

Special Educators' Perceptions about Learning Fundamental Social Skills Through Theatrical Play: The Case of Children with Special Educational Needs

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ABSTRACT

Through this quantitative educational approach there is an attempt to analyze special educators' perceptions about the contribution of theatrical play in preschool children with Special Educational Needs, in terms of social integration. The purpose of this research is to investigate how theatrical play, can promote integration and development of children with Special Educational Needs. For the purposes of this research it was chosen to be used the quantitative method. More specifically, it was used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire-SDQ (Goodman, 2005) in combination with the Teachers' Use and Perceptions of Theatrical Play Questionnaire (Stefanou & Nalbanti, 2007), in a sample of 30 special educators. The survey results underline the positive effect of theatrical play on learning fundamental social skills in children with special educational needs.

Keywords: Theatrical Play, Special Educational Needs and Fundamental Social Skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

The theatrical play is an experiential method, which aims to develop communication, psychosocial integration and imagination. Theatrical game was implemented in terms of functionality issues, such as the relationship of children towards theater (Kontogianni, 2000) and socialization. The term social inclusion is used to describe the adaptation of people with special educational needs in a social environment (Psathas, 2009). Relevant studies have shown that theatrical play constitutes a considerable alternative way of learning fundamental social skills. Furthermore, theatrical play offers a special way of entertainment and socialization which increase child's self-esteem and allow them to express their emotions.

Additionally, research findings indicate the effectiveness of theatrical play and dramatic arts in socialization in children with special educational needs (Jindal-Snape & Vettrano, 2007). Nevertheless, there are no research data stating special educators' perceptions on the matter. So the basic aim of this research to depict special educators' perceptions theatrical play, with emphasis in using it. More specifically, the main aim is to answer the following research questions:

1. Which is the contribution of theatrical play, on learning fundamental social skills for children with special educational needs?
2. Which can be the participation of children with Special Educational Needs in theatrical play?
3. Which are the children's reactions throughout the process of theatrical play?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theatrical play is directly related to theater, but also with the concept of sight. It also constitutes one way of activation, the release of imagination and the development of psychosocial integration of those who participate in it. This

method is mainly experiential, it is a way to communicate, to deepen human relationships, but also to have self-awareness among the group of individuals which are involved in the play (Kouretzis, 1991).

The term theatrical play, contains all kinds of pretend play, which is: role play, fantastic game, the personification game, explorative play, social - dramatic play and the symbolic play. The theatrical play by its very nature has a double meaning in education (Nelson, 2010). Initially, it is a game and children through it have the freedom to express themselves as they desire, making their own rules and communication codes. Simultaneously this game requires from children to restrict and put limits on time and space which they have, in order to have a good communication between them, the team spirit that they have to possess and their joint actions during the game in order to enjoy participating together in something public (Grammatas, 1996).

Theatrical play, may significantly contribute to children with special educational needs, as these children can benefit from theater art (Schonmann, 2011). They can develop their visual perception, fine motor skills, aesthetics and creativity. Also they learn to act autonomously, gain satisfaction from the learning process and be entertained by the theater art. Furthermore, it constitutes a mean of experiential learning which contributes significantly to the linguistic, emotional and social development of the child (Alevriadou, Anastasiou Andonopoulou, Asteri, Belitsa, Papadopoulos Pappas Stampoltzi & Stafrousi, 2004). Special education is defined as a set of services provided to students with disabilities and diagnosed with special educational needs. There are many aspects to the development of a child, which determines and which includes personality, communication skills (verbal and non-verbal) and the ability to appreciate and enjoy life, like being willing to learn. Each child has different strengths,

personality and experiences and thus, specific disabilities have a different impact on each child (Margaroni, 2014). As special educational needs, therefore, defined as restriction of the ability of an individual to participate and benefit from the educational process, due to a permanent physical, sensory, mental or learning disability or any other situation which can result in a person to learn differently from a person without such a situation (National Council of Special Education, 2014).

The term social integration is used as a term to describe the integration of people with special educational needs into the social environment (Chasen, 2011). Social inclusion is defined as a process in which a person socializes (Trigas, 2010). Alongside, this process includes education, vocational training, recovery and functional rehabilitation of the person with any form of disability and special educational need. In order to perform all of the above, an essential requirement is the disabled to be calculated in a community (school, family, work), that there is mutual acceptance and recognition of the equivalence in environments reported (Psathas, 2009). For the purpose of social inclusion in the school environment there should be an implementation of inclusive education for children with special educational needs at school, thus, as its main objective is their integration in schools. It is also a fact that there is a difficulty in integrating children in society, since the majority of people are not ready to accept diversity (Kladis & Drossinou, 2013). As a consequence, theatrical play can be implemented for children with special educational needs, as it will help them learn key social inclusion fields and subsequently to their inclusion in the social environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH METHOD

In quantitative research, the researcher aims to test a theory by which it extracts theoretical assumptions which are checked after collecting data, with techniques such as experiments, questionnaires and standardized observations (Zachos, 2010). Quantitative research is considered a research strategy that emphasizes the quantitative way to collect and analyze the data. Additionally, there are embedded practices and rules of the scientific model (Nova - Kaltsoouni, 2006). For the purposes of this research, it was chosen to be used a quantitative approach.

