, keep a handwritten journal and have an address book with white out in it. I also handwrite all my lesson plans. I don't have a Kobe eReader either.

I begin to see some emerging themes bounce right off the page. Parents liked that the lesson they observed fostered imagination and included family participation (it was an "open class" and family was invited to participate). They also liked the way I structured and taught the lesson to include sharing, a variety of activities and a topic that targeted a life skill.

"*No* one and I mean *no* one gets on my boat - " I say sternly over my headset microphone to a room full of eager children and their families. The room immediately goes quiet as all eyes look right at me. I clearly hold the golden key to the imaginary boat.

" – until you put on a life jacket." Relief. Parents and children collectively smile when they register that I wasn't actually canceling the fishing trip. After all we did make all that effort to get on a bus that took us to the ocean dock.

I hand out colourful leis that I picked up at the discount store that I frequent every Friday night while my mother baby-sits my kids. The girls at the till no longer ask me if I'm hosting a birthday party. That stopped about mid-October when one of the girls finally went out on a limb (I was buying 24 turkey basters so that my students could pretend they were all milking their own cow on the farm).

“Do you mind me asking why you buy all this stuff every week?” The people stuck behind me in line were also slightly curious I’m sure. I could feel shoulders moving forward in anticipation of my response.

“I teach a drama class for children with autism.”

“Oh.”

I was never bothered again. Mosquito hats, plastic spiders, passport covers, shovels, hula hoops, gloves, rakes, binoculars, aprons, straw skirts, shower caps, pretend money, hammers, dog leashes, babies all bought in multiples throughout the course of the year. Never a question, just a “Thank you” and “Have a nice night ma’am.”

“Wow you have a lot of stuff,” the theatre director announced on the first day of school. It eventually became known to staff that my teaching assistant and I did not travel light on our way to the Imagination Room. Mason even did his part lugging the large bag of puppets over his shoulder.

“Can I help you with your bins?”

“Let me open the door for you.”

“Oh neat. What are you pretending to be this week?”

Before I even started this entire process, I knew one thing was for sure. I better have a lot of stuff from week to week because our kids are visual and our kids like to touch stuff. So lots of fun things to see and touch from week to week was a must. So were the treats. Our kids love when it’s their turn to pick a treat from the treat box.

Sharing, taking turns and following instructions were all goals I had this year when developing the program. When I see parents have identified sharing and interaction with peers on their forms as something they liked about the lesson I wonder if they

noticed that the children all waited patiently for their own fishing rod because they knew they would get their own. I wonder if they noticed how much fish I had for the children to catch with the magnet tip of their rod. Moving from that, it made waiting their turn for the treat box a little more bearable.

I had learned in the case of props that in the Imagination Room more was always more. I made sure students had their own gear so they could move forward in the drama without having to wait or be upset that they didn't have the proper tools. Everyone today was well-behaved, engaged, happy and participating in the drama. A lot of thought had gone into structuring this lesson to produce optimal enjoyment and student successes in the activity at hand.

One parent writes: "All children are treated 'normal' unlike school." Another writes: "The teacher is sensitive and responsive to individual needs despite having so many children in one class."

What would my son have done if he didn't have a fishing rod? How many fish would make him happy? What can I do to make sure all my students have what they need to be successful in this drama? I asked myself these questions while planning this lesson and every lesson this year. It's not cheap entertaining children on the spectrum. Their expectations are high. If you're unprepared you're cooked.

Structure of the lesson is noted as a positive by the parents. They appreciate the thought process that goes into having leis and fishing rods for everyone. And lots of fish, a heaping bucket to be exact.

Most parents didn't fill out the question that asked about things that needed improvement in the lesson. Single themes (only stated by one parent and without

repetition from another) came up like: more time for craft, more pretend play, more turn taking, more organization, less sibling participation (siblings were only allowed to participate in the last class), less noise, and more one-on-one time with students.

Echoed themes (repeated more than once) are noted in the answers to my question: three things I liked about the program as a whole. Enjoyment of the children, variety of activities, teaching style, structure of the lessons and teacher insights were among the most popular.

“Demetra really ‘gets it’ because she lives it,” writes one parent.

Again only single themes (only stated by one parent and without repetition from another) are given to the question asking: three things I noted needed improvement about this program as a whole. One parent wanted updates about his child’s progress, another wanted the children to bring in games from home. Yet another said “more props” and I don’t believe it was a joke. Another complains: “It should be every day!”

In the open invitation for comments at the back of the page, one mother writes:

“I loved the idea of the birthday party to prepare our son for an upcoming real birthday party. Our tutor made a list of the things we needed to do and referring back to Demetra’s email helped as well. He was really quite successful.

We will also be trying playdate ideas as well.”

Another writes:

“This is our child’s favourite class to participate in. Thank you!!”

And yet another:

“This program is a wonderful program. Our daughter has improved much from attending this program. She looks forward to coming and Demetra has been a positive role model. Many thanks to all your hard work.”

Last one:

“Awesome.”

~ Conclusion and Recommendations for the Future ~

I knew to expect some very positive comments from the parents. I knew families were generally pleased with the program. A good indication for me was when the children kept coming back from week to week and 10-week session to 10-week session. I was happy to see some real critique however. Yes the classes are a little large for one-on-one attention. Sometimes quieter students are not given as many opportunities because they do not have the support they should in the classroom. While I asked some parents to provide one-on-one workers others could have benefited from one. Money is a factor. Finding trained staff is a factor. Advertising the program is a factor. Time is a factor. Meeting the needs of a diverse group of children is a factor.

“I’m thinking of raising the tuition to \$180.00,” the theatre director casually informs me towards the end of the ten-week session.

I’ve been careful all year not to offend. Here’s my golden opportunity.

“Can I have a prop budget?”

The answer is yes.

“You know we should train another teacher to follow you in your classes in the event that the program expands,” my friend Bev points out one day. I’ve been cramming kids in 10 – 12 per class because I couldn’t bear the thought of children on wait lists.

I agree to train teachers who have a minimum of a B. Ed.

“Tina would be great,” Bev says.

Tina is newly graduated from faculty. She runs the birthday parties at the school, a magic show in it’s own rank: cake, costumes, crafts, presents and no personal headset microphone. I’d seen her in action.

“Sure, I’ll invite her to come have a look at a class and see what she thinks.”

I side-couched through an entire lesson where we visited the jungle in search of a rare butterfly. I pointed out the picture lesson board, the green line on the floor, the warnings that I give when an activity change will happen in 5 minutes, 2 minutes, 1 minute, the story blanket, the puppets, the treat box.

“I see what’s going on here,” she interrupts. She has a background in Improv and is the mother to a son the same age as mine. He is not on the spectrum. She kneels down and talks to one of the children like she would her own child. She rolls up her sleeves and helps with the lesson. She has a warm aura yet a stern disposition.

“She’s awesome,” I say to Bev the next day at music class. Our girls sing and play the piano together. It gives us a chance to actually see each other instead of just talking on the phone. The girls sing *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* in princess costumes and tiaras.

“I wish we knew more about how the children do at school, what kind of therapies they have done or are doing, and talk honestly about whether or not a one-on-one is needed before we even get started,” I tell Stephanie in the car on our way home from class.

It’s my single biggest frustration about the program, lack of information.

We talk about the class, Stephanie and I, to and from the Theatre School every week. We talk about what's working and what needs improvement. Stephanie gracefully listens to my trailing thoughts to and from the Theatre School while Mason plays with her iPod in the backseat. I have the attention of a highly-trained ABA tutor for 15-minutes in either direction of the school. I use every minute of it to pick her brain for feedback and ideas of which she has many.

“Ask parents to answer those questions when they register,” she advises.

It's good advice but I tried that in the first term. It was awkward asking people personal questions over the phone when we hadn't even met in person yet. I dropped the venture for second and third term altogether.

“You have to fill this out,” the receptionist at a local gym casually states as she hands me a piece of paper.

“What is it?” I ask.

It's a special needs form for my son. It asks about his medical history, his abilities and areas he requires assistance. It assists the special needs coordinator here in creating better programming for him.

Bingo, I'm making one of those.



The phone rings. It's the principal from my old high school. I had submitted a resume in the event that a job might become available. I'm ready to head back to the classroom, more than a mere Saturday afternoon each week. It's been seven years since I have taught in the school system. A lot has changed since then. My son's teacher has a web page; my daughter's daycare sends weekly lesson plans home via email, all things

that inspired me to keep constant communication with my parents from the Imagination Room.

“Demetra, we’ve never met but I’ve heard so much about you,” the principal tells me. I used to write for the local newspaper. My old teachers followed my column. I was a proud grad and had mentioned as much.

“Turns out we *do* have a position available for September,” she says.

“Full-time drama.”

I sit at a boardroom table with three administrators and answer all sorts of questions about teaching drama, mainly about the Imagination Room. It’s a resume stopper apparently. I’ve directed over 20 productions and that barely comes up. Maybe it was the pride in my voice, maybe it was the delight in my eyes when I spoke of my treasured program and what I have learned in the Imagination Room about teaching drama this year, who knows. The point is I was hired the next morning over the phone.

“You’re not leaving the program are you?” Bev asks.

“There is no way I’m walking away from what I’ve started. I love that room. I’m not going anywhere.”



Months have passed since I analyzed the Parent Observation Forms in this study. The four of us went on a much needed holiday to Greece for the summer. Mason quickly learned how to ask for ice-cream and persuaded my husband and I to buy him various inflatable mattresses for our many hours at the beach including an airplane, an octopus, a turtle, a dolphin and our favourite, the alligator.

When we returned home, school was foremost on my mind. Both children would be attending different schools this year and I would be returning to the school system, to teach drama full-time, after a seven-year leave of absence to raise my children.

