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## Stage for Success

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# STAGE FOR SUCCESS

Drama therapy students work with kids on autism spectrum at summer camps

*By Sarah Caldwell Hancock*



WHEN IT COMES TO BETTER PREPARING KIDS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM FOR LEARNING and social environments, Kansas State University's drama therapy program is showing how theatre techniques can have a starring role.

Graduate students in the K-State program, one of only five such university programs in the country, collaborated with a Kansas school district to offer six-week summer camps this year for three groups of kids from middle school to high school. One of the graduate students also delivered drama activities twice a week to attendees of the Flint Hills Summer Fun Camp, which offers summer activities designed to build social skills and compassion and maintain academic skills in kids both on and off the autism spectrum.

Sally Bailey, K-State professor of drama therapy, supervised second-year graduate students Mike Rogers, Sarah Edwards and Sherry Brown as they provided the camps for about 30 kids this summer. Bailey's students also work with the school district's after-school programs during the academic year.

*Sherry Brown, Mike Rogers and Sarah Edwards share a flair for drama and helping others through K-State's drama therapy program, one of only five in the country.*





*Drama therapy graduate students Sherry Brown, Sarah Edwards and Mike Rogers use a variety of props, drama techniques and games to cue the enthusiasm of middle and high school groups and Flint Hills Summer Fun Camp attendees.*

Drama therapy uses techniques such as performing a scene, improvising or developing a script, or acting out a story with puppets for therapeutic purposes ranging from anger management to drug rehabilitation. Bailey said drama games and activities are also helpful for kids on the autism spectrum.

“Drama helps kids express themselves vocally and physically, helps them interact appropriately socially, develops self-confidence and increases imagination and problem-solving skills,” Bailey said. “Kids on the autism spectrum are able to practice social and communication skills in a fun, motivating way.”

The collaboration between the K-State drama therapy program and USD 383, the Manhattan-Ogden School District, is the only one of its kind in the country. The after-school and summer activities — which Bailey characterizes as a partnership with the drama therapy program, the school district and the parents from the very beginning — have grown. Based on the after-school program’s success, one summer camp offered four years ago morphed into four separate camps in summer 2016. The camps were organized by the autism department at USD 383 and offer activities for the students’ range of needs and ability levels.

The strength of this partnership helps draw graduate students from around the country with a range of experiences. Brown completed her undergraduate degree at K-State in secondary education with a concentration in speech and theater. Rogers earned a Bachelor of Arts from Columbus State University in Georgia and lived

in Hong Kong, where he taught English and drama for the last five years before coming to Manhattan to study drama therapy. Edwards came to K-State after completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater education at Belmont University in Nashville.

As more students come to K-State to study drama therapy and benefit from this ongoing community connection, a second drama therapy professor will be needed.

“We value partnerships and the attraction they have for our students, where we can reach out to the region to share the many ways in which the arts can be used to enrich people’s lives,” said Jeffrey Ward, director of the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance in the College of Arts & Sciences at K-State.

All of these students, plus others working on creative projects, meet regularly with Bailey to plan activities, solve problems, and gather props and costumes. This summer, Rogers’ high school and Edwards’ middle school camps, known respectively as Creative Endeavors Camp and Magical Mystery Camp, were centered around film-making. Brown provided her group with a more general approach at Social Adventures Camp aimed at middle schoolers. Rogers also contributed a lively drama class for Flint Hills Summer Fun Camp students two mornings a week.

Ashley Smith, director of Flint Hills Summer Fun Camp and a first-grade teacher in Manhattan, said she was surprised at the range and impact of drama activities.



“When I picture drama, I picture rehearsal and putting on a performance, but it’s definitely more than that,” she said.

Smith said drama builds relationships and social skills by helping students use teamwork to act out a story, identify their own emotions and recognize them in others, and make better choices in their reactions to difficult situations. Drama activities also level the playing field between peers and students on the autism spectrum because everyone is a little nervous when developing or acting out a story. She said the drama activities provided by Rogers work well because he encourages the group to take risks together.

“Where I notice it has the biggest and most obvious impact is for students who are nonverbal and lacking communication skills, because they are able to participate fully in drama,” Smith said. “They can act something out in a way that doesn’t require language and participate in a story in a way that involves them.”

Along with building flexibility and collaboration skills, another benefit of the summer camps is friendship.

Kimberly Rieckmann is the mother of a student in the high school film camp. Her son has been with the program since it began four years ago as an after-school group for middle schoolers. Rieckmann said the camps are a tremendous resource, and that each camp caters to students’ specific needs such as socializing or expressing emotions. She’s thankful for the friendships the students have formed.

“They have so much fun,” Rieckmann said. “They make their own movies, develop their own scripts, create settings, have costumes — they even work with a green screen now. It’s fun for them to be able to express their interests and have it come out in something tangible.”

The most important part is the friendships they make, she said.

“Drama brings them together and gives them something to do, to work together on. They build friendships based on similar interests and gain understanding of the challenges others face,” Rieckmann said.

For the graduate students, the summer work with the camps counts toward the 800 practicum hours required to attain a master’s degree. The students also learn from seeing the campers make progress.

“It’s helped me understand the autism spectrum itself and taught me patience and understanding more than anything,” Rogers said, adding that his campers have become more social with each other throughout the six-week program.

“In the chat circle at the beginning of camp each day, they’ll share and ask each other questions. That’s huge, because it means they’re showing interest and interacting more,” he said.

Edwards and Brown also have gained perspective from their work.

“I think I’ve realized how you can have all the skills in



the world as a facilitator, but the most important thing is building relationships,” Edwards said. “The kids are really comfortable. I never in a million years thought I’d make a movie with middle schoolers.”

The movie by Edwards’ group has superheroes and monsters from an arcade coming to life in a middle school. The students developed the concept and the story and built an arcade as a setting for the film.

The creative process isn’t always smooth. Campers experience many differences of opinion, but Edwards always ensured they found a positive solution. In a regular school environment, teachers and staff may not have the time to do that, and it makes a difference in how the students relate. Edwards noticed students navigating conflict without her help at times because of the positive relationships they established.

Brown’s group worked on more basic social skills by learning about emotions. She used a variety of games and art activities to support that goal. One popular activity is feelings yoga, which couples a physical pose with an emotion: students stretch upward to depict a grateful giraffe, or fold their arms in to become a caring koala bear. They have daily lessons such as how to give a compliment. Nonverbal students or students who need longer processing time participate. The group doesn’t leave them behind.

One of the major lessons Brown has learned is that students on the autism spectrum shouldn’t be babied.

“They are capable of doing things on their own,” she said. “Even if it takes 15 minutes for them to get a straw in their juice pouch, let them do it. If they don’t, they will never learn.”

Helen Miller, autism coordinator for USD 383, says she’s seen progress in social connection for the campers.

“One of my concerns for any young person is isolation — the mental stress that causes,” Miller said. “Depression and anxiety can become full-blown in our kids on the spectrum. It’s mitigated by having friendships and having people who are in the same boat. These kids can be incredibly supportive of each other. It’s good for their mental health.”

Support from Bailey and K-State is crucial to the success of the after-school fun clubs and summer camps.

“Without these grad students doing drama therapy, I don’t know where I’d find people with that knowledge,” Miller said.

She also is thankful that kids on the autism spectrum are offered an opportunity to use creative outlets instead of being isolated in front of television or video games.

“The kids reporting a sense of belonging is the most encouraging piece,” Miller said.

The after-school clubs and summer camp activities are supported by USD 383 and a variety of grants and community donations. [K](#)