3.2 RESEARCH TOOLS

The questionnaire is a tool which is often used by researchers as it provides structured data that can be used by the investigator, without the participant being present. In addition, when the data is collected, it is easy to be analyzed statistically (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). As a research tool, it was used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire-SDQ (Goodman, 2005), in combination with the Teachers' Use and Perceptions of Theatrical Play Questionnaire (Stefanou & Nalbanti, 2007). Both questionnaires included ordinal questions. It was used a Likert scale (1=totally disagree, 5=totally agree).

3.3 PARTICIPANTS – SAMPLE

The participants were 30 special educators (26 of which were women and 4 men).

3.4 RESEARCH PROCESS

The research data were collected during the spring semester of annual 2016-17. All survey participants were informed about the research that would be conducted by an information letter and in process they gave their written consent for their participation in the research process. Subsequently, questionnaires were distributed in the sample

4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the main findings of the research, based on the results and described by the research questions posed in the introduction of this work.

Demographics: The survey was conducted by 30 special educators working in kindergartens. Of these, 86.6% were women and 13.3% men (see. Table 1). The 80.0% of the participants have studies in the Department of Early Childhood Education and further training seminars. The remaining 20.0% are working in special education after being graduated from coherent postgraduate programs. The 73.3% of the participants have done practical training (assimilation), while 26.7% have not. Regarding their experiences, it was found that 50.0% of the participants have experience 0-5 years, 40.0% experience 6-15 years and 10.0% experience 16-25 years (See. Table 2). The 80.0% of respondents work in the private sector, while 20.0% in the public sector. The schools in which they work, are mainly located in the city (80.0%) and 20.0% in small towns. Most participants have in their ranks 2-5 children.

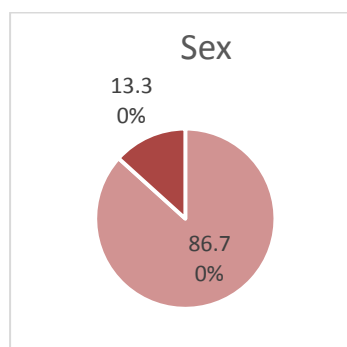


Table 1: Sex

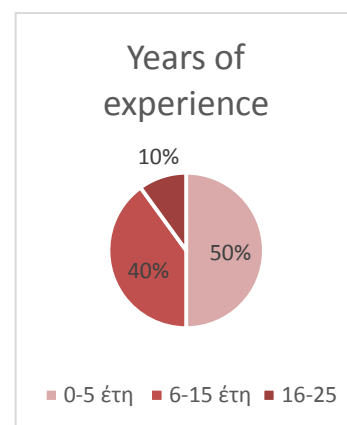


Table 2: Years of experience

Below are some tables with questions from the questionnaires, based on the research questions.

Variables (Valid Percent)	Applying theatrical play at school	Applying theatrical play in class	Training for the implementation of it, at school	How much will you manage to teach with it?	Do you have sufficient knowledge about the theatrical play?
None	3,3%	10,0%	6,7%	3,3%	3,3%
Slightly	16,7%	10,0%	16,7%	30,3%	13,3%
Little	13,3%	26,7%	26,7%	46,7%	30,0%
A lot	53,3%	36,7%	50,0%	20,0%	36,7%
Very much	13,3%	16,7%	-	-	16,7%

Table 3: Theatrical play at school

In the above table, are presented answers about the use of the theatrical play by special educators in school. In the first question concerning how much theatrical play is applied at school, it seems that the 53.3% responded a lot, while the next largest percentage is 16.7%, which replied that they use theatrical play slightly at school. Subsequently responses were given, where most ranged between little and too much, on how the special educators apply theatrical play in their class. Most teachers responded a lot, accounting for 36.7%, while the next largest is 26.7% which they answered little. Finally, the question on whether they think they have enough knowledge about theatrical play method, answered most at medium scales, little (30.0%) or a lot (36.7%).

