

The Performing Arts' impact on Socioemotional and Interpersonal Skill Development in Special
Education Students: A Classroom Guide

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Abstract

Participating in the performing arts, specifically theatre, teaches students interpersonal and socioemotional skills by engaging them in activities that have benefits of learning how to actively listen, feel comfortable communicating, and personify emotions. Special education students are most often not offered the same opportunities as general education students. Most special education students have a difficult time with interpersonal skills and therefore, this thesis focuses on how the performing arts can benefit in the developmental process of interpersonal and socioemotional skills in special education students. This thesis was created to provide a different approach to social coaching for special education teachers. A guidebook was created in order to form an easy step-by-step guide for teachers to follow so they can integrate the performing arts into the special education classrooms.

Background

After volunteering at a summer theatre program for underprivileged special needs young adults every year for four years, an observation was made that performing arts activities have an impact on socioemotional and interpersonal skills. This was not a controlled research study only an observation. The observations were made as a form of conversation starters to create a curriculum for special needs students involving the performing arts. For the last two years of volunteering, there was exponential growth witnessed in the participants of the program. Participants who communicated at a lower level at the beginning of the program were communicating more by the end of the week. Also observed, some participants were more likely by the end of the program to volunteer, interact with other participants, and follow basic directions. Because the participants had appeared to be benefiting from the theatrical stimulation, this gave the inspiration to create this thesis. Other research would be necessary to synthesize in order to create a guidebook for classrooms to incorporate into special education programs' social coaching category of teaching. Watching these students break barriers and experience a part of life they have never experienced was part of the inspiration to create a guide for teachers so more students can have the opportunity to be a part of the theatrical journey.

Introduction

Many special education programs have a very limited curriculum for interpersonal communication skills. Social coaching is used in classrooms across the country. This can include music therapy and performing arts techniques. The performing arts can aid with the development of auditory comprehension, comfortability in public speaking, and expressing

one's feelings and emotions. The creation of a guidebook that explains how to integrate an entertaining approach such as theatre improvisation to learning these skills, can enhance the development of socioemotional and interpersonal skills in special education students. Currently in the school system, there is not a structured curriculum on how students should be taught or exposed to interpersonal and socioemotional skills. These skills are important in the developmental process for adolescents and adding theatre arts into their education could expand their skills.

Many students are not provided with the opportunity to experience live theatrical performances let alone participate in this activity. Special education students are less likely to experience the performing arts than general education students because special education students are thought to not have the skill sets necessary to understand or participate. Allowing these children, the opportunity to participate in theatrical experiences can open their minds and develop their social skills.

Improvisational games are used in this guidebook as a simple way to integrate theatre in the special education classroom. Improvisational theatre dates back to the 16th century in the form of Commedia Dell'Arte. According to City Academy, "Improvisation is really an example of heightened communication, relying on an actor's ability to engage completely with their fellow performers as well their own character" (What is improvisation?, 2019). The technique of these improvisational games allows for the student to express their feelings, work on their speech, and learn to listen to the directions while taking part in a game. These are vital details for communicating and are beneficial for the students' future. This will provide the students and educators a way to enhance interpersonal skills starting at a young age.

Coronavirus

Due to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, limitations were set into place for in person research with students. Also, schools were beginning the full transition from in-person learning to a fully remote classroom setting. This required this thesis to change from an in-person research observation. Initially, the original proposal was to create a curriculum of improvisational games for special needs students that could be integrated into the school system for special education classrooms. This curriculum of improvisational games would have then been tested in a fourth and fifth grade special education classroom at Snow Elementary in Dearborn, Michigan over the span of two months in October and November 2020. This classroom has students with all types of disabilities from the rare Dandy Walker Syndrome to Down Syndrome making a diverse pool of subjects for the curriculum to be tested. This unfortunate circumstance of the inability to attend in person learning with these students, sprouted an idea. A guide for teachers to follow to create an improvisational theatre experience for their students.

Methodology

The method to creating a guidebook using the performing arts for enhancing social interpersonal skills and socioemotional skills in special education classrooms was chosen to have students learn in an engaging entertaining way. Currently, there is a gap in the educational process for social skill development for special needs students.

First, research was conducted to discover theatrical experiences and theatrical social coaching for special needs students. This research was done through the Oakland online library,

University of Michigan online library, and other internet resources. There were three specific theatrical groups found that had success in social skill development for special needs students: Stand Up for Downs (The Improvaneer Method), Social Emotional Neuroscience Endocrinology (S.E.N.S.E), and The Musical Theatre Project (Kids Love Musicals!). As discussed in the research section, these groups had different methods for developing socioemotional and interpersonal skills in special needs students.

After the initial research on the three companies, a specific connection was made with the company Stand up for Downs in Ohio. This company has created The Improvaneer Method, an improvisation company consisting of only people with down syndrome. Within the company of The Improvaneers there are class schedules for up and coming improvisational actors of all ages with down syndrome. This is where the affiliation was created. After numerous email exchanges, a virtual meeting date was scheduled, October 16, 2020, to evaluate and discuss their program. During this meeting, it was learned that The Improvaneers were still having classes over zoom during the pandemic shutdown. Also during the meeting, it was discussed how their classes are arranged and scheduled. Each class is modeled after a building block mentality. As dictated in the research section, in the classes the students learn improvisational games that have benefits of developing socioemotional and interpersonal skills. During each class, the same games are played each session while introducing one or two new games at the end. This is how The Improvaneers created the building block method in order to aid in the development of different interpersonal and socioemotional skills. Each game is specifically chosen to focus on certain skill sets each session. There are three levels of improvisation classes but this has transformed due to the classes being on Zoom. Because many special needs students have comorbidities, the Improvaneers decided to remain virtual even though the state of Ohio has begun to loosen the

restrictions on the group gatherings. This allowed for observations during a few class times to understand how the class sessions take place. My mentor and I attended a few classes and then followed up with meetings after each class to go over what was observed.

After observing the classes, it was learned that there are many games that focus on socioemotional and interpersonal skill development. From taking theatre classes, workshops, and intensives from an early age, I had many games in my rolodex as did my mentor. This made finding improvisational games quite simple. Having a baseline of ideas from the three companies and after watching The Improvaneers rehearse, research was done on a multitude of websites to find specific games that aligned with certain socioemotional and interpersonal skills. It was determined that included in the guidebook collection there would be four targeted skill sets which included eye contact, emotional response, teamwork and listening, and communication. Games were selected based on what would most simplistically fit in each category but would also be engaging for students of all ages.