In the first week of classes I'm called to a team meeting regarding a student on the spectrum that will be in our classes. The resource teacher informs a small group of us that the student was crying in the office on the first day of school because he was overwhelmed. He got lost walking to and from classes and could not remember where his locker was. We need to be aware we're told.

"He needs a schedule," I interrupt.

All eyes are on me.

"My son has autism and I make him a picture schedule every morning. It looks like this."

I scribble on a piece of paper.

"Paul is in grade 10; he may not need stick drawings but he will need a constantly updated list of what to do and in what order. 1. Walk to the second floor. 2. Walk to the end of the hallway. 3. Find your locker. 4. Take out your books. 5. Walk to math class in room blank."

"For everything he does that day?"

"Yes," I say with a large amount of certainty.

I go on to explain that lessons also need to be introduced with a schedule on the white board. I point out that I structure all of my lessons with an agenda on the board so students know what we will be covering that class and in what order. I review the lesson structure at the beginning of every lesson.

Could I please make a short presentation to the entire staff I'm asked. It turns out what is second nature to me now is not widely known or understood in the way I assumed it would be in a school setting. I answer questions pertaining to theory of mind and perspective taking, reading facial cues and sensory issues.

"Please encourage all of our students with ASD to take drama," I later tell the resource teacher on our walk back to the office.

"I'll teach social skills as a hidden curriculum. It's the foundation of my thesis work."

"I sure will," she says cheerily.

That night I start my reading on integrating special needs students into the drama classroom. And not a minute too soon. Later that week I'm invited by the drama teacher's association to make a presentation at a statewide conference on the topic of inclusion in the drama classroom. How can I take what I know about teaching children on the autism spectrum drama and further my knowledge to expand into the realm of teaching all students in an inclusive integrated setting?

Let's play ball.



It's been several months since parents handed in their surveys regarding the Imagination Room. The program continues to operate at full capacity with wait lists. I'm currently looking into offering classes for pre-school age children and even teenagers. The Theatre School and I may need to look at filling out grant applications and separating students based on how they present, like one occupational therapist has

already suggested to me. My Individual Background Information Forms (Appendix G) would assist me in doing this.

Formalized step-by-step curriculums are also a future project I need to consider, as it is unlikely that as the program grows I will be able to teach all the students myself. I've already begun training teachers with the intention of handing over some of my classes in future semesters. Now that classroom structure is solidly established I have been able to bring in new materials that have been commercially packaged for children on the autism spectrum. New pretend-play products that were not available at the onset of this project have become useful in my lessons. I have reframed the Weekly Craft (Appendix H) to state "Today, I played with my friend _____. Here's what we looked like" in an attempt to really drive home the idea that we all need friends to play.

During my defense I received a comment from one of my committee members who said that I should have considered interviewing parents about their perspectives of the program. It was a strategy I overlooked because I was/am continually stopped in the hallway or telephoned by parents at home who share stories with me. The fact that these more informal perspectives of parents were not documented as data for this study is indeed a limitation and worthy of consideration in future studies like mine.

I go back to where I started however: spearheading a new program. I didn't know where it would lead me. It has led me here. I ponder if I met Richardson's (2004) criteria of substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of reality. I think I have in that I not only deeply grounded myself in the world of autism and play but I traveled through it. I believe my story was complex and artistic in its portrayal of my journey through home and classroom; it was also exposing in my honesty

of what it means to live the life of a parent/teacher/researcher with a child on the autism spectrum. I believe I have impacted others, including a fellow drama teacher who has a son with Down Syndrome. She attended a professional development workshop that I taught and came to me afterwards asking for guidance in starting a similar group for children with Down Syndrome. This journey has led to invitations to speak to both parent and teacher organizations. A local school has invited me to teach an outreach program. Social workers, ABA consultants, OT's and speech therapists are recommending their clients register for my program, and most notably, Dr. Richard Soloman himself gave me his business card and asked for a summary of my findings.

And so I ponder what my findings are exactly. I may not have fulfilled the criteria of triangulation and come out the other end with a list of truths, but I can certainly today look at my husband, my children, and myself and know that in my small pocket of the world I have, to the best of my abilities, elicited “a quicker and more successful route to social change” (Ellis, 2004, p. 254) in the area of teaching drama to children on the autism spectrum. As my thesis advisor, Francine Morin, pointed out: a program now exists in a building where one did not previously exist. It serves a wide range of children that I know and care about. It teaches pretend play skills as a tool to practicing perspective taking: what experts in the field of autism call the missing puzzle piece for children with ASD (Gutstein, 2000).

It may not have been scientific research but in a move to travel beyond the notion of triangulation of data in the field of ethnography, Klein (1990) writes,

In our roles as teachers, writers, consultants, and agents of change, we are incapable of maintaining purely the stance of “objective researcher”; instead, we

need to acknowledge that we are rhetoricians who endeavor to understand the audiences we influence. (p.122).

Ethnography, at it's core, is a tool for discourse and not "purely the empirical methodology we sometimes try to pretend it is" (Klein, 1990, p. 121); instead, it is "a starting point, the ground for an exploration of both human knowledge and self" (p.120).



The Boy in the Blue Shirt: A Poem of Hope

“Why does your son have a blue shirt?” they ask.
 It’s hard not to notice.
 He wears it every night when he goes to sleep.
 During the day it is on display, in our main entrance.

When guests come into our foyer they see the blue shirt.
 It’s draped ever so carefully behind the newel post.
 He’s not allowed to wear it during the day.
 He knows this now.

The blue shirt is filled with holes.
 My mother has mended it many times.
 I used to try throwing it away.
 He would dig it out of the trash and wear it covered in garbage.

It took me a long time to agree to “the blue shirt.”
 It was so odd looking after all the patches my mother had sewn on it.
 It clearly didn’t fit him.
 He didn’t care; it was his shirt to wear.

I wash it when he is out of the house.
 I place it back exactly as he had it.
 I’m pretty sure he notices.
 It’s the first thing he checks when he comes home from school.

I’ve grown to accept “the blue shirt.”
 I don’t understand why he finds it so soothing.
 He doesn’t understand why I don’t understand.
 We understand that we don’t see the shirt in the same way.

One morning he rose and said, “the blue shirt is too small.”
 He put it in the garbage.
 We bought a new blue shirt.
 It rests behind the newel post during the day; he sleeps with it on at night.

We have gone through more than one blue shirt.
 As his body grows so does his mind.
 His attachment to the blue shirt is still strong but changing.
 Summer has come and his new blue shirt has short sleeves; seasons now matter to him.

Last week he visited a friend’s house and was given a blue shirt to paint.
 He painted a sun in the corner and wrote his friend’s name on it.
 He wears the shirt to school. He tells his classmates about his friend.
 His friend has a blue shirt too. They wear their shirts together and they are quite happy.

Not everyone has a blue shirt.
 Not everyone understands why blue shirts are so important to some while not to others.
 Those of us with children who wear blue shirts, we have grown to see the painted sun in the corner.
 Our job is to wash the shirt, rest the shirt carefully behind the newel post and never stop hoping.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (4th ed.)*, Text revision. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
- Anderson, C. (2004). Learning in “as-if” worlds: Cognition in drama in education. *Theory into Practice*, 43 (4), 281-286. doi: 10.1353/tip.2004.0040
- Ashwin, C., Chapman, E., Colle, L., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2006). Impaired recognition of negative basic emotions in autism: A test of the amygdala theory. *Social Neuroscience*, 1(3-4), 349-363. doi:10.180/1740910601040772
- Beyer, J., & Gammeltoft, L. (1998). *Autism and play*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria against ourselves. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 266-272. doi: 10.1177/107780040000600209
- Bolton, G. (1985). Changes in thinking about drama in education. *Theory into Practice*, 24(3), 151-157. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1477034>
- Bosacki, S. L., Macgillivray, S., & Moore, C. (2011). Theory of mind and social interest in zero-acquaintance play situations. *Child Development*, 82(4): 1163-1172. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2011.01602.x
- Brown, E. (2010, April 29). Stanley I. Greenspan, 68; expert on infant development. *The Washington Post*, pp.B07.
- Brown, H. M., & Klein, P. D. (2011). Writing, Asperger syndrome and theory of mind. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-1168-7

Cahnmann-Taylor, M., & Siegesmund, R. (2008). *Arts-based research in education. Foundations for practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Carr, J. E., Severtson, J. M., & Lepper, T. L. (2009). Noncontingent reinforcement is an empirically supported treatment for problem behavior exhibited by individuals with developmental disabilities. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 30*(1), 44-57. doi:10.1016/j.ridd.2008.03.002

Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Charman, T. (1997). The relationship between joint attention and pretend play in autism. *Development and Psychopathology, 9*(1), 1-16. Retrieved from <http://journals.cambridge.org.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=43424&jid=DPP&volumeId=9&issueId=01&aid=43423&bodyId=&membershipNumber=&societyETOCSession=>

Chevallier C., Noveck, I., Happé, F., & Wilson, D. (2011). What's in a voice? Prosody as a test case for the theory of mind account of autism. *Neuropsychologia, 49*(3), 507-517. doi:10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2010.11.0422

Conn, C. (2007). *Using drama with children on the autism spectrum*. Brackley, UK: Speechmark Publishing Ltd.

Conroy, C. (2009). Disability: creative tensions between drama, theatre and disability arts. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 14*(1), 1-14. doi:10.1080/13569780802655723

- Corbett, B. A., Gunther, J. R., Comins, D., Price, J., Ryan, N., Simon, D., Schupp, C. W., & Rios, T. (2011) Brief Report: Theatre as therapy for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 41(4), 505-511. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-1064-1.
- Cotugno, A. J. (2009). Social competence and social skills training and intervention for children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 39(9), 1268-1277. doi:10.1007/s10803-009-0741-4
- Craig, J., & Baron-Cohen, S. (1999). Creativity and imagination in autism and Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorder*, 29(4), 319-326. doi:10.1023/A:1022163403479
- Creswell, J. (2007) *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dewey, J. (1938/1997). *Experience & education*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Eisner, E. W. (2004). Educational objectives-help or hindrance? In D. J. Flinders & S. J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader*, (2nd ed.) (pp. 85-91). New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Elder, E., Talmor, R., & Wolf-Zukerman, T. (2010). Successes and difficulties in the individual inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder in the eyes of their coordinators. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 14 (1), 97-114. doi:10.1080/13603110802504150
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.