Variables (Valid Percent)	Chances to teach through theatrical play	Theatrical play: strengthens the relationship between students	Theatrical play: strengthens the relationship between students and teacher	Theatrical play: helps children socialize
None	3,3%	-	-	-
Slightly	6,7%	-	3,3%	3,3%
Little	16,7%	26,7%	20,0%	16,7%
A lot	56,7%	40,0%	36,7%	43,3%
Very much	16,7%	33,3%	40,0%	36,7%

Table 3.1: Social inclusion of children through theatrical play

The table above, shows how children can be socially integrated through theatrical play. Originally, it seems that teachers have many opportunities to teach through theatrical play, since most of the answers were a lot (56.7%). Several positive, were also the responses to the next question, as participants believed that theatrical play can strengthen the students' relationships a lot (40.0%).

Furthermore, most believe that it can be strengthened respectively, and the relationship of students and educational very much (40.0%). Finally they believe of a lot (43.3%) to very much (36.7%) that children with special educational needs can develop their social integration through this method and confirm the initial research hypothesis.

The findings come to confirm the original hypothesis of the researcher, as the benefits that accept children with special educational needs during the theatrical play, the participants answered that some of them are the following: expression of emotions, socialization, integration, cooperation, creativity, self-expression development, language development, initiative development, mental defusing, learning through play, psychotherapy, growth potential, alternative way of teaching, interaction, communication and delimitation.

In conclusion, the special educators on basis of the rates and benefits, appear to be positive about theatrical play, as it is understood how it can help in the early stages of their social integration. From the above tables, it seems overall that the hypothesis of the researcher is confirmed for the first research question.

Further, as regards to the second research question, the researcher formulated the hypothesis that children with special educational need to have the opportunity to actively participate in the process of theatrical play and the following tables come to confirm that.

Variables (Valid Percent)	Play: motive to learn	Theatrical play: motive to learn	Play: entertained lesson	Theatrical play: entertained lesson
Slightly	3,3%	6,7%	-	3,3%
Little	10,0%	30,0%	10,0%	13,3%
A lot	40,0%	40,0%	43,3%	60,0%
Very much	46,0%	23,3%	46,7%	23,3%

Table 4: Theatrical play as a motive to learn and entertain

The above table presents answers about the theatrical play as an incentive of learning and entertainment for children with special educational needs. Initially, participants were asked about whether the game constitutes a learning motivation and the responses were positive, from a lot (40.0%) to very much (46.0%). Then participants answered respectively for the theatrical play from a little (30.0%) to a lot (40.0%). Moreover, participants were asked about how they think the game constitutes entertaining lesson and responded positively, by a lot (43.3%) to very much (46.7%). Similarly they answered and theatrical play equally positive from a lot (60.0%) to very much (23.3%).

Variables (Valid Percent)	The student is congenial to the other children	Often lies or cheats	Other children bullies the student with SEN	Willing to help others	The student has many fears	Completes a work, have good attention
Not valid	20,0%	30,0%	26,7%	40,0%	13,3%	30,0%
Applies somehow	63,3%	53,3%	66,7%	50,0%	53,3%	46,7%
Certainly applies	16,7%	16,7%	6,7%	10,0%	33,3%	23,3%

Table 4.1: Participation of the student with Special Educational Needs to the theatrical play method

The above table shows the involvement of a child in the dramatic play method. Initially, special educators questioned whether this child is congenial to other children, and they answered that applies somehow (63.3%).

Then they were asked if the child is lying or deceiving, and again they answered that applies somehow (53.3%). Then they asked if the child bullied by other children and most of answered that applies somehow (66.7%). In addition, half of the participants answered that applies somehow and 40.0% it does not apply if the child is willing to help others.

Those children seem to have many fears as the answers were between applies somehow (53.3%) and certainly applies (33.3%). However, most cases seem and can bring about a

work out (somehow applies: 46.7%) though many of them find it hard (not valid: 30.0%).

Variables (Valid Percent)	Shares with other children	Lonely, plays alone	Good with younger children	Willing to help
Not valid	24,1%	20,0%	16,7%	33,3%
Applied somehow	51,7%	53,3%	53,3%	50,0%
Certainly applied	24,1%	26,7%	30,0%	16,7%

Table 4.2: Participation of the student with Special Educational Needs to the theatrical play method

The above table shows the participation of a child case with special educational needs in dramatic play. Initially, it seems that the student shares with other children as well as 51.7% responded that this applies somehow. In the next question concerning the lonely game, most participants answered that applies somehow (53.3%) and that is certainly true (26.7%). Moreover, teachers were asked whether they are good with younger children and the answers of most were that applies somehow (53.3%) and that is certainly true (30.0%). Finally, it shows the willingness of the child to help and half participants answered that applies somehow, while the rest answered not valid (33.3%) and that is certainly true (16.7%).