After these games were purposefully decided on, the guide booklet was created for special education teachers to use. This guidebook was created using a booklet template online through a website called Flipsnack. What is included in this guidebook is an overview of the benefits of theatrical experiences for special education students and a list of games that fit the criteria to benefit special needs students. The games are listed in categories based off of the skill sets that they are aiming to develop. After each skill, there is description on how the games will benefit this area. After each game summary, there is a detailed description with examples of how to play each game. The descriptions include a step-by-step approach to each game in order for the educator to easily explain the games to the students. Each game was modified either to simplify or to create a more advanced version for an upper level class. For visual learners, there

are direct links to a website that have videos for each specific game explaining how to play. A website was created in order to reach a wider audience due to the pandemic, an internet source was the simplest way to accomplish this. This website includes the guidebook and videos with clear examples for the educator to follow.

Literary Review

Students with cognitive special needs have developmental delays in social and socioemotional skills, such as verbal and nonverbal communication, expressing emotions, and eye contact. The ability to empathize, understanding emotional social cues of others, is a commonly underdeveloped interpersonal skill in special needs children and adults (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020). In classrooms across the country, social coaching is suggested to be integrated into the classroom in order to increase development in social awareness and skills. While social coaching can increase a student's success in the classroom, students are not provided with the opportunities because academic constructs are at the forefront of priority (Puckett, Mathur, Sarup, & Zamora, 2017). There are many forms of social coaching, such as creative therapy through the performing arts.

There has been a miniscule amount of current research regarding the use of the performing arts in the special education curriculum. Malley and Silverstein found through their research that theatre techniques have created positive results in increasing social skills for students with disabilities (Malley & Silverstein, 2014). Participating in the arts is a way for students to develop skills in, as Ho and MacLean state, "problem-solving, make connections between abstract and concrete concepts, know themselves, and re-create themselves" (as stated in Malley & Silverstein, 2014, p.39).

The majority of arts programs designed for education are rooted in music as opposed to theatre but the few programs that have been created as a theatrical experience have found success in developing interpersonal skills in the students. Three programs have created research studies with special education children and young adults partaking in theatrical experiences. Over time they have concurred that performing arts have created an impact in developing interpersonal skills. The first example is S.E.N.S.E., Social Emotional NeuroScience Endocrinology, created at Vanderbilt University. During the time of their study, eight mentally disabled students were paired with typically developed peers in order to create a musical version of "The Jungle Book". Each student was paired in order to create a modeling system where the special needs student could look to their paired peer in order to learn from them. Through this experience of peer mediation, the Vanderbilt study found that the cognitively disabled students' interpersonal skills improved by the end of the production (Zyga, Russ, Meeker, & Kirk, 2018).

Another example is The Musical Theatre Project and Kids Love Musicals! (KLM), in Ohio. The facilitators of this program travel to schools and teach a series of exercises to the students to improve socioemotional responses. Kids Love Musicals! incorporated a residency program in 2013-2014 where a group of teaching artists from KLM traveled to special needs classrooms two times a week for four weeks. This program included children with a range of disabilities from nonverbal and severely cognitively disabled to high functioning down syndrome and autism (Zyga et al., 2018, p. 266). During this four- week, interval the students are first put into small groups in their classrooms and then acclimated into the art environment in order to create a safe space for the students to feel comfortable (Zyga et al,2018, p.266). Because of the curriculum this group of artists have created, the students have the opportunity to learn in a

multitude of different ways. Zyga, Russ, and Meeker expand on the multifaceted ways they teach: "For instance, students watch a performance of a song from the movie musical on film, they extrapolate from the scene by improvising, they experience an actor-teacher performing the same song, they discuss it, they wear costumes, and they learn, sing, and perform the song themselves" (2018, p.266). KLM used a coding system in order to monitor their students' socioemotional and interpersonal skill development. These included eye contact, turn taking, engagement, social awareness and self-confidence, flexibility in thought, and emotional understanding (Zyga et al., 2018, p.266). Through this they have found "increased confidence and verbal expression, enhanced interaction with others, improved capacity to overcome behavioral challenges, and improved ability to work in larger groups" (Zyga et al., 2018, p.266). This program has proven through research that implementing a theatrical experience into the special education curriculum has been beneficial to the growth of interpersonal and socioemotional skills.

Not only are musicals stimulating interpersonal skill growth, improvisation techniques are as well. Stand Up for Downs, an Ohio based organization, has created a program called The Improvaneer Method, which includes a series of Improv classes and performances for children and adults with Down Syndrome. They offer three levels of in person classes: Improvisation, Improvaneer, and Performance. Each level has ten sessions. Due to the recent pandemic restrictions, the Improvaneers have moved online consisting of five one-hour classes per level. Each class is created on a building block of improvisation games and each week new games are implemented while still incorporating the games from prior weeks. The games are generated to incorporate social and life skills while maintaining an entertaining and enriching environment. Similarly, to the KLM, the Improvaneers research study was created on a coding system

generated by a survey. The Improvaneers study researched eye contact, voice projection, body language, speed to volunteer, listening and responding, team work, adapting to change, and problem solution ("Stand Up for Downs", n.d). Nine students were studied over six sessions and were evaluated on session one and session six. According to the research provided by Rob Snow, the overall improvement of the cast in total was "29% over six sessions" (R. Snow, Personal Communication, February 22,2021). The three most improved areas of study were adapting to change, listening, and team work, followed by problem solving as a close second (R. Snow, Personal Communication, October 5,2020). As dictated in the study, improvements in all areas of the skill assessment were found ("Stand Up for Downs", n.d). Also within the scope of the research, the ability to freely speak for up to sixty seconds either as sensical or nonsensical was studied. All but one student who partook in the study improved their ability to freely speak over the period of the six sessions ("Stand Up for Downs", n.d). The range of improvement spanned from students in the first session speaking completely nonsensical material to being able to speak rationally by the last section. Students were also shown to speak rationally for a longer duration of time.

Guide to Improv Fun

This is the list of games and activities created for the classroom guidebook for special education teachers. Listed are the descriptions of each game and the benefits for the students including the skill that the game is aiming to enhance. Also included is a detailed step by step process to playing each game for clarity for the teacher. The games are grouped by the skills the activities are aiming to enhance development in.