- Fernandez, F. D., Cardoso, C., Sassi, F. C., Amato, C. L., & Sousa-Morato, P. F. (2008). Language therapy and autism: Results of three different models. *Pró-Fono, 20*(4), 267-272. doi:10.1590/S0104-56872008000400011
- Foxx, R.M. (2008). Applied behavior analysis treatment of autism: The state of the art. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 17*(4), 821-834.
Retrieved from
<http://dx.doi.org.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/10.1016/j.chc.2008.06.007>
- Frankel, F. D., Gorospe, C. M., Chang, Y. C., & Sugar, C. A. (2010). Mothers' reports of play dates and observation of school playground behavior of children having high-functioning autism spectrum disorders [Abstract]. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 52*(5), 571-579. doi:10.1111/j.1469-7610.2010.02318.x
- Freire, P. (1970/2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
- Frith, U. (2001). Mind blindness and the brain in autism [Abstract]. *Neuron, 32*(6), 969-979. doi:10.1016/s0896-6273(01)00552-9
- Frost, R. (1986). *Collected poems of Robert Frost*. New York, NY: Buccaneer Books.
- Gammeltoft, L., & Nordenhof, M. S. (2007). *Autism, play, and social interaction* (E. van Acker, Trans.). Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Granpeesheh, D., Tarbox, J., & Dixon, D. R. (2009). Applied behavior analytic interventions for children with autism: A description and review of treatment research. *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry, 21*(3): 162-173. Abstract retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/pubmed?term=19758537>

- Greenspan, S. I., & Wieder, S. (2006). *Engaging autism*. Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Press.
- Gutstein, S.E. (2000). *Autism aspergers: Solving the relationship puzzle*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.
- Gutstein, S. E. (2009). Empowering families through Relationship Development Intervention: An important part of the biopsychosocial management of autism spectrum disorders [Abstract]. *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry*, 21(3), 174. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/pubmed?term=19758538>
- Gutstein, S. E., Burgess, A. F., & Montfort, K. (2007). Evaluation of the relationship development intervention program. *Autism*, 11(5), 397-411.
doi:10.1177/1362361307079603
- Gutstein, S. E., Gutstein, H. R., & Baird, C. (Ed.). (2007). *The Relationship Development Intervention (RDI®) program and education*. Houston, TX: Connections Center Publishing.
- Gutstein, S. E., & Sheely, R. K. (2002). *Relationship development intervention with young children – Social and emotional development activities for Asperger syndrome, autism, PDD and NLD*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Hajidiacos, D. (2006). *Acting alone: A drama teacher's monologue survival kit*. Winnipeg, MB: J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing Inc.
- Harvard Mental Health Letter. (2010). *Autism spectrum disorders: Diagnosis and management involve time and patience*. Retrieved from www.health.harvard.edu
- Harrop, J., & Epstein, S. R. (2000). *Acting with style*. Needham Heights, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon.

- Hayward, D., Eikeseth, S., Gale, C., & Morgan, S. (2009). Assessing progress during treatment for young children with autism receiving intensive behavioural interventions. *Autism, 13*(6), 613-633. doi:10.1177/1362362361309340029
- Heathcote, D., & Bolton, G. (1994). *Drama for learning: Dorothy Heathcote's mantle of the expert approach to education. Dimensions of drama series*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Heathcote, D., & Herbert, P. (1985). A drama of learning: Mantle of the expert. *Theory Into Practice, 24*(3), 173-180. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1477037>
- Hobson, R. P., Lee, A., & Hobson, J. A. (2009). Qualities of symbolic play among children with autism: A social-developmental perspective. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 39*(1), 12-22. doi:10.1007/s10803-008-0589-z
- Howlin, P. (2003). Outcome in high-functioning adults with autism with and without early language delays: Implications for the differentiation between autism and Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 33*(1), 3-13. doi:10.1023/A:1022270118899
- Idol, L. (2006). Toward inclusion of special education students in general education, a program evaluation of eight schools. *Remedial and Special Education, 27* (2), 77-94. doi:10.1177/07419325060270020601
- Ignagni, E. & Church, K. (2008). One more reason to look away? Ties and tensions between arts-informed inquiry and disability studies. In Cole, A., & Knowles, J. G. (Eds.) *Handbook of the arts in qualitative social science research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Ingersoll, B., & Schreibman, L. (2006). Teaching reciprocal imitation skills to young children with autism using a naturalistic behavioral approach: Effects on language, pretend play, and joint attention. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 36*(4), 487-505. doi:10.1007/s10803-006-0089-y
- Jarrold, C. (2003). A review of research into pretend play in autism. *Autism, 7*(4), 379-390. doi:10.1177/1362361303007004004
- Jarrold, C., Boucher, J., & Smith, P. (1993). Symbolic play in autism: A review. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 23*(2), 281-307. doi:10.1007/BF01046221
- Kaland, N., Moller-Nielsen, A., Callesen, K., Mortensen, E. L., Gottlieb, D., & Smith, L. (2002). A new 'advanced' test of theory of mind: Evidence from children and adolescents with Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 43*(4), 517-528. doi:10.1111/1469-7610.00042
- Kamps, D.M., Leonard, B.R., Vernon, S., Dugan, E.P., Delquadri, J.C., Gershon, B., Wade, L., & Folk, L. (1992). Teaching social skills to students with autism to increase peer interactions in an integrated first-grade classroom. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 25*(2), 281-288. doi:10.1901/jaba.1992.25-281
- Kanner, L. (1943). Autistic disturbances of affective contact. *Nervous Child, 2*(2), 217-250. Retrieved from <http://affect.media.mit.edu./Rgrads/Articles/pdfs/Kanner-1943-OrgPaper.pdf>
- Kleine, M. (1990). Beyond Triangulation: Ethnography, Writing, and Rhetoric. *Journal of Advanced Composition, 10*(1), 117-125.

- Koegel, L. K., Singh, A. K., & Koegel, R. L. (2010). Improving motivation for academics in children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 40*(9), 1057-1066. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-0962-6
- Krantz, P. J., MacDuff, M. T., & McClannahan, L. E. (1993). Programming participation in family activities for children with autism: parents' use of photographic activity schedules [Abstract]. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 26*(1), 137. doi: 10.1901/jaba.1993.26-137
- Krantz, P., & McClannahan, L. E. (1993). Teaching children with autism to initiate to peers: effects of a script-fading procedure. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 26*(1), 121-132. doi:10.1901/jaba.1993.26-121.
- Kroeger, K., & Sorensen, R. (2010). A parent training model for toilet training children with autism. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 54*(6), 556-567. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2010.01286.x.
- Langer, S. (1985). The comic rhythm. In S. Barnet, M. Berman, & W. Burto (Eds.), *Eight great comedies* (pp. 456-460). New York, NY: Mentor.
- Levine, K., & Chedd, N. (2007). *Replays. Using play to enhance emotional and behavioral development for children with autism spectrum disorders*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Lillard, A.S., (1993). Pretend play skills and the child's theory of mind. *Child Development, 64*(2), 348-371. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.1993.tb02914.x

- Lim, H. A. (2010). Effect of “developmental speech and language training through music” on speech production in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 47(1), 2-26. Retrieved from <http://iimp.chadwyck.com.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/articles/displayItem.do?QueryType=articles&ResultsID=12DE96557C8969A31&filterSequence=0&ItemNumber=2&ItemID=iimp00744437&journalID=JID00222917>
- Lord, C., & Bishop, S. L. (2010). *Autism spectrum disorders, diagnosis, prevalence, and services for children and families* (Social Policy Report Volume 24, No. 2). Retrieved from <http://www.srcd.org/spr.html>
- Low, J., Goddard, E., & Melsner, J. (2009). Generativity and imagination in autism spectrum disorder: Evidence from individual differences in children’s impossible entity drawings. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 27(2), 425-444. doi:10.1348/026151008x334728
- Lovaas, O. I., (1987). Behavioral treatment and normal educational and intellectual functioning in young autistic children. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 55(1), 3-9. doi:10.1037/0022-006x.55.1.3
- Lovaas, O. I., (1993). The development of a treatment-research project for developmentally disabled and autistic children. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 26(4), 617-630. doi:10.1901/jaba.1993.26-617
- Lovaas, O.I., Smith, T., & McEachin, J. J. (1989). Clarifying comments on the young autism study: Reply to Schopler, Short, and Mesibov. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57(1), 165-167. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.57.1.165

- Lynch, S. L., & Irvine, A. N. (2009). Inclusive education and best practice for children with autism spectrum disorder: An integrated approach. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 13*(8), 845-859. doi: 10.1080/13603110802475518
- Madsen, K.M., Hviid, A., Vestergaard, M., Schendel, D., Wohlfahrt, J., Thorsen, P., Olsen, J., Melbye, M. (2002). A population-based study of measles, mumps, and rubella vaccination and autism. *The New England Journal of Medicine, 347*(19). 1477-1482. Retrieved from <http://www.nejm.org>
- Manning, M.M., & Wainwright, L.D. (2010). The role of high level play as a predictor social functioning in autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders 40*(5): 523-533. doi: 10.1007/s10803-009-0899-9
- Marco, E. J., Hinkley, L. B., Hill, S. S., & Nagarajan, S. S. (2011). Sensory processing in autism: A review of neurophysiologic findings. *Pediatric Research*. Advance online publication. doi:1203/PDR.0b013e3182130c54
- Marks, S. U. (2007). Can “special” programs for children with autism spectrum disorders be inclusive? *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 32*(4), 265-268. Retrieved from <http://www.tash.org/publications/RPSD/RPSD.html>
- Mastrangelo, S. (2009). Harnessing the power of play – Opportunities for children with autism spectrum disorders. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 42*(1), 34-44. Retrieved from http://www.lianalowenstein.com/power_of_play.pdf
- Maurice, C., Green, G., & Luce, S. C. (Ed.). (1996). *Behavioral intervention for young children with autism, A manual for parents and professionals*. Austin, TX: Pro-ed.
- McCarthy, J. (2007). *Louder than words: A mother's journey in healing autism*. New York, NY: Dutton.

