
Received: 30 September 2024, Accepted: 21 May 2025DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.2001>

Improving the Social-Emotional Well-Being of a Child with Multiple Developmental Disabilities by Incorporating the Performative Drama Model into the Learning Process

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Self-advocacy is an essential skill for effective and successful integration into the wider social environment and is important for psychological and physiological well-being. The Performative Drama Model *Ars Vitae* was trialled to improve students' assertiveness and performance in real life. A 12-year-old boy with learning disabilities and multiple developmental disabilities, who had difficulties expressing himself and participating in class, was trained over a three-month period. The model was integrated into his lessons, with a particular focus on developing self-advocacy skills to help him express himself better and assert himself in groups. The activities carried out by the "actor" supported the development of his self-advocacy, classroom integration and communication skills, and improved his academic performance and general well-being.

Keywords: arts therapy, autism, integrated learning, self-advocacy, *Ars Vitae* model

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Izboljšanje socialno-emocionalnega stanja otroka z več motnjami v razvoju, z vključitvijo performativnega dramskega modela v učni proces

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☞ Samozagovorništvo je bistvena veščina za učinkovito in uspešno vključevanje v širše socialno okolje; pomembno je za psihološko in telesno blagostanje. Performativni dramski model *Ars Vitae* je bil preizkušen z namenom podpore razvoja asertivnosti in uspešnosti učenca v vsakdanjem življenju. Pri 12-letnem dečku z učnimi težavami in več motnjami v razvoju, ki je imel težave z izražanjem in s sodelovanjem v razredu, je obravnava po performativnem dramskem modelu potekala tri mesece. Dejavnosti po tem modelu so bile izvajane med poukom. Poudarek je bil na razvoju samozagovorniških veščin, da bi mu pomagali bolje izražati sebe in se uveljavljati v družbi. Posamezne aktivnosti, ki jih je deček izvajal kot »igralec« v performativnem procesu, so podpirale razvoj njegovih veščin samozagovorništva, vključenosti v razredu in komunikacijskih veščin ter izboljšale njegovo učno uspešnost in splošno počutje.

Ključne besede: pomoč z umetnostjo, avtizem, celostno poučevanje, samozagovorništvo, performativni dramski model *Ars Vitae*

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Autism spectrum disorders manifest themselves in the areas of social communication, social interaction and behaviour, interests and activities. The deficits significantly impair the child's social and educational functioning, as they manifest themselves in difficulties with verbal and non-verbal communication, social and emotional reactions, and establishing, understanding and maintaining social relationships, as well as in repetitive stereotypical behaviour, movements, use of objects, interests, language, thinking and behaviour, and unusual reactions to sensory stimuli. Due to more or less pronounced problems in individual areas, children with autistic disorders have poorly developed abilities to adapt to the environment (conceptual, social and practical skills), which significantly hinders their integration into the environment and their development of independence. It is in these areas that they need the most help and support. Depending on the degree, autism spectrum disorders are divided into mild, moderate or severe deficits in social communication and social interaction, as well as mild, moderate and severe deficits in the areas of behaviour, interests and activities. Children with mild deficits in social communication and social interaction have problems in establishing social relationships (establishing contact, inappropriate reactions to the environment, reduced interest in interaction), in verbal and non-verbal communication and in adapting their behaviour to different situations in the environment. Children with mild deficits in the areas of behaviour, interests and activities have inflexible behaviour in at least one area, as well as difficulties in transitioning between different activities and in organising and caring for themselves (Vovk-Ornik, 2015).

Children with special needs and drama activities

In the context of drama education as one of the disciplines of arts therapy, several studies have been conducted that specifically focus on the acquisition of the skills needed to improve assertiveness. Garvas (2006) found that through the process of drama facilitation, individuals improved their ability to express their own emotions and self-image, and that by improving empathy, they respected and listened more to their interlocutor. Through the creative process of drama, the participants discovered undesirable patterns of behaviour and tried to interrupt them. In the opinion of the researchers, all of this was reflected in the improved social integration of the individual. Methods of