Physical Warm Up

Engaging the students in a full body physical warm up allows for the mind and body to be alive and prepared for the activities and exercises planned. Some examples of full body exercises include doing fifteen jumping-jacks, running in place, and shaking out each limb. A few stretches for the body can include touching toes, lunges, and yawning stretches while moving arms up and out. Facial stretches are also important in order to activate the different musculature in the face and these include making wide enormous facial expressions, making the face very tight and small, proceeded by grinning as large as possible, and ending with grimacing as small as possible.

Exercises

Each exercise will be described in a simple way to the students verbally and then demonstrated by the teacher in order to engage the eyes and the body while listening. Also, the exercises and games should include tips for the students in order to set them up for success. The exercises should be used as building blocks such as, beginning each session with the same three games and adding one or two new games each session. This benefits the stimulation of the muscles in the body and muscles associated with memory of what was generated last session while incorporating new material. Each session could have a focus such as eye contact, listening, or teamwork but creating the building block stepping stone will create a structure for the students. Many of the exercises overlap different skill focuses especially with communication and listening.

Eye Contact

These games foster an awareness of maintaining eye contact with students' partners. To accomplish this, the following games use verbal and nonverbal skills.

Name Game is a beginner level activity. To initiate the activity:

1. have the group form a circle.
2. Facing the person to their left, have each person say their own name and add an action associated with it ("Improvitational Comedy",2020)
3. . An example would be turning to the person to the left, looking them in the eye, saying Madelyn and then waving my hand. This will continue around the circle until everyone has said their name and performed their action.
4. The teacher will encourage students to look their neighbor in the eyes and project their voice while stating their name and action.
5. The students will be reminded to try not to repeat the action of their fellow classmates.

This activity is beneficial for eye contact when the student turns to their neighbor, coordination by incorporating the action, and projection and communication by making sure the other people in the circle can hear their name ("Improvitational Comedy",2020).

Zip, Zap, Zop is a classic improvisation game and is an intermediate level activity.

1. This game is initiated by creating a circle with the group.
2. the instructor will then explain that the order of words the students will say is ZIP, ZAP, ZOP.
3. The instructor will have the students repeat the words three or four times (Rohd, n.d.).
4. Then, it will be explained that with each word that is spoken by the student there is an eye contact, clap and a pass motion.
5. It will be demonstrated by the instructor while the instructor explains the steps. An example would be the instructor speaking I will look at "Sarah" across the circle and say "ZIP" while clapping my hands and ending with my hand pointing at her. Then "Sarah"

will look at “Billy” across the circle and say “ZAP” while her hands clap and are pointed at “Billy”. Then “Billy” will continue the same pattern with the word “ZOP” and then the whole process is repeated by passing the words across the circle to different students.

6. The instructor will encourage a slow pace in order to establish the guidelines of the game and will also embolden the importance of maintaining eye contact.

This game specifically helps with motor skills while incorporating the clapping pointing motion, eye contact by picking a partner to pass to without announcing their name, and projection by making sure all of the participants can hear the pattern.

Emotional response

The ability to empathize is an under developed social skill in special needs children and adults (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020). Because of this concept, creating games and activities for special needs students is important for the mental developmental growth. Empathy is an important skill for everyday life whether it be in a career setting, personal setting, or school setting. These games help to identify emotions and teach how to react to the situations associated with each.

Personified emotion is a beginning level activity between two participants or a participant and the preceptor.

1. The educator will explain how to play by first setting up two chairs facing each other.
2. Then the educator will explain that he or she will say a word and the participant will need to react or show an emotion to the word without verbalizing. An example would be the preceptor stating the word surprised and the student would open his or her mouth and put hands on his or her face. This exercise can be made more difficult by having other

participants suggest emotions to personify or the instructor could give action phrases to personify. Examples of the phrases could be you walked into your surprise birthday party or you fell off the swings.

Because of the simplicity of this exercise, it can be shaped for any ability level. The structure of this activity is focused on the ability to express emotions and react to situations based on the words and phrases suggested.

Teamwork and Listening

Active listening and teamwork building are important for students to learn in the classroom in order to create friendships, achieve higher education, and obtain job opportunities. Listening activities engage students to follow directions and process what other classmates are expressing. These games embolden the students to watch and listen to the classmates while building a community of actors.

The first activity is *Group Counting* which is a beginner level activity to engage listening skills.

1. The overall goal of the game is for the students to reach the number provided by the instructor, usually the number of students in the class, and for them to do so without talking at the same time or repeating numbers.
2. If someone states a number at the same time as someone else or a number is repeated then the game has to restart.
3. The complexity of this game can be modified by increasing the goal number. An example would be moving the goal number from ten to fifteen.

Group counting is beneficial for developing listening skills because each student needs to listen intently in order to know if someone is speaking or has already said a number.

The second activity is, *What Are You Doing*, an advanced game that involves a group of students to participate.

1. The educator will ask the students to form a circle and then will explain that he or she will start in the center by performing an action nonverbally.
2. Then, the educator will instruct a student to say "What are you doing?" and the educator will respond with a different action than what is being performed by the student (Dahl, 2020).
3. The student will replace the educator in the circle and begin performing the action the educator just discussed.
4. The next student will ask the same question and the process continues until everyone has participated.
5. An example of this game would be the educator standing in the center of the circle pretending to blow up a balloon. A student will ask "What are you doing?" and the educator could state that he is climbing a rock wall. This student will replace the educator in the circle and begin to climb a rock wall. The process will repeat with the next student.

Reminding students to not repeat each other's action is important.

This game is valuable to the developmental growth of team building and listening skills because each member of the group must listen to the person before them in order to know what action to perform. They also must use team building techniques such as turn taking and working with a partner to provide an action the partner can easily display.

The final teamwork and listening activity, *So I'll*, is an intermediate to advanced activity that involves one participant and the educator.

1. The educator will set up the scenario by stating a situation and then the participant will be prompted to respond by saying "What you are saying is..."
2. The student will then restate what the educator has said. They will end the sentence by saying "So I'll" and add what they would respond.
3. An example would be the educator saying "It is pouring outside" and the participant could state "What you are saying is that it is pouring outside, so, I'll grab an umbrella." Another example could be the educator explaining "I fell down the stairs and hurt my arm" and the participant could respond with "What you are saying is you fell down the stairs and hurt your arm so, I'll take you to the hospital to have it examined". Continue this process in order to create a story and incorporate all of the participants in the group ("So I'll", 2019).
4. The participants may need assistance with the sentence structure or knowing when to speak and the educator can provide as little or as much guidance as needed.