- McCarthy, J. (2008). *Mother warriors: A nation of parents healing autism against all odds*. New York, NY: Dutton.
- McConachie, H. & Diggle, T. (2007). Parent implemented early intervention for young children with autism spectrum disorder: a systematic review. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, 13(1), 120-129.
- McMillan, J. H. (Ed.). (2004). *Educational research – Fundamentals for the consumer*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Moor, J. (2002). *Playing, laughing and learning with children on the autism spectrum*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mhule, R., Trentacost, S. V., & Rapin, I. (2004). The genetics of autism. *Pediatrics*, 113(5), 472-486. Retrieved from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/113/5/e472.full.html>
- Muncey, T. (2010). *Creating autoethnographies*. London, England: Sage.
- Murdock, L. C., & Hobbs, J. Q. (2010). Picture me playing: Increasing pretend play dialogue of children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-1108-6
- Nelson, A. (2010). *Foundation role plays for autism*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Norman, R. (2002). Power as pedagogy: The potent possibilities in drama education. *English Quarterly*, 34(1-2), 69-74.
- Notbohm, E. (2005). *Ten things every child with autism wishes you knew*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.

- Notbohm, E. (2006). *Ten things your student with autism wishes you knew*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons Inc.
- Nilsson, J. (2010, March 20). Imagination is more important than knowledge. *The Saturday Night Post*. Retrieved from www.saturdayeveningpost.com
- O'Connor, C., & Stagnitti, K. (2011). Play, behaviour, language and social skills. The comparison of a play and a non-play interventions within a specialist school setting. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1016/j.ridd.2010.12.037
- O'Reilly, M., Sigafos, J., Lancioni, G., Edrisinha, C., & Andrew, A. (2005). An examination of the effects of a classroom activity schedule on levels of self-injury and engagement for a child with severe autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 35(3), 305-311. doi:10.1007/s10803-005-3294-1
- Park, M. (2008). Making scenes: Imaginative practices of a child with autism in a sensory integration-based therapy session. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 22(3), 234-256. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1387.2008.00024.x
- Park, M. (2010). Parents of kids with autism not more likely to divorce, study suggests. CNN. http://articles.cnn.com/2010-05-19/health/autism.divorce.rates_1_autism-experts-parents-of-autistic-children-autism-spectrum-disorder?_s=PM:HEALTH
- Peter, M. (2003). Drama, narrative and early learning. *British Journal of Special Education*, 30(1), 21-27. doi: 10.1111/1467-8527.00277
- Peter, M. (2009). Drama: Narrative pedagogy and socially challenged children. *British Journal of Special Education*, 36(1), 9-17. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8578.2009.00414.x

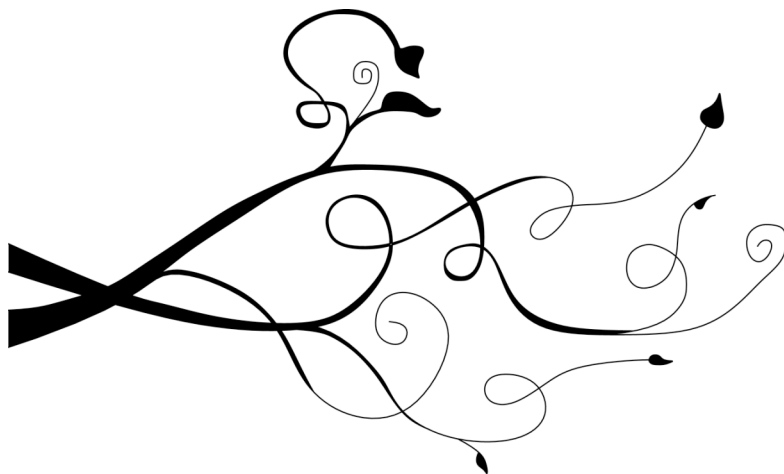
- Pfeiffer, B. A., Koenig, K., Kinnealey, M., Sheppard, M., & Henderson, L. (2011). Effectiveness of sensory integration interventions in children with autism spectrum disorders: A pilot study. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 65(1), 76-85. doi:10.5014/ajot.2011.09205
- P.L.A.Y. Project. (Producer). Workshop one: *Be your child's best play partner* [DVD]. Available from <http://www.playproject.org>
- Prendeville, J. A., Prelock, P. A., & Unwin, G. (2006). Peer play interventions to support the social competence of children with autism spectrum disorders [Abstract]. *Seminars in Speech and Language*, 27(1), 32. Abstract retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/pubmed?term=16440243>
- Rapin, I., & Dunn, M. (2003). Update on the language of individuals on the autistic spectrum. *Brain and Development*, 25(3), 166-172. doi:10.1016/S0387-7604(02)00191-2
- Rapin, I., Dunn, M., & Saul, R. (1997). Language disorders in children with autism. *Seminars in Pediatric Neurology*, 4(2), 86-92. doi:10.1016/S1071-9091(97)80024-1
- Rasmussen, B. (2010). The 'good enough' drama: Reinterpreting constructivist aesthetics and epistemology in drama education. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 15(4), 529-546. doi:10.1080/13569783.2010.512187
- Reagon, K. A., & Higbee, T. S. (2009). Parent-implemented script fading to promote play-based verbal initiations in children with autism. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 42(3), 659-664. doi:10.1901/jaba.2009.42-659

- Ricard, M., Girouard, P. C., & Décarie, T. G. (1999). Personal pronouns and perspective taking in toddlers. *Journal of Child Language*, 26(3), 681-697. Retrieved from <http://journals.cambridge.org.proxy2.lib.umanitoba.ca/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=37018&jid=JCL&volumeId=26&issueId=03&aid=37017&bodyId=&membershipNumber=&societyETOCSession=>
- Richardson, L. (2000). Evaluating ethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(2), 253-255. doi: 10.1177/107780040000600207
- Roley, S. S., Bissel, J., & Clark, G. F. (2009). Providing occupational therapy using sensory integration theory and methods in school-based practice. *American Journal of Occupational Therapists*, 63(6), 823-842. doi:10.5014/ajot.63.6.823
- Rudy, L. (2008). Does autism in the family lead to divorce? *Autism Spectrum Disorders Blog*, 1-4. Retrieved from <http://autism.about.com>
- Sarakoff, R. A., Taylor, B. A., & Poulson, C. L. (2001). Teaching children with autism to engage in conversational exchanges: Script fading with embedded textual stimuli. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 34(1), 81-84. doi:10.1901/jaba.2001.34-81
- Schneider, C. B. (2007). *Acting antics*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Schopler, E., Short, A., & Mesibov, G. (1989). Relation of behavioral treatments to “normal functioning”: Comment on Lovaas. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57(1), 162-164. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.57.1.162
- Sherratt, D. (2002). Developing pretend play in children with autism: A case study. *Autism*, 6(2), 169-179. doi: 10.1177/1362361302006002004
- Sherratt, D., & Peter, M. (2002). *Developing play and drama in children with autistic spectrum disorders*. London, England: David Fulton Publishers.

- Siff Exkorn, K. (2005). *The autism sourcebook. Everything you need to know about diagnosis, treatment, coping and healing*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Smith, T., & Eiseketh, S. (2011). O. Ivar Lovass: Pioneer of applied behavior analysis and intervention for children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 41*(3), 375-378. doi:10.1007/s10803-010-1162-0
- Smukler, D. (2005). Unauthorized minds: How “theory of mind” theory misrepresents autism. *Mental Retardation, 43*(1), 11 – 24.
- Solomon, R. (2011, April). *Do what your child loves, and your child will love being with you: The P.L.A.Y. Project®*. 23rd Talk presented at the Annual Autism Conference conducted at Viscount Gort, Winnipeg, MB.
- Solomon, R., Necheles, J., Ferch, C., & Bruckman, D. (2007). Pilot study of a parent training program for young children with autism: the PLAY project home consultation program. *Autism, 11*(3), 205-224. doi:10.1177/1362361307076842
- Sowell, T. (2001) *The Einstein Syndrome*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Stahmer, A. C. (1995). Teaching symbolic play skills to children with autism using pivotal response training. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 25*(2), 123-141. doi:10.1007/BF02178500
- Stahmer, A. C., Ingersoll, B., & Carter, C. (2003). Behavioral approaches to promoting play. *Autism, 7*(4), 401-413. doi:10.1177/1362361303007004006
- Seuss, Dr. (1990) *Oh, the places you'll go!* New York, NY: Random House.
- Szatmari, P., Bryson, S. E., Boyle M. H., & Streiner, D. L. (2003). Predictors of outcome among high functioning children with autism and Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 44*(4), 520-528. doi:10.1111/1469-7610.00141