artistic support include drama that integrates speech and movement/dance in role play, improvisation, interpretation of literary texts, puppet design and animation, and the making and use of masks. The introduction of theatrical skills through theatre activities was adapted to the abilities of the participants (Garvas, 2006). Strelec (2014) investigated the importance of theatre pedagogy for the integration and participation of individuals in society and for the development of the skills necessary for coping with life. In her research, she also observed the relationship between dramatic improvisation and self-confidence in people with special needs and found that self-awareness, self-discovery and an active attitude towards oneself and the environment are important elements in empowering individuals (Strelec, 2014). In a case study of a boy with an autistic disorder, Vilčnik (2015) found that various theatre techniques, drama activities and other methods of helping with art contributed significantly to understanding the teen's emotions and way of communicating. She found that after the meetings, the participant behaved more maturely, accepted agreements and showed a higher level of independence (Vilčnik, 2015). Vidrih (2016) states that participants in drama activities in which the performative drama method *Ars Vitae* was used, in addition to becoming aware of their own patterns of thinking and acting, personal satisfaction, recognition and awareness of their own behaviour, also make progress in communication (Vidrih, 2016). Similarly, Planinc (2017) believes that the introduction of drama activities gives children the opportunity to explore, face problems and discover different solutions. The research process itself takes place in a stimulating, accepting environment where students learn critical thinking. He notes that after the introduction of theatre activities, he observes positive reactions from the children, more sustainable, practically acquired knowledge, faster memorisation, creative problem solving, improved orientation and coordination, more confident speaking, improved and conscious own communication and improved relationships between students (Planinc, 2017). Kroflič (1992) asserts that movement is the most elementary form of expression for children and that the psychomotor way of problem solving is therefore closest to them. They can empathise with the problem more easily and understand it better if they also solve it through movement. This is a holistic cognitive and psychomotor activity.

The performative drama method *Ars Vitae*

Two decades ago, the *Ars Vitae* (AV) model of performative drama was developed. The AV model uses a scaffolded structure, which is a teaching strategy relying on Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the concept of the zone

of proximal development. It consists of elements that support learner's development by providing the necessary support for progressing to the next level (Van Der Stuyf, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). However, teachers' beliefs and experiences must be considered, as they determine the practices and innovations teachers use in their instruction (Bingimlas & Hanrahan, 2010). As such, both the instructors' theoretical perspectives and personal experiences and beliefs can be added to the model's scaffolding, integrating the scaffold structure with collaborative elements of social constructivism (Haydey et al., 2010).

The AV model emerged directly from professional acting experiences. The author's own professional acting experience contributed to the mastery of specific acting techniques that are transferred to participants in an "aeovian" workshop (i.e., a workshop of or pertaining to the AV model). The AV model is a result of years of applying professional acting techniques to coping with challenges in a given situation. It is a dynamic, ever-changing model that relies on improvisation and is based on the parallels between theatre and life: life is a theatre, and we are all actors playing and shaping our roles in life. Hence it is considered a performative model. By performing our life roles, we form ourselves and so become the artists of our own lives. This is why the model's name is *ars vitae*, "the art of life". As Cicero said, "*Ars est enim philosophia vitae*", or "Thus art is the glow to know life" (Cicero & Holstein, 1873, Lib III., Cap. II., p. 125). Not only does the AV model help participants (AV actors) to better understand and portray characters on stage, it also helps people to better understand and live out their various roles in life, such as a parent, employee or student.

The AV model has a three-in-two structure: three hierarchically co-dependent levels split into two phases. The first two levels, which can be used independently, make up the preparatory phase, while the third level, which should be used in conjunction with the first two levels, constitutes the creative phase. The preparatory phase encourages the participants to be introspective, to become aware of attention and intention, of their own experiences and drives, particularly bodily rhythms, such as breathing. Expressive elements, such as voice and body expression, are used to facilitate this awareness. The creative phase encourages participants to become the artists of their own lives. This phase ends with an analysis of the acquired experiences and knowledge, thus bringing both phases to a conclusion.

The first level establishes the so-called "neutral" attitude. This is accomplished by using body instrumentation (a means of attuning to the self, strengthening a sense of perception and lowering the volume of thought processes) to adopt an awareness of the triunity between body, mind and breath. At the second level, the performer enlists inner support (i.e., a neutral attitude

and vocal-speech-language refinement) to attune to other participants in the AV process (AV actors). This gives the participant an opportunity to recognise his own patterns of voice, body and breathing, and to test new combinations of patterns in order to develop new modes of behaviour. At the third level, creativity and improvisation begin. Using the experiences and techniques of the first two levels, one can authentically portray any drama character. Once in an appropriately relaxed state, participants analyse the mass of impulses, motives and reactions accrued during their lives. They then use the results of this analysis, combined with imagination and fictitious circumstances, to delve into their characters' psyches – thoughts, feelings, motives and behaviours, whether seen or hidden – to create a compelling creative performance. The goal is not to perfectly recreate identical personas and circumstances, but to be connected to them through feelings, emotional memories and sensory reactions that can be analysed.