While this activity focuses on verbal communication, there are benefits pertaining to the students' ability to listen and engage by learning how to repeat back what the educator has spoken including the students own appropriate response to the subject matter. This will also be advantageous for the students' ability to project their voices in order for the educator to hear and understand what is being spoken and for the student to express a socioemotional response in correspondence with the situations provided.

Communication

Communication is an imperative skill needed for everyday life as it can be crucial for explaining personal needs, facilitating friendships, comprehending educational curriculum, and eventually

partaking in job interviews. These games use diverse approaches to learning communication skills including reading and responding, listening and responding, learning to not reiterate sentiments that were previously expressed, and freely speaking in an interview setting.

Flash is a beginner to intermediate game that uses flashcards with one random adjective, noun, or verb on each card.

1. The educator will prepare as many flashcards as desired before commencing the game.
2. Once the flashcards are completed the educator will gather the students into a group.
3. A flashcard will be shown to one individual and the educator will explain that the student should say whatever comes to their mind when reading the word.
4. For some there may be no direct correlation between the word on the flashcard and the word the student has spoken but the objective of the exercise is for the student to quickly respond.
5. An example of this exercise would be the educator holding up a card with the word “balloon” and the student responding with “clown”. Another example would be the educator holding up a card with the word “Cold” and the student responding with “sun”. Both of these answers are correct answers in this exercise but if the educator has a more advanced class, then he or she could intervene and suggest a word that better suits the category.
6. Another way to make this exercise more difficult is by using more advanced words or using phrases on the cards. It is imperative that the educator remind the students to think of a unique word as opposed to repeating what someone else has stated.

This is beneficial for developing communication skills specifically eliciting a faster reaction speed when given a decision or circumstance and utilizing the opportunity for the student to create their own thoughts and feelings as opposed to repeating what others have said.

One Word Story is an intermediate level game which is played with a group of students.

1. The educator will first prompt the students to make one large circle. Within the circle the educator will explain that they will be creating a story together but each student can only say one word at a time(bbbpress,2013).
2. The educator will start the story with the first word and then will pass the story to the person to her left so they can add their word.
3. An example would be the educator saying "Once" and then the next person sitting to her left could say "there", the next student could say "was", and this pattern continues until a storyline is formed.
4. This exercise may be more difficult for others and therefore the educator will be able to prompt individuals by providing examples of words to choose from.
5. Also, it is important that the educator reminds the students to not repeat what has been said prior.

This exercise utilizes and strengthens the communication skills by listening and engaging with the preceding student, it allows the student to be creative when picking the next word of the story, and allows for the student to think uniquely by learning to not repeat words.

The Interview is an advanced exercise that is between the educator and one student.

1. This game is played by the educator interviewing the student as if they were applying for a job by asking them why they would be fit for whichever type of job the educator provides.

2. The student will be encouraged to respond with why he or she feels they would be an adequate candidate for the job.
3. The second portion of the game is for the teacher to ask the student to pretend they are a different character applying for the job.
4. An example would be the educator asking a student why they would be a good candidate to be a cheerleader. The student would respond with for example "I am positive and I love to dance." The educator could then say "let us pretend you are a sloth. Do you think a sloth would be a good cheerleader? Why?"

This game is beneficial for learning how to communicate with an appropriate response when asked direct questions in an interview setting. It is valuable for understanding projection and eye contact, and is also important for adapting to change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the classroom guidebook that was created for special education teachers to integrate into the classrooms as a form of social coaching, was an idea formed after the ongoing pandemic interrupted the in-person research with school-aged children. In hopes of creating an engaging, entertaining, and rewarding social coaching activity, this guidebook for improv in the classroom was created. Through proven research from three companies, the performing arts has added benefits to developing interpersonal and socioemotional skills in special education students. After carefully selecting games and activities that fit into one of four skillset categories, a guidebook began to form. Because many classrooms have resorted to virtual teaching, an online version of this guidebook was created. This has created an easier outlet for special needs teachers to still have the ability to teach social skills while engaging the students in something

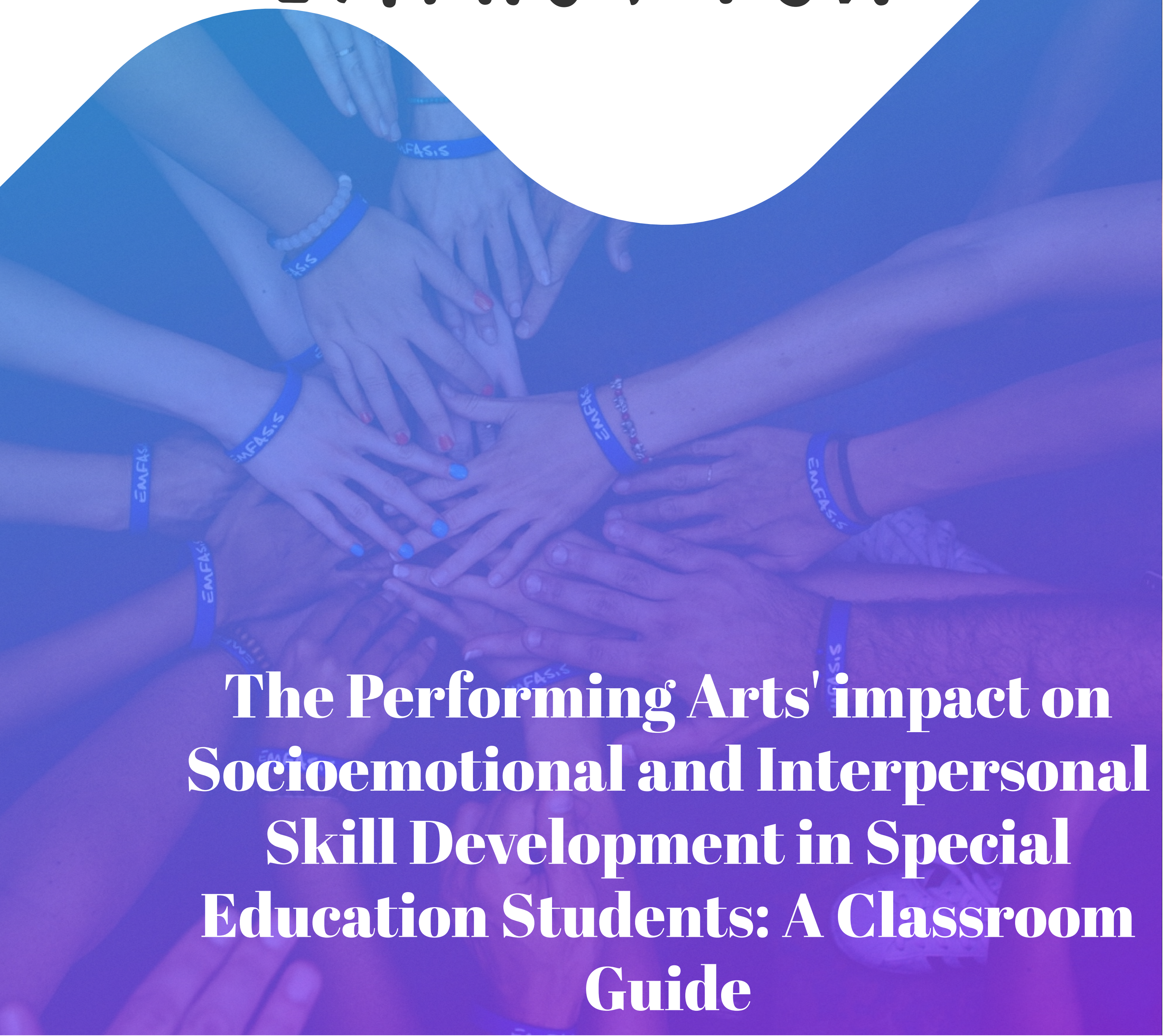
new. Many special needs students are not provided with theatrical opportunities and this is a way to open their eyes to a different approach to learning.

