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## Theatre Communications Class: Impact on Students With and Without Autism

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

**Theatre Communications Class: Impact on students with and without autism**

A Thesis Submitted to the  
University Honors Program  
In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree  
With Upper Division Honors

Department of  
Allied Health & Communicative Disorders

By

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DeKalb, Illinois

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**University Honors Program**

Capstone Approval Page

Capstone Title:

**“Theatre Communications Class: Impact on students with and without autism”**

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Janet Olson', is written over a horizontal line.

Department of Allied Health & Communicative Disorders

Date of Approval

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**Honors Thesis Abstract  
Thesis Submission Form**

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**Abstract:**

This study evaluated an inclusive Theatre Communications Class implemented at a suburban high school. The class is designed to target social and communication skills in students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) using role playing theatre activities with students without ASD that are prepared and performed for the class. Caregivers of 2 students with ASD completed the Autism Social Skills Profile prior to enrollment. Two students without ASD completed the Multidimensional Attitudes Scale to assess their attitudes towards individuals with autism prior to enrollment. In December of 2011, after a semester in the program, they completed the measures again. Analyses revealed that the social skills of students with ASD increased positively, while the high school students attitudes towards individuals with autism were impacted positively in the areas of cognition and affect.

## INTRODUCTION

High school students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often demonstrate significant deficits in social interaction which are a core feature of the diagnosis of ASD and impact their ability to interact with peers (Happé, 1998; Quill, 1995; Zager, 1999). In order for high school students with ASD to work on these social skills it is important for them to interact with peers in "least restrictive environments" that offer opportunities not just for academic engagement but also for social interaction. The 1997 Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stipulates that learners with disabilities, including those with ASD, are entitled to educational services in maximally normalized settings that offer the greatest opportunities for contact with typical peers (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000; Stainback & Stainback, 1992). Therefore, school districts have become increasingly interested in ways to facilitate social interaction for high school students with ASD within the school curriculum.

One way for students with ASD to work on social interaction with their peers, is by having them participate in theatre coursework within the regular education curriculum. Theatre activities utilize drama and role playing processes in order to increase and effect socialization between the students with ASD and their peers (Jones, 1996). To take advantage of this, a Theatre Communications Class was designed in a Chicago suburban high school to utilize theatre activities with students with and without ASD to promote their interaction and to practice drama fundamentals. Students enroll in the class at the time of high school registration and receive credit for the class. A drama teacher, a special education teacher and teachers' aides conduct the course. This class has been offered at the high school since the fall of 2007. However, despite this interest in using theatre to promote social interaction for high school

students with autism, there are no studies examining if they improve the social skills of adolescents with autism. This study is the first to examine outcomes from this suburban high school class and the first to examine if theatre activities improve social interactions for children with ASD.

Not only might theater communications classes help students with ASD, but they also have potential to improve high school students' attitudes toward disability. For example, Carter & Hughes (2006) asked special education teachers, their paraprofessionals, and general education teachers to complete a questionnaire about inclusive classroom settings. They reported that one of the most substantial benefits of inclusion for general education classmates were "improved attitudes toward students with disabilities"(pp.185) and that it "increased their knowledge about students with disabilities" (pp.185) (Carter & Hughes, 2006). These data suggest that an inclusion setting allows regular education students to improve their attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. However, Carter & Hughes (2006) did not directly measure student's attitudes toward disability and did not specifically consider outcomes from a theatre communications course. This study is the first to measure student's attitudes toward autism after participating in an inclusive theatre communications class.

This study will evaluate a Theatre Communications class that has been implemented for more than four years at a Chicago suburban high school. The class is designed to increase social skills of students with ASD by having them interact with regular education students in role playing theatre activities that are prepared and performed for the class. In order to prepare the regular education students to work with students with ASD, a mandatory training session is held in August prior to the start of the fall semester. This training session is conducted by a Special Education Teacher and a Drama/Theatre Teacher at the school using curricular materials they

prepared. Students receive information about what ASD is, how it impacts an individual's daily living, and associated difficulties. Students self-enroll in the Theatre Communications class during the spring, as part of the typical fall class registration process.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants and Procedures*