In short, the AV model involves the mutual interaction of body, mind and breath, and active research of self through the individual performative experience. This means that, in aeovian terms, thoughts are seen; for example, when an actor is performing, he must have an awareness of whether his gestures are out of tune with his expressions, that is, the gestures must “see” the facial expressions and vice versa. Similarly, participants in the AV process or AV actors are encouraged to scrutinise their attitudes, movements and speech in order to “hear” any dissonance. Authentic performance is based on such learning by insight, revealed through consonance between expressions and actions, and through a balance between structure and spontaneity (Vidrih, 2007).

Aeovian workshops emphasise the multisensory faculties of the individual (Guyton & Hall, 2011). This is done to awaken the sensory dimension of one's personality, particularly the performative experience, which helps the practitioner to develop psychophysical abilities and skills, thus strengthening his own physical, emotional and mental intelligence, and enhancing the triunity between body, thought and breath. An aeovian trainer leads the individual to the attunement of this triunity through the dramatic process. The three-in-two structure of the AV model allows the individual to gradually tune her inner world to the outer world. An advantage of working in a workshop setting is that the model's structure safeguards against any mutual disregard. With a focus on attuning to others, the AV method fosters a sense of community and safety that not only allows participants to better delve into their characters, but to deal with the issues and concerns of their own lives.

As an acting technique, the carefully guided process of the AV model consists of a static structure, but the practitioner builds upon that scaffolding,

eventually developing a concordant *personal arsenal* of the character, which is comprised of the character's beliefs, thoughts, opinions, expressions, attitudes, reactions and behaviours. This external expression must be attuned to the actor's own feelings; for an actor to convincingly portray a character, his whole personality must be subordinate to the personal arsenal of the character. The actor thus becomes a mirror of the character's inner world, bringing it to life with a depth of vitality, a breadth of mentality and a chord of originality. To enable this, participants explore, both broadly and deeply, the roots and modes of such a personal arsenal to ensure the triunity of body, thought and breath.

Once participants understand the processes and purposes of the AV model, they can practise and apply it. In its practice, the AV model functions like play: it attunes us to ourselves and to those around us, serving as a catalyst for liberating ourselves from constraints. In its application, the AV model functions like a classroom: the actor is a teacher who wants his students (the audience) to believe him and learn about his character. Moreover, just as one must be a student before becoming a teacher, so an actor must first be an observer of the character's experiences and emotions. He then takes this knowledge to the stage to educate others through his performance.

The dramatic process used in the AV model does not stop at the walls of the theatres; rather, it breaks out from the theatre into the rest of life, responding to the needs of the individual and of mankind (Vidrih, 2009a). At the end of the aeovian journey, the participant is endowed with the title of an aeovian actor (AV actor) and has a stronger understanding of herself and her role in this world. With this step, the participant declares that she is accepting a proactive role in her life by becoming the artist of her own life. She is advocating for herself.

In order to illustrate the AV model in action, let us consider a case where it was used. The task at hand was to perform a celebration ceremony according to a preestablished scenario. Most of the 12 adult participants were more familiar with choir singing, but none with acting. The various roles of the teacher were acted out by the author according to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy of educational objectives, with its six cognitive processes that differ in their complexity, with *remember* being the least complex and *create* the most complex (Krathwohl, 2002, p. 215):

Remember. In the role of a facilitator, the teacher reminded the participants to be an empty shell and to create a mental image of the portrayed character.

Understand. In the role of a therapist, the teacher helped the students be fully aware and present in order to understand the metaphors that

represent the basic concepts of stage play, so as to perform a well-synchronised ceremony.

Apply, Analyse and Evaluate. In the role of a challenge setter, the teacher helped the students be authentic to their roles and to themselves by remaining attuned to the triunity of body, mind and breath. He helped the participants to analyse rehearsals and evaluate which elements worked and which did not.

Create. Finally, in the role of a co-creator, the teacher helped the participants to create a new and original creation on their own: the ceremony.