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A CLASSROOM — GUIDE TO IMPROV FUN



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OVERVIEW

Students with cognitive special needs have developmental delays in social and socioemotional skills, such as verbal and nonverbal communication, expressing emotions, and eye contact. The ability to empathize, understanding emotional social cues of others is a commonly underdeveloped interpersonal skill in special needs children and adults (Fletcher-Watson & Bird, 2020). In classrooms across the country, social coaching is suggested to be integrated into the classroom in order to increase development in social awareness and skills. While social coaching can increase a student's success in the classroom, students are not provided with the opportunities because academic constructs are at the forefront of priority (Puckett, Mathur, Sarup & Zamora, 2017). There are many forms of social coaching, such as creative therapy through the performing arts.

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Introduction

Why was this created?

After volunteering at a summer theatre program for underprivileged special needs young adults every year for four years, an observation was made that performing arts activities have an impact on socioemotional and interpersonal skills. This was not a controlled study only an observation. The observations were made as a form of conversation starter to create this guidebook for special needs students involving the performing arts. For the last two years of volunteering for the program, there was exponential growth witnessed in the participants of the program. Participants who communicated at a lower level at the beginning of the program were communicating more by the end of the week. Because the participants had appeared to be benefiting from the theatrical stimulation, this gave the inspiration to create this guidebook. Watching these students break barriers and experience a part of life they have never experienced, is also a part of the inspiration.

Improv Fun?

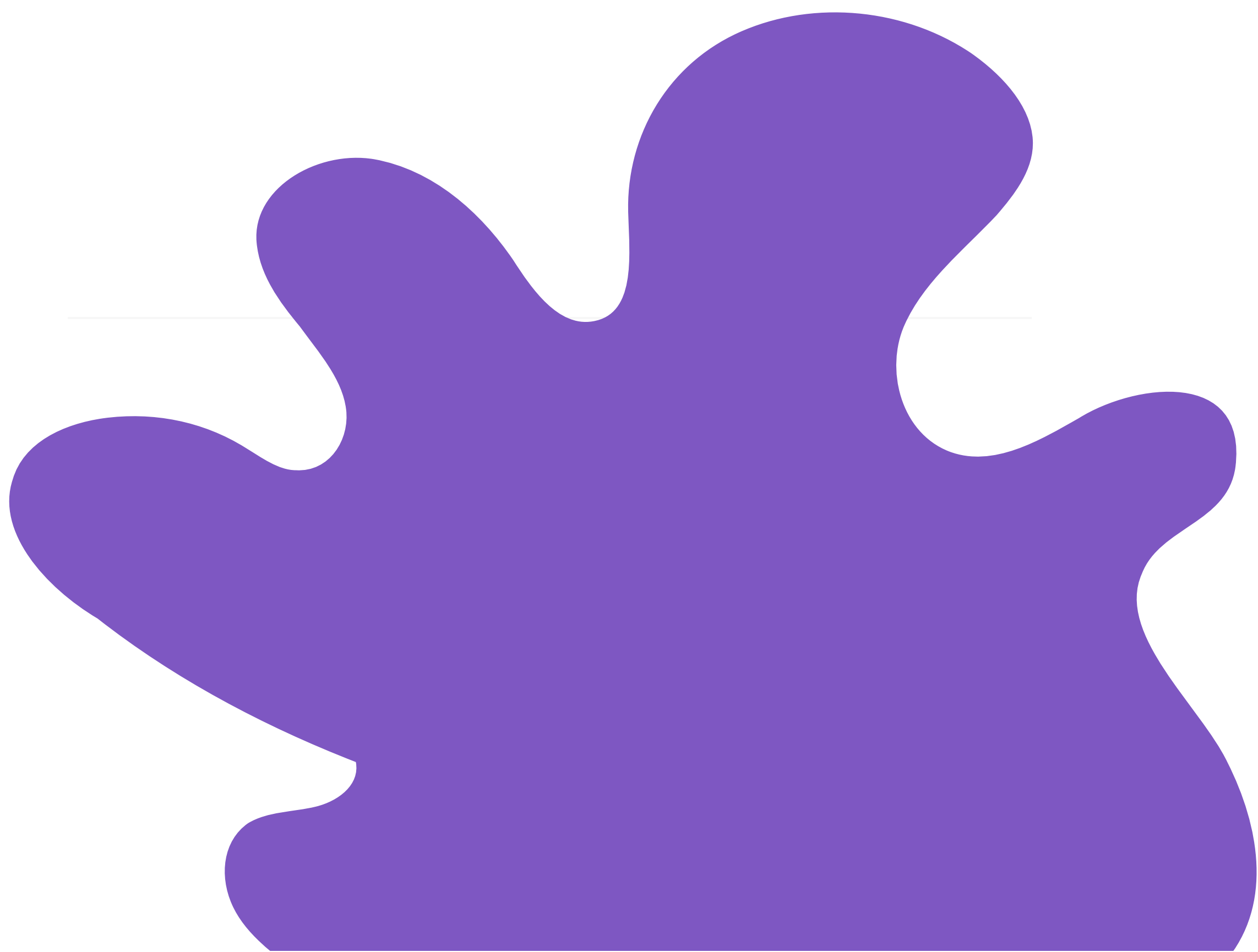
Improviseational games are used in this guidebook as a simple way to integrate theatre in the special education classroom. Improvisational theatre dates back to the 16th century in the form of Commedia Dell'Arte. According to City Academy, "Improvisation is really an example of heightened communication, relying on an actor's ability to engage completely with their fellow performers as well their own character" (What is improvisation?, 2019). The technique of these improviseational games allows for the student to express their feelings, work on their communication, and learn to listen to the directions while taking part in an entertaining game. These are vital details for communicating and are beneficial for the students' future. This will provide the students and educators a way to enhance interpersonal skills starting at a young age.