Twenty-two students enrolled in the Theater Communications Class and their caregivers were invited to participate in the current study. Caregivers of 2 students with ASD (ages 15 and 17) completed the "Autism Social Skills Profile" (Bellini, 2006) and a background questionnaire (See Appendix C) prior to the August 2011 enrollment. Both students with ASD were males and were enrolled in the Theatre Communications class for the first time. Two students without ASD (ages 16 and 17) completed the "Multidimensional Attitudes Scale" (Findler et.al, 2007), and a background information questionnaire prior to enrollment (See Appendix D). One subject was excluded because her pretest self-ratings were at ceiling so change could not be demonstrated with this measure. The remaining students without ASD were both females, had no prior experience working with students with ASD, and were enrolled in the Theatre Communications class for the first time. In December of 2011, caregivers of the students with ASD and the students without ASD completed the measures again and returned them to the researchers.

## **Results & Hypotheses**

### *Students with ASD:*

This study tested the following hypothesis:

1. It was hypothesized that students with ASD will increase their communication and social skills after participating in a Theatre Communications class.

To test this hypothesis, the “Autism Social Skills Profile” (Bellini, 2006) was completed by caregivers prior to enrollment and after completing a semester in the class. The “Autism Social Skills Profile” (Bellini, 2006) includes 49 items that are used to assess the communication and social skills of the students with ASD. Caregivers rate each item on a scale from 1-4. On the scale, one represents that the individual never exhibited the behavior, two-sometimes, three-often, and four-very often. The number of items at each rating level was tallied at pretest and posttest to look for positive change. For both participants with ASD, the number of 3 and 4 ratings increased and the number of 1 and 2 ratings decreased after participating in the Theater Communications Class. See Figures 1 and 2.