The result of this preparation was a performance that echoed in the body, minds and hearts of the distinguished guests and others.

Theatre training and theatrical performance have been widely studied as a social and educational tool, even as a means of coping with the challenges of life (Cahill, 2014, p. 36; Nicholson, 2005, pp. 63–64; Rousseau et al., 2007, p. 451; Vettraino et al., 2017, p. 89; Horghagen & Josephsson, p. 169; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007, p. 726; Vidrih, A., 2009b, p. 65). Due to the way it emphasises mindfulness and emotional calmness, the AV model, in particular, can provide an excellent means of managing stress and other heightened emotional states (Shearer et al., 2016). This raises the question of whether it could also prove to be a valid coping strategy for dealing with other cognitive and emotional challenges, such as depression, anxiety and grief. Moreover, given how it has been shown to effectively help practitioners build self-awareness and become the artists of their own lives, it could prove to be an effective intervention in building confidence, self-efficacy, self-awareness and other important skills in underperforming individuals.

The AV model teaches and encourages transformative power via imagination. The mind continually constructs images and connects them to create new knowledge, making imagination the central engine that provides meaning to mental events (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). If this central engine of meaning is shut off, nothing written will provide meaning; it will become gibberish. Imagination is therefore at the heart of every creative process, including the AV Model. Thus, it can be argued that the AV model could prove to be an effective tool for teaching people to be more creative and productive, and for instilling in them confidence in their potential.

The AV model is designed to assist individuals in transforming their lives into a compelling, authentic performance. This is done through training awareness of self and others, understanding and connecting to self and others, and finding a balance between the self and real-life roles, as well as between

body, mind and heart. The applications and benefits of the AV model go far beyond the stage, however. The mindfulness and understanding practices that it uses to train performers can have profound effects on managing stress and on coping with challenging life circumstances, suggesting it could be a powerful therapeutic intervention (Vidrih et al., 2020). At its heart, the AV model is about imagination and creation, especially about creating authentic, in-tune performances in various roles. These can be performances of character roles, but they can also be performances of real-life roles: parent, child, student, etc. The AV model develops the art of living well, *ars vitae*. As such, it could prove to be an effective means for helping underperforming, underconfident individuals build the skills and confidence they need to succeed in life, and for showing them how to be the artists and creators of their own lives. It can teach them *ars vitae*.

Research problem and research questions

The present case study describes an example of the use of the AV model of performative drama in order to promote social-emotional development in the area of self-advocacy skills in a child with pronounced difficulties in these areas. Specifically, the aim of the research was to examine whether the AV model (at least the first two phases, since the child never attained to phase-three activities) could prove to be an effective method for building skills in these areas in such a child. Of particular interest was how the child would react to such activities, given that the activities require exposure and activity with the whole body and voice at the same time, something that is extremely difficult for the child as someone on the autism spectrum. The child's teacher was also used as a researcher in this process, looking for sources of strength, trying to listen to and hear the child and respond to his needs, assessing his current situation, and providing him with appropriate incentives to move forward.

The objectives of the research were twofold:

1. To explore the possibilities of planning and implementing drama activities according to the AV model in order to support the social-emotional development of the child; and
2. To identify changes in the daily functioning of the child in the areas of self-awareness, communication, leadership skills and rights awareness during and after the implementation of the activities.

The present study employs a qualitative case study approach using participatory observation. In planning the implementation of the activities, the

AV model of performative drama (Vidrih, 2016, p. 75) was used as a methodological framework. When followed according to its framework, this model trains expression and self-awareness for those who practise it. The research focused on the child's subjective experiences and external behaviours, which were observed according to checklists, while self-awareness was measured using a standard scale. The findings will help provide a better understanding of the socio-emotional state and development of the individual involved, and perhaps other similar individuals, but cannot be extended to the general population.

Method

Participants

The participant was a fifth-grade boy (12 years old at the beginning of the study) with multiple developmental disorders: mild speech and language disorders, and autistic spectrum disorders (minor deficits in social communication and social interaction), manifesting in minor difficulties with behaviours, interests and activities. The boy was involved in a personalised, nine-year primary school programme with a lower educational standard, and was enrolled in a combined fifth- and sixth-grade class. He was observed during workshops with his entire class, which included two additional male fifth-grade students, two female fifth-grade students and two male sixth-grade students.