Exercise Overview

Each exercise will be described in a simple way to the students verbally and then demonstrated by the teacher in order to engage the eyes and the body while listening. Also, the exercises and games should include tips for the students in order to set them up for success. The exercises should be used as building blocks such as, beginning each session with the same three games and adding one or two new games each session. This benefits the stimulation of the muscles in the body and muscles associated with memory of what was generated last session while incorporating new material. Each session could have a focus such as eye contact, listening, or teamwork but creating the building block stepping stone will create a structure for the students. Many of the exercises overlap different skill focuses especially with communication and listening.

Physical Warm Up

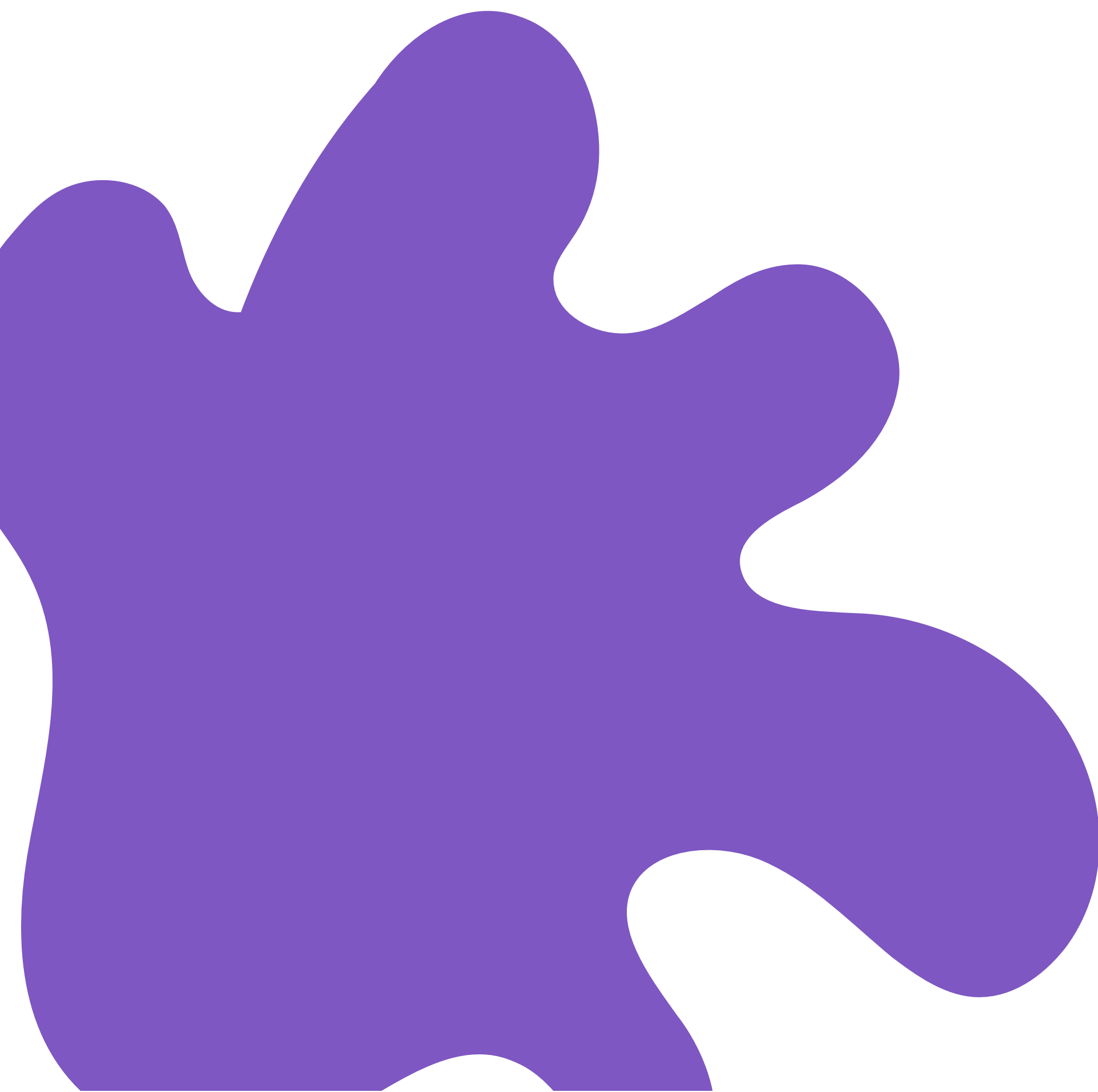
Engaging the students in a full body physical warm up allows for the mind and body to be alive and prepared for the activities and exercises planned. Some examples of full body exercises include doing fifteen jumping-jacks, running in place, and shaking out each limb. A few stretches for the body can include touching toes, lunges, and yawning stretches while moving arms up and out. Facial stretches are also important in order to activate the different musculature in the face and these include making wide enormous facial expressions, making the face very tight and small, proceeded by grinning as large as possible and ending with grimacing as small as possible



Game Time

Eye Contact

These games foster an awareness of maintaining eye contact with students' partners. To accomplish this, the following games use verbal and non verbal skills



Name Game

a beginner level activity.