- Stephens, C. E. (2008). Spontaneous imitation by children with autism during a repetitive musical play routine. *Autism, 12*(6), 645-671. doi:10.1177/1362361308097117
- Thorp, D. M., Stahmer, A. C., & Schreibman, L. (1995). Effects of sociodramatic play training on children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 25*(3), 265-282. doi:10.1007/BF02179288
- Vismara, L. A., & Rogers, S. J. (2010). Behavioral treatments in autism spectrum disorder: What do we know? *Annual Review of Clinical Psychiatry, 6* (December 2009), 447-468. doi:10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.121208.131151
- Wagner, B. J. (1985a). *Dorothy Heathcote – Drama as a learning medium*. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Wagner, B. J. (1985b). Elevating the written word through the spoken: Dorothy Heathcote and a group of 9- to 13-year-olds as monks. *Theory Into Practice, 24*(3), 166-172. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1477036>
- Wan, C. Y., Demaine, K., Zipse, L., Norton, A., & Schlaug, G. (2010). From music making to speaking: Engaging the mirror neuron system in autism. *Brain Research Bulletin, 82*(3-4), 161-168. doi:10.1016/j.brainsbull.2010.04.010
- Wan, C. Y., & Schlaug, G. (2010). Neural pathways for language in autism: The potential for music-based treatments. *Future Neurology, 5*(6), 797-805. Retrieved from http://www.musicianbrain.com/papers/Wan_2010_NeuralPathways_Autism_Music-basedTreatments.pdf
- Watanabe, M., & Sturmey, P. (2003). The effect of choice-making opportunities during activity schedules on task engagement of adults with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 33*(5), 535-538. doi:10.1023/A:1025835729718

- Wieder, S., & Greenspan, S. (2003). Climbing the symbolic ladder in the DIR model through floor time/interactive play. *Autism, 7*(4): 425-435.
doi:10.1177/1362361303007004008
- Wieder, S., & Greenspan, S. (2005). Can children with autism master the core deficits and become empathetic, creative, and reflective? A ten to fifteen year follow-up of a subgroup of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who received a comprehensive developmental, individual-difference, relationship-based (DIR) approach. *The Journal of Developmental and Learning, 9*, 39-61.
- Weiss, M. J., & Harris, S. L. (2001). Teaching social skills to people with autism. *Behavior Modification, 25*(5), 785-802. doi:10.1177/0145445501255007
- Williams, D. (2010). Theory of own mind in autism: Evidence of a specific deficit in self-awareness? [Abstract]. *Autism, 14*(5), 474-494. doi:10.1177/1362361310366314
- Wolf, A. (2005). *Acting for kids on the autistic spectrum*. New York, NY: iUniverse, Inc.
- Wolfberg, P. J. (2009). *Play and imagination in children with autism, (2nd ed.)*. Overland Park, Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Company & New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Wolfberg, P. J., & Schuler, A. L. (1993). Integrating play groups: A model for promoting the social and cognitive dimensions in play in children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 23*(3), 467-489. doi:10.1007/BF01046051



APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter to “The Theatre School”

UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Dear “Artistic Director of the Theatre School”,

My name is Demetra Hajidiacos, and I am a Master’s student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. For my thesis, I would like to survey parents whose children are enrolled in my spring “Imagination Room” classes that I have designed to meet the specific needs of children on the autism spectrum.

I am specifically interested in what parents find of value in these new classes and what they see needs improvement.

Parents who are interested in participating in my study will be asked to observe one class and fill out a brief form. I have attached the Parent Observation Form as well as the Parent/Child Consent Form that my teaching assistant, “Stephanie” will distribute to parents on my behalf.

The Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board has approved this research. If you have any questions or would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me by email or at my home phone at 555-5555. In addition, you may contact my faculty advisor, Dr. Francine Morin at 555-5555.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Demetra Hajidiacos

Appendix B: Parent/Child Consent Form



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Parent/Child Consent Form

Research Project Title: The Imagination Room: Teaching Drama to Children on the Autism Spectrum, One Mother's Journey to Receiving a Treasured Education

Student Researcher: Demetra Hajdiacos. I am a graduate student at the University of Manitoba. I am conducting this project in partial fulfillment of my Master of Education degree.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Focus and Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this study is to tell a three-part story of a parent/teacher/researcher. The story will be informed by the researcher's personal experiences with having a son on the autism spectrum as well as the researcher's journey to develop a drama course to specifically meet the needs of children with ASD. The story has three chapters: "I am a Parent", "I am a Teacher" and "I am a Researcher".

This type of research/storytelling, whereby the researcher recounts a personal and professional journey, is known as autoethnography. Autoethnography is a branch of qualitative research. It contains rich details of individuals, actions and settings, as well as descriptions of the writer's thoughts, in order for the reader to experience the researcher's journey as realistically as possible.

The first part of my study, Chapter 1: "I am a Parent", is already complete. Chapter 2: "I am a Teacher" and Chapter 3: "I am a Researcher" have yet to be written. In this part of my study, I have designed a teacher-led imaginative drama course intended to meet the specific needs of children on the autism spectrum (using picture boards and breaking down tasks, establishing routines and using a wealth of costumes and props etc.). In Chapter 2 and 3 I would like to explain the pedagogy behind my lesson plans and would like permission from you to:

1. Describe my lessons in full detail including the children's reactions to the lesson (i.e. things the children say specifically in response to my lessons, whether the group appears to be enjoying themselves or not, whether my activities seem to be too easy or too difficult for the children). I will not be monitoring student growth or the children's aptitude for pretending.

As a matter of my routine teaching practice I have been keeping journal notes of this nature, for my own professional growth. In signing this form I ask your permission to retrieve information from my teaching journal that dates back to April 10, 2011 (the first class of this 10-week session). For instance, if I introduced a lesson idea in class and it was successful I would like to recount this event. I do not keep any specific notes of children in my journal. Examples of my exact journal notes are: “the children seemed to enjoy this activity” and “this lesson was not as successful as I had hoped.”

When retelling a lesson I will describe group reactions and recount specific quotes from children but will not follow the progress of a particular child. The purpose of the note taking is so I can grow as an educator. If a lesson idea was not successful, I need to ask myself why it was not successful and what can I do differently as a teacher next time to ensure success. I am monitoring my progress as a professional and not the children’s individual progress. Monitoring the individual progress of the children in the class is not the intent of the study.

2. Have parents fill out an Observation Form so I can learn what parents liked or did not like about Class #10 (the final class of this ten-week spring session) and the course as a whole.

Teacher as Researcher:

In this project, I am both the teacher of your children and a researcher. I understand that because of this relationship, and because your child is already currently enrolled in this class, you may feel pressure to participate in the study; however, I am employing several strategies to ensure that your participation is completely voluntary. From the outset, it is important for you to understand that your participation or non-participation will have no effect on my relationship with you or your children.

Also, it is important for you to know that there is no disadvantage in not consenting because your child will continue to receive the same program and learning experiences that he/she has already been receiving from me regardless if you agree to participate in the study or not. If you chose to not participate, nothing your child says or does in class will be referred to in my thesis. For example, if six of the children in the class consent and four do not, when writing my thesis, I will only refer to the specific quotes and reactions given by those six students.

If at any point you would like to withdraw from this study I will immediately, and without hesitation, electronically delete and manually shred any information that I have collected from you or your child. This will have no bearing on my study and will not offend me personally.

Research Procedures:

You are being asked to participate in my research. Participating in this research means that you consent to do the following:

1. Read the course description (distributed via email) prior to the commencement of the course if you have not already done so.
2. Read weekly emails sent by the teacher/researcher that summarizes the lesson plans, if you have not already done so.

3. Fill out an Observation Form that will be distributed and collected by the teaching assistant at the end of Class #10 (the final class of this session). Since parents are asked to participate in the last class, this form will need to be filled out after class. The Observation Form should take approximately 15 - 20 minutes to fill out. The teaching assistant will supervise your children in play while you take the time to fill out this form. Both you and your children are asked to remain in the classroom during this time. You and your child are free to leave whenever you would like. You are not required to stay while others complete their form. The teacher will not be present in the room while you are filling out your form.

Deception, Risks and Benefits:

There is no deception employed in this study. There are no risks to participating in this study. You may benefit from the opportunity to observe my teaching style and learn from my lesson ideas. This project does not involve any more risk than you would experience in your everyday life. Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You may withdraw your participation at any time. Your decision to participate or not participate in this study will not affect your child's standing in this course.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

Your privacy is important. The Observation Form you will be asked to complete is anonymous and your responses will be kept confidential. Only I will have access to your research records.

Your anonymity is important. Your name, likeness or names and likenesses of your children will never be revealed in my final thesis report. Names of individuals and places will be changed to protect participants' identities. Also, the likeness (gender, hair colour, height etc.) of your child will be altered so that no one will ever be able to identify your child. I will keep my journal, Consent Forms and Observation Forms locked in a cabinet in my home office. This material will be shredded upon completion of the study or by latest December 31, 2012.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation for participating in this study; however, your time is valuable to me. If you participate and agree to allow your child to participate in this research, you will receive a \$20 gift card to Toys R Us as a token of my appreciation.

Feedback and Debriefing

Weekly emails, which you already receive and will continue to receive from me, inform you about my lessons in this course. In addition, you will have the opportunity to request and read a summary of my study upon its completion.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a participant. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and/or refrain from answering questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board(s) and a representative(s) of the University of Manitoba Research Quality Management/Assurance office may also require access to your research records for safety and quality assurance purposes.

This research has been approved by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns about this project you may contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Francine Morin at 555-5555 or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 555-5555. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

I thank you for your consideration in supporting research on drama programming for children on the autism spectrum. Please feel free to contact me at any time if you have questions by emailing me or phoning me at home at 555-5555.

Sincerely,

Demetra Hajidiacos
B.A. (Hons), B.Ed.

Part 1: Your Consent to Participate

Your name (please print)

Your Signature

Your email address

Part 2: Your Consent to Have Your Child Participate

I, _____, _____ consent, or _____ do not consent to having my child/ward participate in this research project.