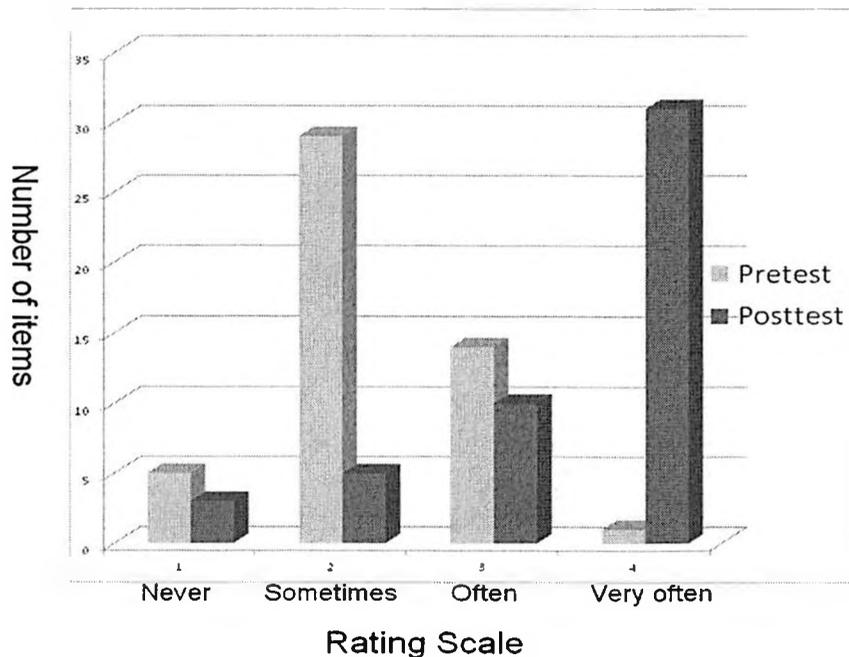


Figure 1 Social Skill Ratings for Participant A

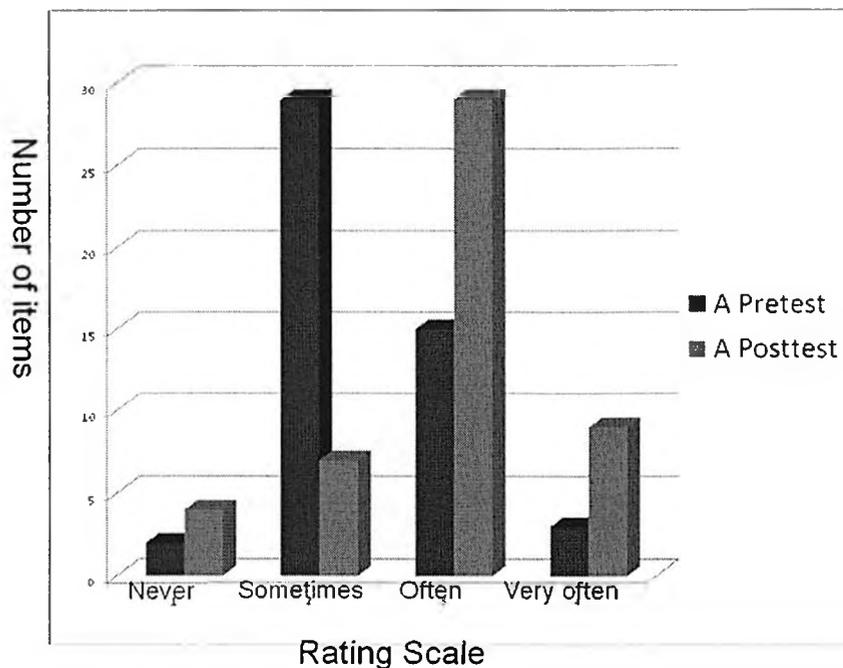


Figure 2 Social Skills Ratings for Participant B

*Students without ASD:*

This study tested the following hypothesis:

1. It was hypothesized that students without ASD will positively change their attitudes toward individuals with autism on three dimensions: cognition, affect, and behavior.

To test this hypothesis, researchers assessed the three rating scales for cognition, affect, and behavior in the pretest and posttest of the “Multidimensional Attitudes Scale” (Findler et.al, 2007). The “Multidimensional Attitudes Scale” (Findler et.al, 2007) provides a brief description of a scenario and then asks students to rate the levels of cognition, affect, and behavior an individual exhibits during the scenario. Within each dimension, items were evaluated and tallied as showing positive change, negative change, or no change. Participant 1 had 5/15 items that changed positively for affect, 6/10 for cognition, and 4/8 for behavior. Participant 2 had 6/13

items that changed positively for affect, 2/4 for cognition, and 1/3 for behavior. A positive change which was defined as an increase in at least one rating level, occurred in both participants. Participant 1 exemplified a positive change in cognition and participant 2 demonstrated a positive change in affect after participating in the Theatre Communications Class. See Figure 3.