The boy had a noticeable lack of communication skills, which hindered him in successfully demonstrating knowledge and in managing social interactions, everyday contacts and independent self-care. Although not physically impaired, the boy moved as if his body were in a slight spasm and found it hard to move. He could do all of the exercises in physical education if he made an effort, but he expressed no motivation to exercise. He was also extremely awkward in handling various objects and waited for the help of the teacher, never asking for help on his own. He spent a lot of time preparing and tidying up his belongings. It was difficult for him to organise his workspace on his own: he needed a lot of time to master the order in the space, to recognise where the objects belong, and to come to terms with the routine of preparing and tidying up the space. He also demonstrated difficulties finding himself in the space, usually following a group and sticking to the back or the side, often hiding behind the others.

Despite his difficulties expressing himself, the boy was included in the class and accepted by his classmates. He liked to participate in games, but only if he was invited by his classmates; he did not join on his own. During free time,

when given the possibility of choosing an activity or game, he remained seated in his place. He always followed the game rules and the suggestions of others, but he was never the initiator. Although he rarely initiated inappropriate behaviour, occasionally his classmates complained that he was teasing them and would hit them when the teacher was not looking. Although he did not deny such actions, the boy did not give the impression that he regretted them either. He did not initiate conversations with classmates, and when he did converse with them, he gave short answers. He was unobtrusive, non-confrontational and easily overlooked in the group. He had no company or friends in his home environment in the afternoon, and he did not have any desire to engage in play with anyone. He was usually quiet in the company of adults, unless someone asked him something.

The boy gave the impression that he was satisfied with his learning success. He generally did not have high goals and was satisfied with any mark teachers gave him. However, when he completed a task well, he was much happier than usual. At times, he acted as if he felt very sorry for himself and did very little without being explicitly commanded. At any request, he would sigh, moan and sometimes stamp on the ground with his foot as if angry. In verbal communication, he acted as if he had a limited vocabulary and difficulty recalling words, which is inconsistent with his formation of perfectly linguistically correct sentences. When answering questions, he gave short and quiet answers, but only if called upon. He mostly covered his mouth with his hand or touched his nose and acted as if he were unsure of the answers, although in most cases he answered correctly. Occasionally he quietly spoke the answer – often the correct one – when other classmates did not know it. He was more successful in the English class.

It was extremely difficult for the boy to express his opinions and feelings. For example, on Monday mornings, he was not able to report on what he had done during the weekend because he said he did not remember anything, as if he were afraid to say something that might be wrong. In describing his feelings and experiences, he was limited to a basic expression and description of emotions and usually wanted to satisfy the teacher with his answer. His typical answers were “Okay”, “Good”, “I’m happy” and “I like it”. When asked for an explanation, he was usually silent and could not explain his opinion (or decision or answer). He did not express his desires in class, except his desire to resist writing. Otherwise, when he did not like something, he simply waited quietly, refusing to work, and would not say what bothered him when asked about his needs.

When talking to an adult or when he thought that someone was watching him, the boy had a closed posture, with his shoulders clearly hunched

and rounded forward, his head slightly drooping and his gaze looking away. When standing, he would slowly move away from the conversation partner. He seemed stiff and behaved as though his hands were in his way. At home, he argued a lot with his mother about homework, which he did not want to do, so his mother often did it for him. His mother had only weak authority over him and found it difficult to achieve what she demanded of him. It was difficult for her to encourage him to do any form of movement, recreation or socialising with other children. In school, however, he listened to his teachers (with the exceptions already described, which were often related to writing).

Instruments

A semi-structured interview was conducted to evaluate changes in various behaviours and a checklist was developed. The child was scored according to the checklist before and after the AV training. To evaluate the child's self-awareness, the Scale of Positive Self-Evaluation (Musek, 2017) was used, focusing on the areas of physical appearance, achievements and successes, as well as general attitude towards oneself. The answers were completed by both the researcher and the child.

During the drama training process itself, the author kept a reflective diary for participatory observation. The child was observed during workshops that were conducted with his entire class in their classroom at least once a week from late February to early June 2019. For each workshop separately, observations were made describing the child's response during the workshops and evaluating the activities and their implementation; this was occasionally supplemented with video analysis. After three months of performing drama activities, the verbal and non-verbal expression skills checklist and the self-advocacy skills checklist were filled in again, and another interview with the professional colleague was conducted. The Scale of Positive Self-Evaluation test was then completed again by both the researcher and the child.