Parent/Guardian's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Please forward a summary report of the research findings to me by email using the following address: _____.

Appendix C: Parent Observation Form

Dear Parents,

Please answer the following questions to the best of your abilities. There are no right or wrong answers. I thank you kindly for your time.

Please circle one:

1. Gender of your child: Male Female
2. Age of your child: 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
3. Number of courses your child has taken with this instructor:
 1 2 3
4. Three things I liked about this lesson:
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
5. Three things I noted need improvement in this lesson:
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
6. Three things I liked about this program as a whole:
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
7. Three things I noted need improvement about this program as a whole:
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
8. I would recommend this course to families who have children on the autism spectrum.

True

False

Please use the back of this form to make any additional comments about this class, the instructor or the program as a whole.

Appendix D: Photographs of Picture Lesson Boards

Week 1: Pirates



Week 2: The Airport



Week 3: The Restaurant



Week 4: The Garden



Week 5: The Bee Farm



Week 6: Birthday Party



Week 7: Road Safety



Week 8: A Playdate!



Week 9: The Jungle



Week 10: Fishing



Appendix E: Introductory Parent Letter for Spring Session

"Theatre School"
 "Imagination Room" Spring Session
 "Oh the places we'll go and the people we'll meet"

Dear Parents,

Welcome to "The Theatre School's" "Imagination Room" Program and thank you kindly for entrusting me with your beautiful and precious children. I want you to know that it is a responsibility that I take very seriously.

Our first class is on (date of class) in (room #). I will meet you and your children in the lobby downstairs at the beginning of each and every class. Please do not bring your children upstairs to wait in the hallway outside the classroom.

Class times are as follows:

"Imagination Room"	(Ages 5 - 7)	(time)
"Imagination Room"	(Ages 8 - 10)	(time)

Teacher Bio:

I'm an educator/writer/parent with many years of experience teaching in the school system as well as the private sector. I'm a published author of a book for teachers entitled *Acting Alone: A Drama Teacher's Monologue Survival Kit* (J. Gordon Shillingford Publishing Inc., 2006); I have professionally reviewed theatre for "The Paper", the "Radio Station" and the "Other Paper" and I am currently in my final year of a masters program in arts education at "The University." I also, just like you, happen to be the parent of an incredibly special and unique child who is on the autism spectrum.

Course Goals:

It is my hope that these new classes will help our children:

- ✓ learn to play imaginatively and co-operatively with other children
- ✓ achieve a positive sense of self-awareness and self-esteem

Please understand that these classes are pilot classes and I, along with your children, will be learning and growing as we move through what I hope is a magical and rewarding (third!) term.

Meet our assistants:

Our classroom assistant is "Stephanie." "Stephanie" has a background in Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) and will be studying to become a speech language pathologist this fall. She has been helping with our younger class since the beginning of the school year and has a keen eye for implementing strategies that help our children focus and learn. She is also incredibly warm and caring and we are absolutely thrilled to have her helping us in both classes this term!

We are also extremely fortunate to have "Blair" join us again this term as a classroom volunteer. "Blair" is a former ABA tutor and he is working towards a degree in occupational therapy. His generous and caring personality coupled with his knowledge and experience has been a huge asset to our program and we thank him for offering to come spend one more term with us!

A Note regarding one-on-one assistants:

One-on-one assistants are most welcome but they must comply with the following rules:

- ✓ Allow the child the opportunity to listen to the teacher's full instruction before jumping in to explain the instruction to the child in a modified manner. The teacher will allow time for assistants to do this after a classroom instruction has been given.
- ✓ The role of the assistant is to help the child become more fully involved in the classroom activity and not to take the child to a corner of the room to do another activity. This is distracting to the rest of the children. If the child requires a time-out please take the child outside.
- ✓ Edible reinforcers are permitted but none with nuts, wheat or dairy and not in view of other children if possible.
- ✓ Assistants should use their quietest voice possible and use least-intrusive means to help the child they are responsible for.
- ✓ **All new students are required to have a one-on-one assistant for the first two classes.** The teacher will then determine whether the student requires one-on-one support in subsequent weeks or if the student is able to attend class on his/her own. In the case that a child requires one-on-one support and parents are unwilling to offer that support, the child will not be permitted to continue in the class.

Weekly themes:

We will meet once a week for ten weeks and every class will have a different theme. In the first term we focused on occupations (doctors, chefs, superheroes, police officers, firefighters etc.). In the second term we focused on locations (Hawaii, the Moon, a

farm, a pajama party, the dentist's office etc.). This term's theme is "Oh the places we'll go and the people we'll meet" bridging the concepts introduced in both the first and second term. In our first class (date) we will be pirates in search of lost treasure!

You will be given each week's theme in advance in order to prepare your child and get him/her excited about class. You may, on occasion, be asked to bring simple props or costume pieces from home. On (date) it would be great if your child could wear a white, red or blue t-shirt to class (very pirate like!).

Structure of the class:

- ✓ Parents will bring their children into the classroom and help their child 1) sit in the circle and 2) pick a puppet for the "Hello Song."
- ✓ Parents will leave (unless they will be staying to be a one-on-one assistant to their child). Parents are asked to kindly stay in the building in case they are needed.
- ✓ After the "Hello Song" we discuss the theme and go on a journey. Our journey is always plagued with a problem that requires solving through creative and cooperative ways. For instance, last term we visited a daycare and discovered that we were the ones who were responsible for taking care of all the babies! We had to learn to change diapers, hold the babies, take them for a walk in their strollers etc.
- ✓ Our creative Improvisations all have a beginning, middle and end.
- ✓ The journey is concluded with a craft that asks the children to articulate their favourite part of the story.
- ✓ We share our crafts with our friends (present them in a circle Show & Tell style).
- ✓ We enjoy a story that ties in with the theme of the class.
- ✓ We sing our goodbye song with our puppets.
- ✓ Children pick a fun treat from the "treat box."
- ✓ Children stay seated until their name is called to come to the door, high five the instructors and be collected by a parent, who is standing outside the classroom door to receive them.

A weekly email recaps the journey and informs parents of next week's theme. Lesson ideas for ABA tutors and respite workers will also be provided.

Safety Policy:

Only parents who have provided a one-on-one assistant in the classroom with their child are permitted to leave the building for the duration of the class. If you step out of the building for a moment, please leave another adult in your place in the event that your child needs you. We do not leave our children unsupervised in the hallway. If a child needs to go to the bathroom, we find the child's parent or guardian to accompany the child.

Other Important Notes:

Please leave all outside toys in the car. They are distracting to the students and sometimes hard to put away once they have been brought into the building.

Our weekly craft is an excellent conversation starter about what your child learned in class. Please compliment your children on their craft and ask about their favourite part of the lesson.

I will be phoning parents in week 6 to discuss your child's progress in the course.

Parents will be asked to participate in our final "open class" on (date). Grandparents, friends and school resource staff are also welcome on that day to a maximum of four people per child.

If you have any questions or would like to make any suggestions of places we can go and people we might meet there, please always feel free to either phone me at home at 555-5555 or email me. If you are phoning, evenings after 8 p.m. work best for me.

I invite parents who are new to the program to phone me on either Monday or Friday evening this week between 6 - 9 p.m. to discuss your child's strengths and areas he/she is currently working on. Please also feel free to email me if that works better for you.

I look forward to getting to know all of you in the weeks to come and making some GREAT drama with your children!

Sincerely,

Demetra Hajidiacos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

Appendix F: Weekly Parent Emails

These are the exact emails that were sent to parents whose children were in my classes during this 10-week Spring Session. Names and dates have been changed.

Week 1: Pirates

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to be pirates this past "Saturday!"

- We dressed like pirates (wearing colorful bandannas).
- We looked at pictures of pirates, pirate ships and lost treasure.
- We huddled and analyzed a treasure map.
- We steered our ships to the island in question (using hula hoops for our captain's wheels).
- We docked our ships and looked through our telescopes (paper towel rolls).
- We identified our marker (a tree).
- We took three steps southeast of the tree (as per the instructions on our map).
- We dug for the treasure (using shovels).
- We found our treasure chest (a wicker basket with a lid).
- We cautiously opened our treasure and found jewels (necklaces)!

After we each took our share of the treasure we made a craft that illustrated our favorite part of our pirate adventure and we shared our craft with our friends. We also listened to a story, sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

Next class we will visit an airport. If your children could each bring to class their own small empty suitcase that would help with the fun!

Thank you!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 2: The Airport

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to travel through the airport this past "Saturday!"

- We looked at pictures of the inside of an airport (arrival/departure board, check in desk etc.).
- We made luggage tags with our names and Canadian stickers.
- We received tickets to a place named Somewhere (which the children took home with them).
- We received "passports" (which the children took home with them).
- We packed our luggage with weather appropriate clothing (clues were on the ticket).
- We lined up to weigh (on my bath scale!) and check our luggage.
- We showed our passport, handed over our ticket and boarded the plane.

Going to the airport required a great deal of critical thinking (what to pack), patience (waiting in the line to check in) and imagination (believing we were about to board a flight to Somewhere). The whole experience was quite lifelike as the children rolled their baggage in the one hand and held their ticket and passport in the other. When the children did reach the front of the line they were asked what their name was, where they were going and what was in their luggage. Next time you travel, don't be surprised if your children are able to check in themselves!

After we successfully boarded our plane to Somewhere we made a craft that illustrated our favorite part of our journey and we shared our craft with our friends. We also listened to a story, sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

This lesson is an example of a role-playing drama that can be transferred into a real-life skill. If you are unsure about taking your child to a new environment (like an airport) try using the simple strategies above to role-play at home before going to the new environment. Social stories are often used to prepare our children for new environments but for those of us who learn by doing, actually doing the activity is even better. Think of it as a dress rehearsal!

