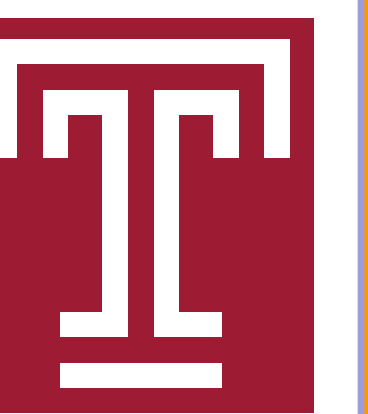




Stakeholder Perceptions of the Effects of a Theatre Program for Children with ASD



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Abstract: Arts programs are credited with helping children with Autism Spectrum Disorders gain cognitive and social skills. Yet exact measurement of programs' effects and underlying mechanisms are rare. We completed a systematic study of adult stakeholders of a large, successful theatrical program and found they believed the program builds imitation, motor, and communication skills. They emphasized the program's use of modeling, small group work, warm-ups, and relaxation.

Introduction:

- Arts programs are often claimed to help children, with varied levels of evidentiary support
- Studies of arts programs are often disconnected from what is actually happening in the programs
- One best practice is to work with stakeholders to determine what they believe is effective about their program
- Need to focus both on:
 - Outcome (what behaviors or skills change as a result of the program)
 - Mechanism (what about the program is causing change)
- We focused on a well-received, in-school musical theatre program for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Previous work has found theatre programs for children with ASD improve social behavior (Lerner 2011), emotional recognition (Lerner & Mikami, 2012), peer interaction (Guli et al., 2013; Corbett et al., 2011), and theory of mind (Corbett et al., 2013)



Guiding Questions:

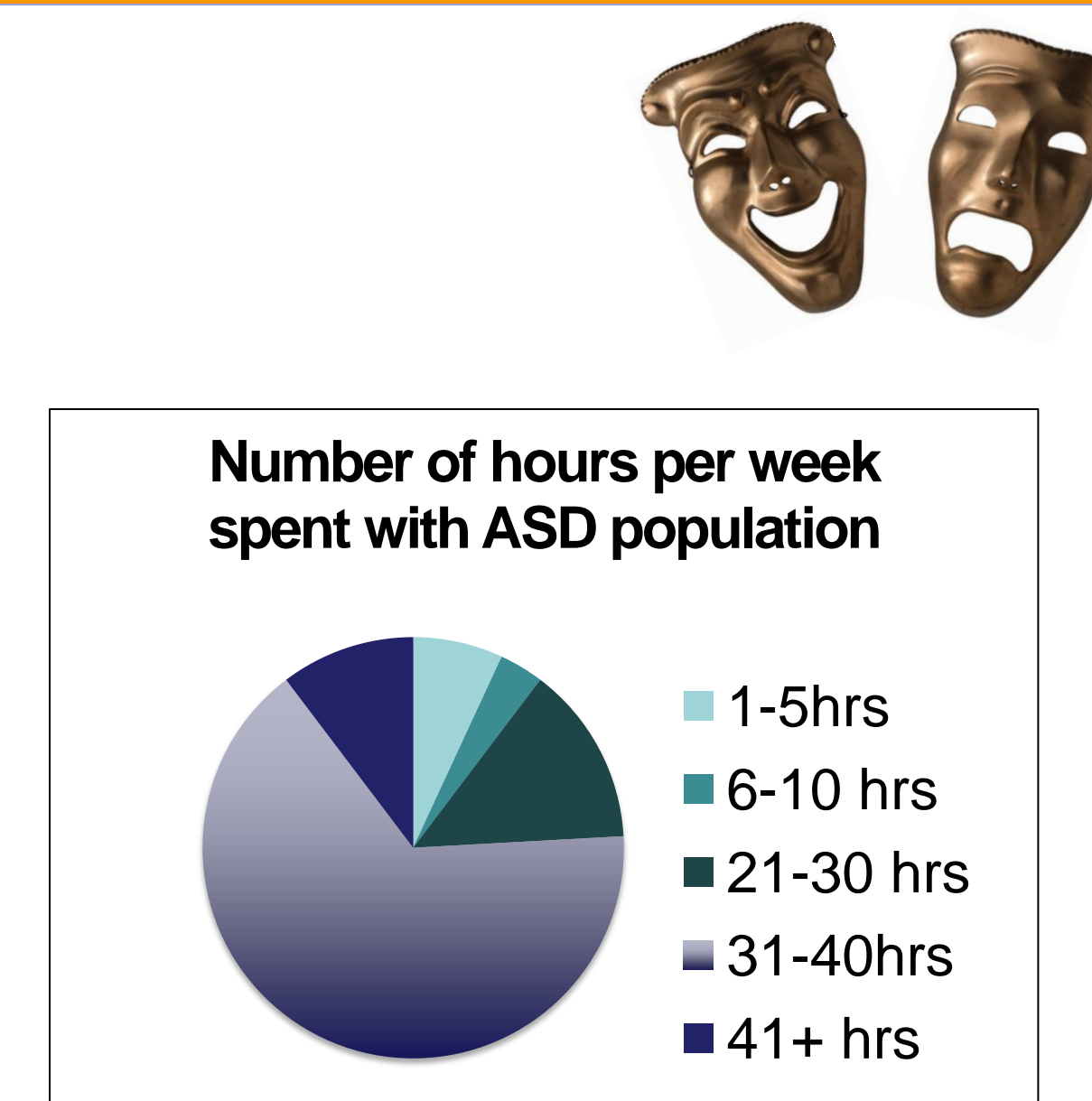
- What behaviors or skills do stakeholders believe are changed as a result of children's participation in the program?
- What instructional strategies do stakeholders believe are core to their program (which might be mechanisms for changes in the students)?