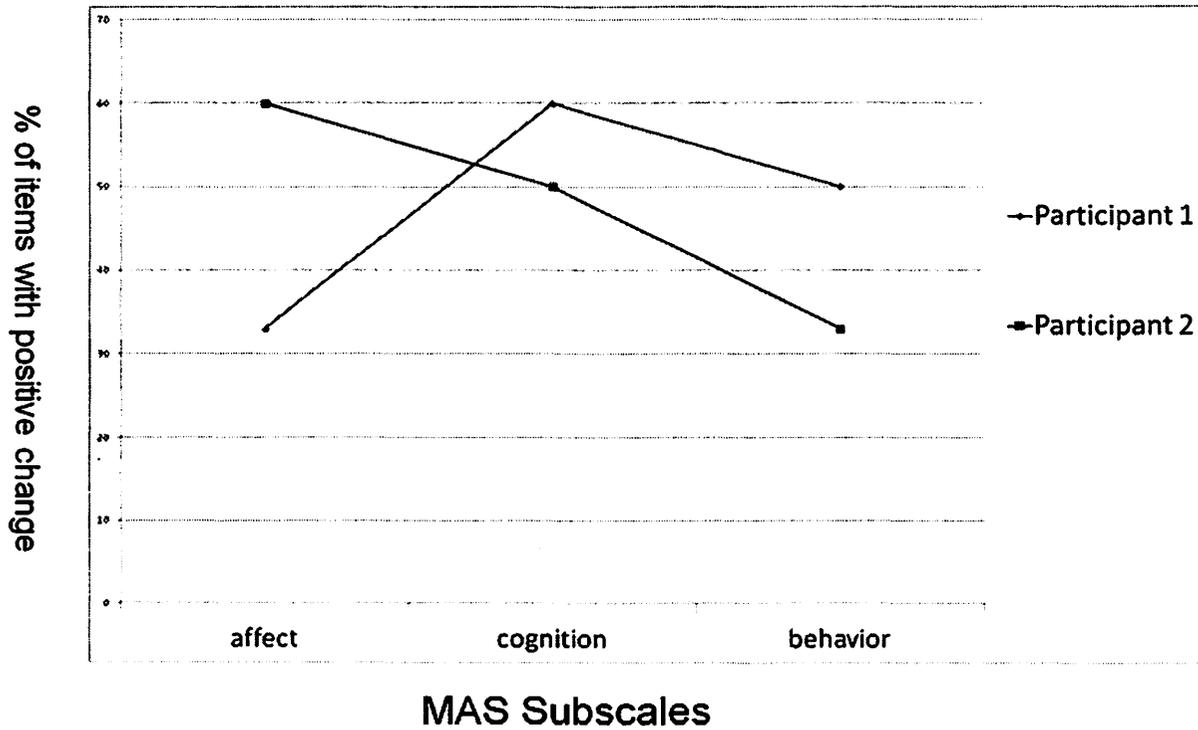


Figure 3. Student Attitudes Toward Disability

## DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to evaluate the impact of a Theatre Communications class on the social and communication skills of students with ASD and the attitudes of students without ASD towards individuals with ASD. Both students with ASD received more positive ratings on the “Autism Social Skills Profile” (Bellini, 2006) after participating in the Theatre Communications class. Therefore, the Theatre Communications class appeared to positively increase the social and communication skills of students with autism.

The “Multidimensional Attitudes Scale” (Findler et.al, 2007) revealed that both students without ASD reacted differently to the Theatre Communications Program. Each participant demonstrated an increase in at least one rating level but demonstrated an increase on different dimensions of the scale. After participating in a Theatre Communications class, participant 1 experienced a positive increase in their ratings on the cognition dimension where participant 2 experienced a positive increase in their ratings on the affect dimension. These results illustrate that individual differences can occur and that individuals’ attitudes toward disability will be affected differently on the dimensions of affect, cognition, and behavior. It is important to note that even though increases didn’t occur across all three dimensions, that there were positive increases in at least one area for each participant. These results point out the importance of measuring attitudes toward disability using a multidimensional rating scale.

In this study, a small sample of only two subjects was used to assess the impact of a Theatre Communications Class on students with and without ASD. In the future, a larger sample of students with and without ASD is needed. In addition, observational reports and objective measures of social skills in students with ASD should be included in future studies evaluating the impact of Theatre Communication Classes on children with and without ASD.

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## Appendix A

### Background Information

Code # \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

What year are you? (Please circle one)      Freshman      Sophomore      Junior      Senior

Have you ever been enrolled in the Theatre Communications Class before?      YES      NO

If yes, how many times? \_\_\_\_\_

Other than the Theatre Communications Class, have you ever had any experience working with individuals with disabilities?      YES      NO

If yes, could you please describe where you had this experience (ex: Rehab Nursing Center) and what type of disability the individual you worked with had? (ex: An individual with autism, an individual who is blind, an individual with cerebral palsy)

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Appendix B

**Background Questionnaire**

Code # \_\_\_\_\_

Caregiver's D.O.B.: \_\_\_\_\_

Caregiver's gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Caregiver's ethnicity: (optional)

\_\_\_\_\_ African-American                      \_\_\_\_\_ Asian                      \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic

\_\_\_\_\_ Anglo-American/Caucasian      Other (specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

Caregiver's education (highest level completed):

\_\_\_\_\_ less than high school                      \_\_\_\_\_ high school/GED                      \_\_\_\_\_ some college

\_\_\_\_\_ college degree                      \_\_\_\_\_ graduate degree

Caregiver's Occupation (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Family's average annual income: (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Has your child/ward ever been enrolled in the Theatre Communications Class before?    YES    NO

If yes, how many times? \_\_\_\_\_

Have they been in any other theater programs? \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, how many times? \_\_\_\_\_

Does your child have a diagnosed disability? \_\_\_\_\_ (optional)

If yes, what is the diagnosis? \_\_\_\_\_ (optional)

Does your child receive other inclusive services? \_\_\_\_\_ (optional)

If yes, what kind of services? \_\_\_\_\_ (optional)