Next class we will visit a fancy restaurant! Please send your children in their "fancy" clothes.

Thank you!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 3: The Restaurant

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to visit a fancy restaurant this past "Saturday!"

- We looked at pictures of restaurants (formal and informal).
- We discussed what we touch and don't touch at a fancy restaurant (centerpieces, candles, wine glasses etc.).
- We drove to the restaurant.
- We were seated and given "Kids" Menus (that "Stephanie" made and the children took home with them).
- We did not touch the centerpieces or wine glasses!
- We ordered our food.
- We placed our napkins on our laps.
- We had to raise our hand when our name was called and our server was handing out the food we ordered.
- We had an unexpected visit from our puppet friend the Lion who touched everything he was not supposed to.
- We disciplined the Lion for not behaving properly in the restaurant (the children did this without any prompting!).
- We left/did not leave a tip for our server (the teacher).

After we ate our food we made a craft that illustrated our favorite part of our journey and we shared our craft with our friends. We also listened to a story, sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

This lesson is another example of a role-playing drama that can be transferred into a real-life skill. If you are unsure about taking your child to a new environment (like a restaurant) try using the simple strategies above to role-play at home before going to the new environment. Social stories are often used to prepare our children for new environments but for those of us who learn by doing, actually doing the activity is even better. Think of it as a dress rehearsal!

Next class we will visit a garden. Please send your children in a sun hat.

Thank you!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 4: The Vegetable Garden

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to plant a vegetable garden this past "Saturday!"

- We looked at pictures of gardens, gardening tools and gardeners planting.
- We looked at real vegetable seeds.
- We put on gardening gloves and used gardening tools to plant our imaginary garden.
- We sprayed our gardens with water.
- We watched our gardens grow.
- We chased away the bunnies who were trying to eat our vegetables!
- We made a Mother's Day craft and picked a pouch of seeds to give to our mothers as a gift.

We also listened to a story, sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

Next class we will be visiting a Bee Farm!

Please let me know if any of your children are allergic to honey. If none of the children are allergic, we will taste the honey that we collect from the bees.

Thank you!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos

B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 5: The Bee Farm

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to be bee farmers this past "Saturday!"

- We looked at pictures of bees on flowers, bees in hives, bee farmers and honey.
- We discussed how bees make honey.
- We used our bee puppets (that the children took home with them) to "make" the honey.
- We dressed like bee farmers and collected the honey.
- We ate the honey!

After taste testing the honey we painted stripes on our bee puppets. We also listened to a story, sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

Next class is "Stephanie's" (pretend) birthday party!

I will make a cake with no egg, milk or wheat. Any other allergies please let me know :)

Thanks!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 6: Birthday Party!

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to celebrate “Stephanie’s” 16th birthday this past “Saturday!”

- We looked at pictures of birthday parties: birthday boys & girls, cakes, cupcakes, balloons, candles, games etc.
- We signed a giant card for our friend “Stephanie.”
- We surprised “Stephanie” when she came into the classroom.
- We gave “Stephanie” a present filled with all her favourite things.
- We played a parachute game.
- We sang "Happy Birthday" to “Stephanie”.
- We let “Stephanie” blow out her own candles.
- We did not put our fingers in the cake.
- We all ate chocolate cupcakes with sprinkles on top!

After wiping off all the chocolate from our faces we made a craft that depicted our favourite part of the party. We also listened to a story (older class only), sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

Next class we will go on a bike ride through the neighbourhood. Please send your children with their bike helmets.

Thanks!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos

B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 7: Road Safety

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to drive our cars and ride our bikes on the street this past "Saturday!"

- We looked at pictures of roads, bike helmets, cyclists, stop signs, traffic and pedestrian lights.
- We drove our cars and rode our bikes on the streets (taped out on the classroom floor).
- We stopped at the stop signs (children took turns holding the signs) and looked both ways for traffic and pedestrians.
- We ran through the street with our rainbow ribbons (representing our cars and bicycles) and stopped at the intersections.
- We waited as all sorts of people crossed the street: lady with groceries, mom with stroller, elderly man with cane etc.
- We talked about the importance of never riding our bike or walking alone.
- We talked about the importance of stopping at the "red hand" and stop signs.

We then made a craft that illustrated our favorite part of our journey and we shared our craft with our friends. We listened to a story about friendship, sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

Our older students also told a circle story about two friends who rode their bikes to the park (each student adds a part to the story when called upon). Turns out our friends were being eaten by mosquitoes at the park and decided to go to the mall instead!

Next class we will have a playdate at our puppet friend Lion's house. If the children could each bring a toy/board game/activity that they enjoy and would like to explain/share with Lion that would add to the fun!

Thanks!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 8: Playdate!

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to have a playdate at Lion's house this past "Saturday!"

- We looked at pictures of friends playing together.
- We shared our toys, music and activities with Lion and all our friends.
- We made a painting.
- We played a game "Let's Pretend."

we also listened to a story about friendship, sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Our older students also told a circle story about an owl and a lion who found a curious purple egg in a tree! Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

Next class we will take a safari trip through the jungles of Africa. Please send your child to class with an empty backpack.

Final "Open" Class:

(Date) is our last class. This is an "open" class. Please feel free to invite family and friends to a maximum of four guests per child. One family member will participate with your child in the drama on that day and the rest will be seated around the room on chairs. The children are also presented with awards on that day.

Thanks!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 9: The Jungle

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to visit an African Jungle this past "Saturday!"

- We looked at pictures of jungles and jungle animals.
- We looked at a picture of a rare butterfly only found in Africa (green and yellow).
- We looked at a picture of a girl catching a butterfly in a net.
- We packed our backpacks (some real and some imagined) with water, snacks and our butterfly net.
- We flew on a little bumpy airplane to Africa.
- We got out of the airplane and slathered ourselves in sunscreen and bug spray.
- We put on our sun hats and set foot into the jungle.
- We tiptoed past sleeping lions, looked up at tall giraffes, saw monkeys swinging and avoided the snakes!
- We finally came to the valley of the green butterflies and on the count of three caught as many as we could.
- We filled our backpacks with butterflies to take back to Winnipeg (probably not legal now that I think of it).
- We were given our butterfly net to take home for summer play in the backyard.

We also made a safari Father's Day craft, listened to a story about pretending with friends, played "Let's Pretend!", sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Our older students also told a circle story about two pink butterflies in search of a place to rest. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

Next class is our final class. We will go fishing! Please feel free to bring family and friends to a maximum of four guests per child. It's warm in (room #) this time of year folks so please dress light. The children are also presented with awards on that day. I know it's cottage season but it would be absolutely wonderful to see everyone on that day :)

Thanks so much for an awesome year everyone!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Week 10: Fishing

Dear Parents,

We had a great time pretending to fish in the ocean today!

- We welcomed our family and friends!
- We each invited an adult family member and our siblings to join us in today's drama.
- We looked at pictures of fishermen/women, fish, fishing boats, bait and fishing rods.
- We looked at a pop-up book of animals found in the ocean: dolphins, whales, sharks, sea horses etc.
- We took a bus to the dock.
- We put on life jackets (leis) and jumped off the dock to test our life jackets.
- We all floated (thankfully)!
- We boarded our boat and started the motor.
- We saw sharks and dolphins and turtles and whales etc.
- We each received our own fishing rod.
- We caught a bucket full of fish (plastic fish with magnets).
- We drove away in our boat saying goodbye to all the animals we had met.

We also made a craft that depicted our favourite part of the journey, listened to a story about a shark who was afraid of a spider, sang hello and goodbye with our puppets and picked a fun treat from the treat box. Please feel free to pass on our lesson ideas to therapists, tutors and respite workers working with your child at home.

Today was our last class and all the children were awarded with certificates and a small gift card. If your child did not attend class today I will get in touch with you in August to get those items to you. I'll be away for the entire month of July.

Registration for fall session begins in July. Please phone the theatre school office at 947-0394 ext. 230 for more information. I don't know the exact date registration begins but I do know that we are scheduled for Saturday in fall (same times).

Thank you all so very much for sharing your beautiful and wonderful children with me this term and this year (for those of you who have been with me since September). It was an absolute joy and an honour. I hope to see you all again next year.

Have a fabulous summer everyone!

Demetra

DEmEtrA HaJiDiAcos
B.A. Hons, B.Ed., M.Ed. Student

"Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." - Pablo Picasso

Appendix G: Individual Background Information Form

“Imagination Room”
Drama for Children on the Autism Spectrum
“Theatre School”
Individual Background Information Form
(For future students)

Dear Parents,

It is our intention at the “Theatre School” to provide appropriate programming for your children, aiding in their enjoyment of pretend play with peers and assisting with growth in the areas of self-awareness and self-esteem.

The information collected on this form is private and confidential. The purpose for gathering this information is to help the teacher create appropriate programming for the children in the class as well as determine if your child requires a one-on-one assistant in class.

Please be aware that it is at the discretion of the teacher whether or not your child requires a one-on-one assistant in class. Parents will not be permitted to be their child’s one-on-one assistant as this creates anxiety in the other children whose parents are not in the classroom. This is not a parent participation class. If it is determined by the teacher that your child requires a one-on-one assistant your family must provide one.

Your child’s one-on-one assistant must have the means (token boards, edible reinforcers etc.) in which to help your child learn and grow in class without being disruptive to the learning of other children. Children who are disruptive to the learning of others may be asked to withdraw from the program. Disruptive behaviour includes but is not restricted to yelling, hitting, biting and non-compliance.

Children who participate in our program are asked to perform tasks such as sitting in a circle for instruction time, following the teacher in teacher-led imaginative play, completing a craft, presenting their craft in front of the class, sitting on a blanket for story time and playing fun and simple structured games with classmates. Each cycle of the class is between 5 – 10 minutes in length. If your child is not able to sit in a circle for more than 5 minutes at a time or follow simple one-part instructions given by the teacher then this class is not appropriate for your child at this time.