Methods:

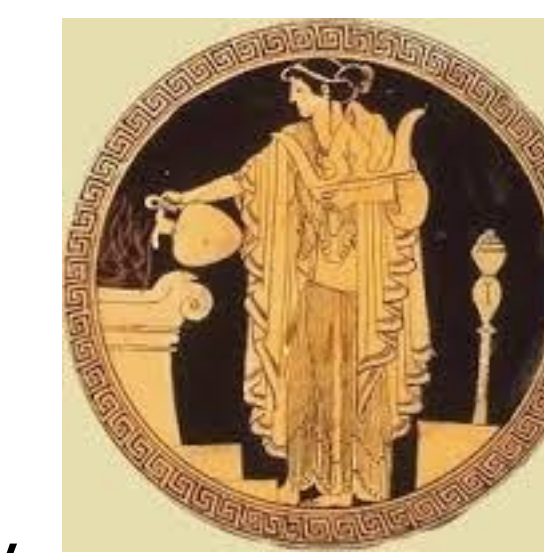
Participants:

- 29 staff and faculty from school for children with ASD, connected to musical theatre program
- 3% <BA, 7% BA, 83% MA, 3.5% PhD, MD, PsyD, 3.5% other
- 90% had formal training with ASD



Delphi Poll:

- Researcher-developed survey:
 - List of skills possibly changed by program
 - Rate how much each skill is affected** (1 "not at all" to 4 "very")
 - List of possible program strategies
 - Rate each strategy** (1 "not at all" to 4 "very")
 - How *familiar* you are with the strategy
 - How *commonly* you use the strategy
 - How *commonly others* use the strategy
 - How *useful* you find the strategy
 - How *competent* you feel to implement the strategy
- Survey sent to every teacher, teaching artist, paraprofessional, and administrator of the program
 - Stakeholders rated all skills and strategies and added their own
 - Survey amended to include new ideas & show the mean/ modal ratings from first round
 - Survey re-sent to all Round 1 stakeholders for final ratings, including previous ratings



Perceptions of Skills Changed:

Skill	Round 2: Mean Score	Round 2: Percentage rating as 4 "very"
Imitation skills	3.31	46%
Motor skills	3.23	38%
Communication skills	3.15	54%
Emotion recognition and expression	3.15	31%
Language understanding	3.15	38%
Turn taking	3.15	38%
Expressive language	3.08	38%
Matching of physical body (including face) to emotional state	3.08	31%
Memory	3.00	31%
Self-esteem	3.00	31%
Stepping out of comfort zone	3.00	23%
Emotion regulation	2.92	38%
Peer relationships	2.92	31%
Overcoming shyness	2.92	31%
Creativity	2.77	31%
Empathy	2.77	23%
Physical control in relation to other people	2.77	31%
Eye contact	2.62	23%
Self-concept/self-understanding	2.54	15%
Self-control and attention	2.54	23%
Vocal control	2.46	23%
Academic performance	2.15	8%

Perceptions of Mechanistic Strategies:

	Chronbach's Alpha across question type	Round 2: Useful	Round 2: Percentage rating as 4 "very"
Modeling/Imitation	.928	3.93	93%
Small group work	.950	3.79	79%
Vocal/Physical warm ups	.950	3.71	86%
Relaxation/Deep breathing	.915	3.71	71%
Incorporating special interests into activities	.923	3.64	71%
Performance	.900	3.64	64%
Helping each other with lines and blocking	.923	3.64	X
Use of song	.897	3.57	71%
Video/Audio modeling	.939	3.57	64%
Reflections	.971	3.57	64%
Games and related activities that necessitate social interaction	.974	3.50	57%
Students as audience	.932	3.50	57%
Peer modeling	.947	3.43	50%
Rehearsal process	.944	3.43	57%
Role play	.934	3.21	50%
Working on lines	.936	3.14	43%
Games and activities that involve the use of nonverbal skills and perspective taking	.941	3.14	36%
Collaborative co-creation	.947	3.14	43%
Self-awareness-bodily response	.934	3.07	43%
Discussing/playing with characterization	.915	3.00	29%
Acting vocabulary	.933	2.93	29%
Physical games with spatial relationships	.925	2.64	21%
Guided imagining	.951	2.43	7%
Playing "add on" games	.952	2.36	7%

Conclusions:

- High agreement across question type for strategies used in program and among participants on the strategies used
- Lower strong agreement for skills changed by program
- Stakeholders can reach some consensus around activities in a program of this type
- 5 Highest-rated strategies are not particularly *theatrical* in nature
- Sets up measurement of skills & mechanisms for change in a later program evaluation
- RCTs are critical, but beginning with stakeholders allows authentic building of research program
- There are many programs that use theatrical techniques for ASD skills - they should be studied and studied well

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