Variables (Valid Percent)	Play: learning mean for preschool age students	Play: creates possibilities of learning with a form of an investigation activity	Enhancement the capability of focusing through theatrical play
Slightly	6,7%	-	6,7%
Little	30,0%	33,3%	30,0%
A lot	23,3%	53,3%	50,0%
Very much	40,3%	13,3%	13,3%

Table 4.3: Theatrical play as a mean of learning

The above table shows the theatrical play as a mean of learning. The special educators initially replied that they find play from a little (30.0%) to a lot (23.3%) as a mean of learning in school age. Then they asked if the game creates possibilities for learning in the form of research activity and answered from a little (33.3%) to a lot (53.3%).

Variables (Valid Percent)	Take into account the feelings of others	Worried and overactive	Ne-rvous	The student has at least one friend	Fights with other children	Often miserable
Not valid	6,7%	16,7%	16,7%	6,9%	30,0%	30,0%
Applied somehow	66,7%	70,0%	60,0%	55,2%	56,7%	63,3%
Certainly applied	26,7%	13,3%	23,3%	37,9%	13,3%	6,7%

Table 5: Students responses during theatrical play

Finally, participants consider that the theatrical play enhances the concentration ability of children with special educational needs from a little (30.0%) to a lot (50.0%). In conclusion, these findings come to confirm the hypothesis of the researcher, as children with special educational needs seem to respond positively and participate in the process of theatrical play as an alternative form of teaching and confirming the initial research hypothesis. Then, for the third research question, the researcher formulated the hypothesis that the game play considerably helps the social integration of

these children and the children's reactions are positive for this process. The following tables, come to confirm this research hypothesis. The above table continues to present the child's reactions during theatrical play. It seems that most children in theatrical play take into account the feelings of others, as well as 66.7% of respondents answered that it applies somehow, and 26.7% answered that certainly applies. Moreover, it seems that children are somehow hyperactive during the theatrical play, as the 70.0% of special educators think. Then it is shown that children are quite nervous as 60.0% replied that this applies somehow and 23.3% that is certainly applied. Furthermore, it is stated that children with special educational needs participating in theatrical play have made at least one friend, since 55.2% of special educators replied that this applies somehow and 37.9% answered that certainly applies. In the next question concerning how the student fight with other children, the answers range from that applies somehow (56.7%) to that not valid (30.0%). Finally, it shows how these children do not seem to be particularly unhappy as 63.3% replied that it applies somehow, while 30.0% think it's not valid.

Variables (Valid Percent)	Helps children feel better	Improves children's psychology	Personal expression of children and teachers
Slightly	3,3%	6,7%	3,3%
Little	20,0%	26,7%	30,0%
A lot	40,0%	40,0%	40,0%
Very much	36,7%	26,7%	26,7%

Table 5.1: How theatrical play helps children

In the table above, is presented the contribution of theatrical play in the mental outlook of the children with special educational needs. Specifically, it seems to help them feel better, as shown by the replies of special educators varying mostly from a lot (40.0%) to very much (36.7%). Moreover, the theatrical play seems to improve the psychology of children as shown by the answers (much: 40.0%, too: 26.7%). Finally, it shows how the theatrical play helps in personal expression of children and teachers, as 40.0% believe that something like this happens a lot, while 30.0% believe that something like this happens a little.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the present study were presented the views of special educators in how theater play affect children with special educational needs in terms of learning basic areas of social inclusion. The 30 special educators seemed to have positive views on theatrical play, and it seems that they choose to use it whenever it's possible. Moreover, they believe that this is an alternative way of teaching children with special needs and it is a suitable mean of learning in preschool children as it includes game. Then, participants think that with this method, strengthened the relationship between students, but also their own relationship with their students. Specialist teachers

believe that the theatrical play constitutes a motivation of learning because it is entertaining and amusing course.

Educators believe that students with special educational needs of preschool age seems to have good care and to succeed, while they help and share things with their schoolmates. This strengthens their ability to concentrate and at the same time they manage to communicate well with their classmates. In addition, students try to be obedient, but many times teachers observe that they are uncomfortable if there is too much noise, which has as a further consequence for them to be distracted. Students also try to understand feelings, according to teachers. Each one of them observe by themselves have at least one friend, but many times there may be tensions between students. Through theatrical play, students and teachers feel better and thereby improve their psychology. Moreover, it seems that it is a way self-expression of students' emotions.

In this study, the research hypotheses of the researcher were confirmed, since they compared with relevant research which was done in the past. However, in any investigation wasn't mentioned negative effect, but in none of the studies which were presented, were any the views of special educators on the topic. This survey covered this research gap and presented the views of 30 special educators. Participants seemed to have a positive response in terms of theatrical play and its application to children with special educational needs.

Finally, it is proposed to do further research on the topic, to a larger sample of special educational teachers, as to have a more comprehensive analysis of the theatrical play and the effect on children with special educational needs.

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