As specified in the “Theatre School’s” brochure, children who will benefit most from this program are children who are currently enrolled in an intensive intervention program such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) and Development, Individual Difference, Relationship-based therapy (DIR/Floortime).

We look forward to the opportunity of providing an excellent drama education for your child. If you have any further questions please contact our classroom teacher and program creator, Demetra Hajidiacos.

Personal Information:

Name of child: _____

Age of child: _____

Child's date of birth: _____

Name of primary contact (parent or guardian): _____

Home phone of primary contact: _____

Cell phone of primary contact: _____

Email of primary contact: _____

Name of secondary contact (parent or guardian): _____

Home phone of secondary contact: _____

Cell phone of secondary contact: _____

E-mail of secondary contact: _____

Emergency Contact Information:

Name: _____ Phone: _____

Relationship: _____

Full name of educational assistant (if applicable): _____

Diagnostic Information:

Please place a checkmark beside your child's formal diagnosis, as determined by a medical professional:

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Asperger's Disorder

Pervasive Developmental Disorder not Otherwise Specified

Date of diagnosis: _____ Place of diagnosis: _____

Please place a checkmark beside one of the following:

- My child is non-verbal
- My child is verbal
- My child is verbal but has difficulties expressing him/herself

Please place a checkmark beside all of the therapies that your child has had access to:

- Speech Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) – Preschool
- Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) – School Age
- Relationship Development Intervention (RDI)
- DIR/Floortime
- Other: _____

Please place a checkmark beside all the therapies that your child is currently receiving:

- Speech Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) – Preschool
- Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) – School Age
- Relationship Development Intervention (RDI)
- DIR/Floortime
- Other: _____

Has your child been diagnosed with any comorbidities in addition to Autism such as

ADHD, Seizer Disorder etc.? Please explain: _____

Does your child have allergies?

Yes

No

If yes, please list: _____

Is your child on any medications?

Yes

No

If yes, please list: _____

School History:

Please place a checkmark beside one of the following:

My child has a full-time one-on-one assistant at school.

My child has a part-time one-on-one assistant at school.

My child does not have a one-on-one assistant at school.

My child is home schooled.

Child's Grade: _____

Please place a checkmark beside all behaviours that your child presents at school.

Hyperactivity

Short attention span

Impulsivity

Aggressiveness

Self-injurious behaviours (head banging, finger, hand or wrist biting)

Temper tantrums

Odd responses to sensory stimuli (sound, touch light, odour)

- High threshold to pain
- Fascination with certain stimuli
- Abnormalities in eating
- Abnormalities in mood or affect (giggling or weeping for no apparent reason)
- Lack of fear in response to real danger
- Excessive fear in response to harmless objects
- Other: _____
- None of the above

Please describe any behaviours that you have checked: _____

Please list any other information that may help the teacher create optimal programming for your child including likes and dislikes: _____

I acknowledge that all the above information is correct.

Signed _____

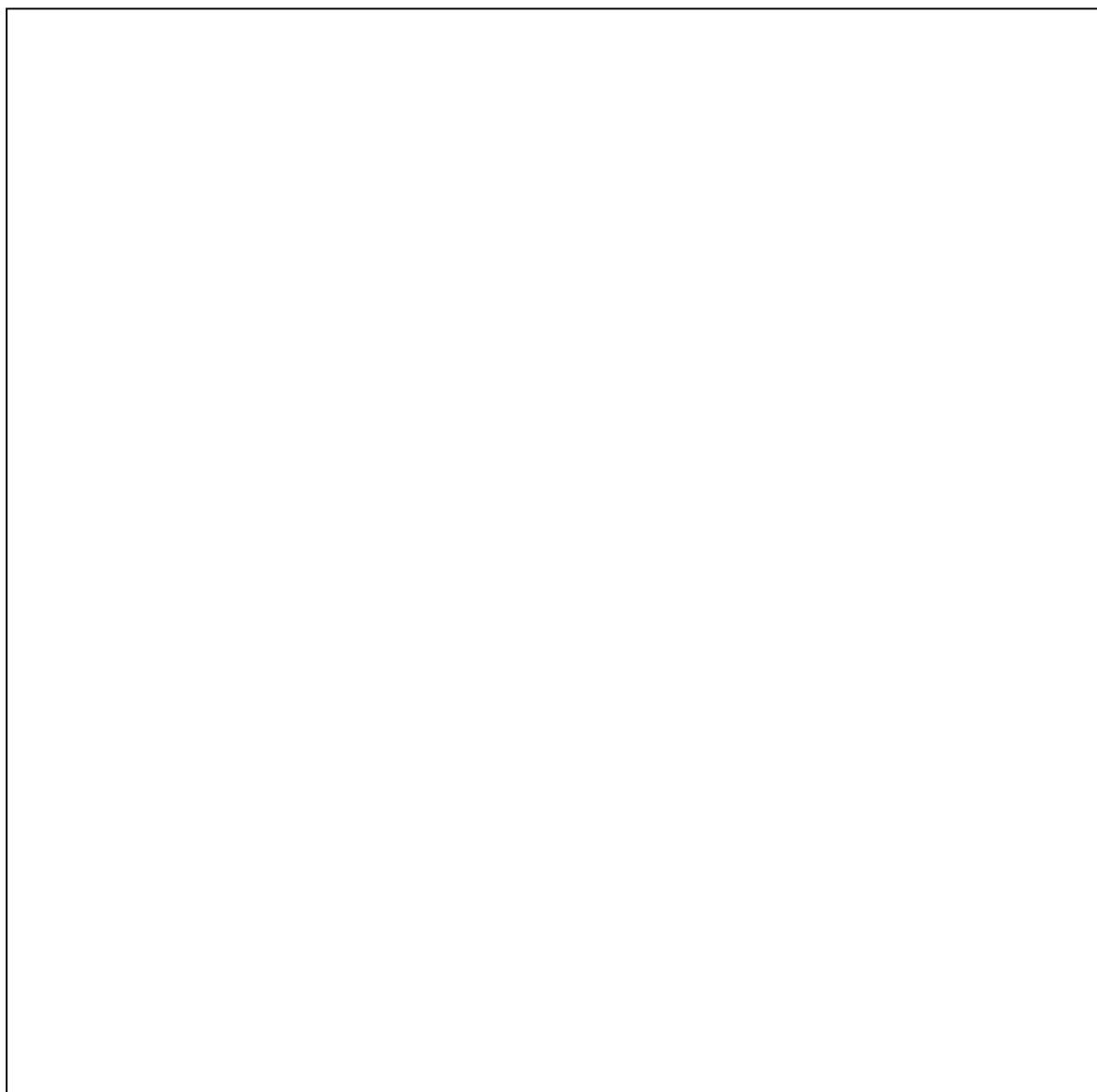
Date: _____

Appendix H: Weekly Craft

Name: _____

Today, my favourite part of drama class was when:

Here's what it looked like:



Appendix I: Drama Award

This Drama Award is presented to

_____ (Child's Name) _____

For having an awesome imagination!

And for completing (name of class)

at

_____ (Name of centre) _____

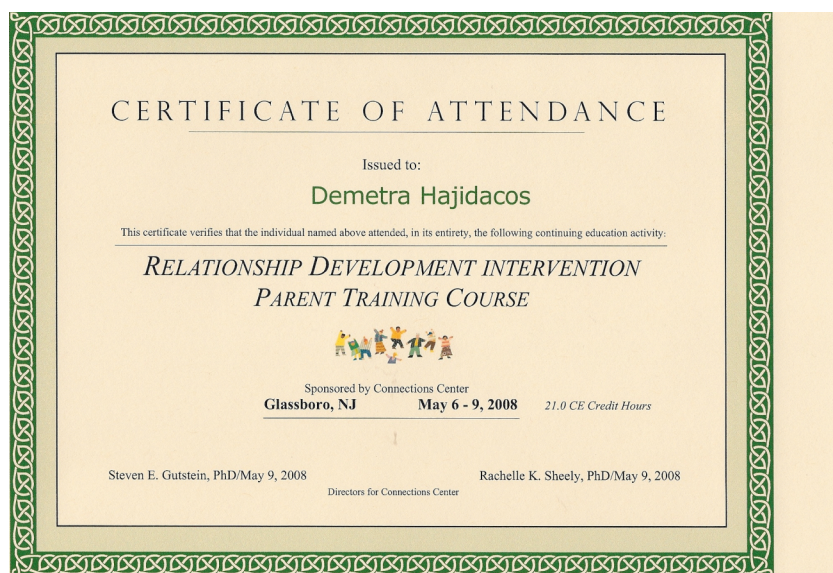
_____ (City and province/state) _____

_____ (Date) _____

Signed, my teachers:

I put this on fancy award paper

Appendix J: Certificates






UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA | **Ethics**
Office of the Vice-President (Research)

CTC Building
208 - 194 Dafoe Road
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
Fax (204) 269-7173
www.umanitoba.ca/research

APPROVAL CERTIFICATE

May 16, 2011

TO: **Demetra Hajdiacos** (Advisor F. Morin)
Principal Investigator

FROM: **Stan Straw, Chair** 
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

Re: **Protocol #E2011:035**
"The Imagination Room: Teaching Drama to Children on the Autism Spectrum, One Mother's Journey to Receiving a Treasured Education"

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the **Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board**, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement. This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

Please note:

- If you have funds pending human ethics approval, the auditor requires that you submit a copy of this Approval Certificate to the Office of Research Services, fax 261-0325 - please include the name of the funding agency and your UM Project number. This must be faxed before your account can be accessed.
- if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year approval; otherwise the account will be locked.

The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study (available at: http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors_ethics_human_REB_forms_guidelines.html) in order to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.