Research design

The drama activities (workshops) were carried out with the entire class for three months, from late February to early June. One meeting per week was scheduled at a set hour. However, the activities were sometimes carried out a day or so earlier if it was possible in the schedule, and later, at the request of the pupils, even up to several times a week. Sometimes, at the request of the pupils, individual activities were performed during the week. The activities were

performed in the home classroom of the participating pupils so that they could feel safer and more at home. Before each activity, the furniture was rearranged to provide sufficient space and any potential distractors were removed to ensure adequate attention and concentration.

Drama activities were used to help the child perceive his body, to control it within a familiar space, and to move with coordination. To ensure success, it was important that he felt included, accepted and safe within the group; that he expressed himself in his own way, not simply repeating after the group; and that he treated himself as an equal member of the group rather than submitting to the group. The activities were designed to help him accept his mistakes and failures as part of learning, to continue working despite these mistakes, and to persist in more demanding tasks. The activities also taught important expressive behaviours, such as entering into interactions, developing and using several different facial expressions, standing upright, raising the head, keeping the eyes forward, and keeping the hands away from the face and mouth when talking.

Each meeting was conducted according to the *Ars Vitae* (AV) performative model. At the first level, the focus was on the self: awareness of the body, thoughts and, above all, breathing. Breathing was the main tool used to build the awareness of the whole body, as it is concrete and controllable. Given that the pupils were usually surrounded by an abundance of different sensory stimuli during class, each activity started with a quiet introduction in which they focused on breathing and moved on from there. In order to establish a routine and ritual, this first activity began with the eyes closed.

At the second level, the emphasis shifted to the experience of the body in the space and becoming aware of the other people in the space. The goal at this level was to lead the pupils – especially the observed boy – to maintain awareness of their bodies and not to blindly submit to the group. Various activities were used at this level, including movement, verbal and nonverbal expression, connecting with the group, and more.

Each meeting finished by calming down, discussing the activities, and sharing feelings and experiences: what the participants liked, their experience of themselves, the feelings they perceived and recognised, changes, etc.

The AV model provided the overall structure of the workshops, but, as deemed appropriate by the researcher, complexity was added to the activities, new things were included and progress was made through the levels (or, conversely, progress was slowed down to take more time on a certain level or activity as needed). In order to ensure the success of the activities, the researcher gave instructions at a level that the pupils would be able to understand. Moreover, to deliver a more honest experience for the pupils and to demonstrate what

was being taught, the researcher focused first on perceiving her own feelings during a certain activity and being aware of her own experiences. She then opened her perceptions outwards, offering them to pupils and directing them or supporting them.

Observations were written down in the research diary as soon as possible after each workshop. After each activity, the researcher evaluated her performance, the course of the activities, the reactions of the pupils, their feedback (especially from the observed boy) and all of her observations. Based on this information, the next meetings and topics were planned, the intention being to build upon the previous meeting and go deeper in the next one. While only the next meeting was fully prepared, the following two or three were partially planned. This planning was essential in order to prepare things according to the boy's current needs, the needs of the whole group and their level of progress.

Results

Changes in verbal and nonverbal expression skills were measured with a checklist, which was completed by the researcher before the start of the workshops and at the end of the three months of their implementation. The boy showed progress in all four areas: verbal expression, eye contact, facial expressions and posture. The changes were small but evident: more desirable behaviours were present and the quantity of undesirable behaviours decreased. The boy was more aware of his body, experienced more feelings in it, was better able to control it, and showed improvements in his expression. Some unwanted behaviours emerged, such as voicing objection, but this is actually very encouraging, as it shows that the boy was aware of his desires and tried to enforce them by standing up for himself. In general, the boy followed the others in the group less and was no longer afraid to do something differently. It is also interesting to note that he became interested in the behaviour of others, observing them and thus gaining new experiences and patterns. He visibly opened up more to the outside world, which could be a result of being firmer and more secure on the inside, trusting himself more and feeling safer. The changes were most prominent during the times of the activities and the researcher's presence, and were less noticeable in an unstructured environment with more people, such as extended classes.