This activity is beneficial for eye contact when the student turns to their neighbor, coordination by incorporating the action, and projection and communication by making sure the other people in the circle can hear their name ("Improvitational Comedy", 2020)

- ✓ Have the group form a circle
- ✓ Facing the person to their left, have each person say their own name and add an action associated with it (Improvitational Comedy, 2020)
- ✓ An example would be turning to the person to the left, looking them in the eye, saying Madelyn and then waving my hand. This will continue around the circle until everyone has said their name and performed their action.
- ✓ The teacher will encourage students to look their neighbor in the eyes and project their voice while stating their name and action.
- ✓ The students will be reminded to try not to repeat the action of their fellow classmates.

[Click here for a video description of this game](#)

Zip Zap Zop

a classic improvisation game and is an intermediate level activity

This game specifically helps with motor skills while incorporating the clapping pointing motion, eye contact by picking a partner to pass to without announcing their names, and projection by making sure all of the participants can hear the pattern.

- ✓ This game is initiated by creating a circle with the group.
- ✓ The instructor will then explain that the order of words the students will say is ZIP ZAP ZOP
- ✓ The instructor will have the students repeat the words three or four times (Rohd, n.d)
- ✓ Then, it will be explained that with each word that is spoken by the student there is an eye contact, clap and a pass motion.

- ✓ It will be demonstrated by the instructor while the instructor explains the steps. An example would be the instructor saying- I will look at "Sarah" across the circle and say "Zip" while clapping my hands and ending with my hand pointing at her. Then "Sarah" will look at "Billy" across the circle and say "Zap" while her hands clap and are pointed at "Billy". Then "Billy" will continue the same pattern with the word "Zop" and then the whole process is repeated by passing the words across the circle to different students.

The instructor will encourage a slow pace in order to establish the guidelines of the game and will also embolden the importance of maintaining eye contact.

[Click here to view a video example](#)

Emotional Response

The ability empathize is an under developed social skill in special needs children and adults (fletcher- Watson & Bird, 2020). Because of this concept, creating games and activities for special needs students is important for the mental developmental growth. Empathy is an important skill for everyday life whether it be in a career setting, personal setting, or school setting. These games help to identify emotions and teach how to react to the situations associated with each.



Personified emotion

a beginning level activity between two participants or a student and educator

Because of the simplicity of this exercise, it can be shaped for any ability level. The structure of this activity is focused on the ability to express emotions and react to situations based on words and phrases.

- ✓ The educator will explain how to play by first setting up two chairs facing each other
- ✓ Then the educator will explain that he or she will say a word and the participant will need to react or show an emotion to the word without verbalizing. An example would be the educator stating the word "surprised" and the student would open his or her mouth and place hands on his or her face. This exercise can be made more difficult by having other participants suggest emotions to personify or the instructor could give action phrases to personify. Examples of the phrases could be you walked into your surprise birthday party or you fell off the swings.

**[click for a video description
of the game](#)**

Teamwork and Listening

Active listening and teamwork building are important for students to learn in the classroom in order to create friendships, achieve higher education, and obtain job opportunities. Listening activities engage students to follow directions and process what other classmates are expressing. These games embolden the students to watch and listen to the classmates while building a community of actors.



What Are You Doing

an advanced game that involves a group of students to participate

This game is valuable to the developmental growth of team building and listening skills because each member of the group must listen to the person before them in order to know what action to perform. They also must use team building techniques such as turn taking and working with a partner to provide an action the partner can easily display.

- ✓ The educator will ask the students to form a circle and then will explain that he or she will start in the center by performing an action nonverbally.
- ✓ Then, the educator will instruct a student to say "What are you doing?" and the educator will respond with a different action than what is being performed by the student (Dahl, 2020).
- ✓ The student will replace the educator in the circle and begin performing the action the educator just discussed.
- ✓ The next student will ask the same question and the process continues until everyone has participated.
- ✓ An example of this game would be the educator standing in the center of the circle pretending to blow up a balloon. A student will ask "What are you doing?" and the educator could state that he is climbing a rock wall. The student will replace the educator in the circle and begin to climb a rock wall. This student will repeat with the next student. Reminding students to not repeat each other's action is important.

[Click here for video example](#)

Group Counting

a beginner level activity to engage listening skills.

Group counting is beneficial for developing listening skills because each student needs to listen intently in order to know if someone is speaking or has already said a number.

- ✓ The overall goal of the game is for the students to reach the number provided by the instructor, usually the number of students in the class, and for them to do so without talking at the same time or repeating numbers.
- ✓ If someone states a number at the same time as someone else or a number is repeated then the game has to restart.
- ✓ The complexity of this game can be modified by increasing the goal number. An example would be moving the goal number from ten to fifteen.

So I'll...

an intermediate to advanced activity that involves one participant and the educator.

While this activity focuses on verbal communication, there are benefits pertaining to the students' ability to listen and engage by learning how to repeat back what the educator has spoken including the students own appropriate response to the subject matter. This will also be advantageous for the students' ability to project their voices in order for the educator to hear and understand what is being spoken and for the student to express a socioemotional response in correspondence with the situations provided.

- ✓ The educator will set up the scenario by stating a situation and then the participant will be prompted to respond by saying "What you are saying is..."
- ✓ The student will then restate what the educator has said. They will end the sentence by saying "So, I'll" and add what they would respond.
- ✓ An example would be the educator saying "It is pouring outside" and the participant could state "What you are saying is that it is pouring outside, so, I'll grab an umbrella." Another example could be the educator explaining "I fell down the stairs and hurt my arm" and the participant could respond with "What you are saying is you fell down the stairs and hurt your arm so, I'll take you to the hospital to have it examined." Continue this process in order to create a story and incorporate all of the participants in the group ("So I'll, 2019)
- ✓ The participants may need assistance with the sentence structure or knowing when to speak and the educator can provide as little or as much guidance as needed.

[Click here for video example](#)

Communication

Communication is an imperative skill needed for everyday life as it can be crucial for explaining personal needs, facilitating friendships, comprehending educational curriculum, and eventually partaking in job interviews. These games use diverse approaches to learning communication skills including reading and responding, listening and responding, learning to not reiterate sentiments that were previously expressed, and freely speaking in an interview setting.