Self-awareness was measured using the Scale of Positive Self-Evaluation, which was completed at the beginning and end of the three months of workshop activities by the student. A large increase was observed in positive self-esteem in the field of achievements and successes based the boy's evaluation,

and a very large increase was observed based on the researcher's evaluation. Moreover, compared to the first test, there was less discrepancy between the student's responses and the researcher's responses in the second test. In the area of general attitude towards oneself, there was a large increase in positive self-esteem based on the boy's responses and a very large increase based on the researcher's responses. Again, there was greater agreement between the student and the researcher in the second test. In the field of physical appearance, there was relatively stable positive self-esteem based on the boy's responses and a very large increase in positive self-esteem based on the researcher's responses. Again, there was greater agreement between responses in the second test.

The interview with the teacher also indicated improvements in the boy's behaviour. She mentioned several times that she noticed more communication in the boy: entering interactions on his own, explaining things when encouraged and speaking more loudly (but still quietly compared to his classmates). The teacher noted that the boy still did not verbally define what he liked or that he wanted to participate in a certain activity; some of his old patterns were still present, but to a lesser degree, and he no longer hid within the group. She noted that it was easier to motivate him and include him in the conversation and that he made eye contact when addressed and maintained it during the conversation, although he still exhibited some withdrawal of eye contact. His face was more expressive after the training and he responded better to conversation partners. His expressiveness still did not always match the situation or action, but he showed progress in this area as well, perhaps owing to being more open to communication than before. Compared to the group, his expressions were less noticeable and required more attention from the teacher to be recognised.

Regarding interest, the teacher reported that after the three months of training, the boy still did not outwardly show joy when he liked an activity, although he did show disappointment when the activity was completed. She also reported that his overall appearance was more coordinated. Compared to his classmates, his facial expressions were still very modest, but some progress was evident. She noticed more frequent relaxation in his posture, less touching of his face with his hand, and fewer instances of closed posture and repetitive gestures. She observed less hiding than before (with his hands, in his posture), but noted that he would still turn his body away and that he was still more closed compared to other classmates. After the three months of training, he was observed to smile more and exhibit a posture of being more actively open to the outside world.

Regarding functioning, the teacher recognised noticeable progress, although the boy was still more restrained than his classmates. She noticed that

he was making an effort to be noticed and that he wanted attention. He needed less encouragement to answer questions, but still needed time to formulate and provide an answer. He gave less resistance to activities that he did not like and showed less lethargy and sighing. Importantly, he demonstrated persistence, not giving up on activities where he was a part of a group, even if he did not like them. One of the major differences in his functioning was that even though he would give up quickly, he was willing to try to do challenging activities.

Discussion

Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have problems in the areas of social communication, social interaction and behaviour, and interests and activities, while speech and language tend to be even more hindered. Usually, depending on the understanding of their needs, they are offered various trainings of social and other skills, which teach them to understand certain behaviours and experiences and help them to express them in a socially acceptable way, thus equipping them with tools that enable more successful integration into society (Potočnik & Rapuš Pavel, 2024). However, people with such disorders think differently than others and react in accordance with their own experience, which is often not appropriate or acceptable according to the rest of society (Potočnik et al., 2025). As such, they are constantly confronted with feedback that their behaviour is not acceptable, that they are not good enough, and that something is wrong with them (Bradeško & Potočnik, 2022). However, by teaching them to experience emotions “properly”, to control them and learn the correct (“acceptable”) responses, people with ASD are sent a message that even what they feel – what is most theirs and comes from within – is not accepted, not right and not good. Therefore, it is important to equip these individuals with the skills to perceive their body, to recognise and accept their feelings, and to feel good in their bodies. This is why the AV model, which focuses on self- and other-awareness, could prove to be a powerful technique for improving functioning, behaviour, expression and self-awareness in these individuals.

A 12-year-old, fifth-grade boy with ASD was given training according to the AV model. Prior to the training with performative workshops, the boy's condition prevented him from communicating with people on a daily basis, from demonstrating knowledge and from taking care of himself in general. This is consistent with ASD. To help improve his self-awareness and overall behaviour and functioning, the boy was trained with activities of the AV model, through which he would first become aware of his body, develop awareness of his place in space in relation to other people, get to know the responses and

perceptions of his own body, train his expression, and improve his ability to respond to others in his space.

Drama workshops according to the AV model were prepared for the selected boy and the rest of his classmates. In just three months, he made considerable progress, as measured on a checklist of behaviours and a scale of self-awareness. The boy compared himself to his classmates (without autistic traits) less often and better understood that he has different problems and abilities than the others, recognising that he is more successful in certain things but has to work harder in other things and still may not achieve the same result as his classmates. As such, he is less disappointed at failure and now perceives himself as at least as smart and bright as the others, and has already begun spontaneously answering in class. Answering questions on his own and even raising his hand is a huge improvement for the boy. He also shows more trust in himself to be capable, competent and accepted in the eyes of teachers, as reflected in the fact that he accepts criticism and praise and responds to it by expressing his emotions. Moreover, he exhibits greater focus on solving problems, even demonstrating persistence in the face of challenge.

The boy also demonstrates marked improvements in expressiveness. Before the workshops, his usual response to criticism was an expressionless face; when praised, he showed some satisfaction and joy. After the workshops, his facial expressions were a little more varied, showing identifiable expressions of being sorry, angry and happy. He also demonstrated greater awareness and openness by the end of the workshops. When prompted with questions, he was able to express his motives, reasons for certain actions, experiences, etc. The boy evaluated certain statements on the self-evaluation scale with a higher score before the training than after the training, although this likely shows a more realistic self-assessment rather than a decrease in skill. In general, he still showed difficulty in communicating compared to other children in the class; however, his otherwise remarkable progress in just three months demonstrates that the AV model is an effective tool for supporting him in an appropriate, comfortable and safe way, and for helping him develop skills in communication, expression and awareness.

It would be ideal to run the workshops for a longer period to allow the boy to really consolidate these newly developed patterns. It would also help to include other professionals in the group in order to experience new people within the safe environment of the known group with different didactic approaches (Potočník, 2020). This would enable the boy to check and consolidate his patterns of response in stressful situations through the AV model structure and drama activities. However, it could prove difficult to increase the time and

efforts of these activities, as it was already challenging to find time during class for the pupils to complete the drama activities and other learning obligations without losing interest (Bojc & Potočnik, 2024). Nonetheless, the results of the boy's progress show that this is an important activity to integrate into the classroom for such students. The learning environment will always provide challenges with time limits, and students with special needs need even more time to master and consolidate the learning material; however, if you know what works and how to implement it, it is possible – and important – to arrange the schedule to allow the implementation of both learning content and creative and supportive content, and to connect them to each other (Batič, 2021).

Future research should aim to replicate these findings with larger sample sizes. In order to understand the full extent of the benefits that can be obtained by training with the AV model, it would be valuable to examine the effectiveness of AV model activities on training these skills in individuals with different types of developmental difficulties and on training different sets of skills. It is also important to examine whether these activities can help typically developing children.

While the findings of the present study are limited, showing progress in only one boy with special needs, it has promising applications. If it can improve expression and awareness skills in someone who has difficulty in these domains, it can reasonably be expected to work with any population, regardless of age, gender or ability. The present research also shows that art can be a powerfully helpful tool for people with autism spectrum disorders. This is by no means the end of learning, but the beginning. The boy is now ready to start strengthening and developing these skills in the hope that he will one day be as independent as possible.

Conclusion

A teacher of students with special needs has an extremely strong influence on the course and result of how the students work through their own experiences, learning, material and acceptance of and communication with other students. The present study shows that art, specifically the AV model of performative drama, helps such students improve their expression of various feelings in a safe environment. In such an environment, all such feelings are accepted and considered correct and true. This helps promote awareness and creative freedom, which can then foster the openness required to be oneself. Creativity comes from experience, and if you really go out of yourself, expressing your emotions, feelings, experiences and inner world in the process, that

can be powerfully therapeutic. This is perhaps the most beautiful thing about art: it is an adaptable tool that can transform and change you, and it is always interesting, up to date and enjoyable. It is something that raises the quality of our lives, because it is life. In the present study, the student managed to calm down (first phase) and to get in touch or coordinate with others (second phase), but he could not show improvisation (he followed the rules, but he did not create or offer new combinations, new creative solutions). We can also highlight the limitations of the research: too little time (more tasks or activities would certainly contribute to a deeper experience) and only one student in the research (additional similar studies would shed more light on other specificities). In addition, there was a lack of consideration of the process that took place outside the school environment (how the student functioned at home, outside school activities, etc.).

Ethical statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Education of the University of Ljubljana.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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