Flash

a beginner to intermediate game that uses flashcards with one random adjective, noun, or verb on each card.

This is beneficial for developing communication skills specifically eliciting a faster reaction speed when given a decision or circumstance and utilizing the opportunity for the student to create their own thoughts and feelings as opposed to repeating what others have said.

- ✓ The educator will prepare as many flashcards as desired before commencing the game.
- ✓ Once the flashcards are completed the educator will gather the students into a group.
- ✓ A flashcard will be shown to one individual and the educator will explain that the student should say what comes to their mind when reading the word.
- ✓ For some there may be no direct correlation between the word on the flashcard and the word the student has spoken but the objective of the exercise is for the student to quickly respond
- ✓ An example of this game would be the educator holding up a card with the word "balloon" and the student responding with "clown". Another example would be the educator holding up a card with the word "cold" and the student responding with "sun". Both of these answers are correct answers in this exercise but if the educator has a more advanced class, then he or she could intervene and suggest a word that better suits the category.

Another way to make this exercise more difficult is by using more advanced words or using phrases on the cards. It is imperative that the educator remind the students to think of a unique word as opposed to repeating what someone else has stated.

[Click here for video example](#)

One Word Story

an intermediate level game which is played with a group of students.

This exercise utilizes and strengthens the communication skills by listening and engaging with the preceding student, it allows the student to be creative when picking the next word of the story, and allows for students to think uniquely by learning to not repeat words.

- ✓ The educator will first prompt the students to make one large circle. Within the circle the educator will explain that they will be creating a story together but each student can only say one word at a time (bbbpress, 2013).
- ✓ The educator will start the story with the first word and then will pass the story to the person to her left so they can add the next word.
- ✓ An example would be the educator saying "once" and then the next person sitting to her left could say "there", the next student could say "was", and this pattern continues until a storyline is formed.
- ✓ This exercise may be more difficult for others and therefore the educator will be able to prompt individuals by providing examples of words to choose from.
- ✓ Also, it is important that the educator reminds the students to not repeat what has been said prior.

[Click here for a video example](#)

The Interview

an advanced game between the educator and the one student.

This game is beneficial for learning how to communicate with an appropriate response when asked direct questions in an interview setting. It is valuable for understanding projection and eye contact, and is also important for adopting to change.

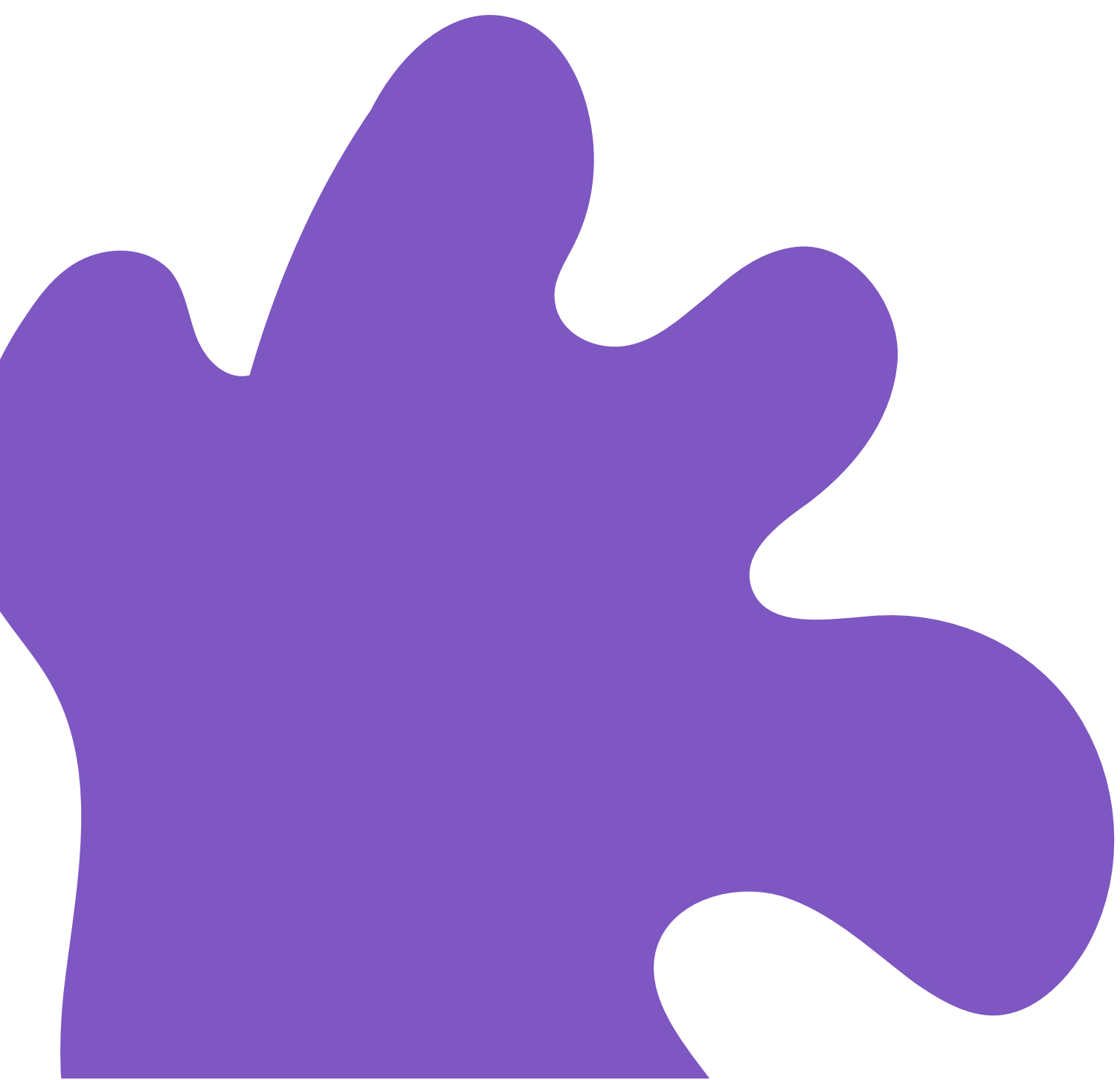
- ✓ This game is played by the educator interviewing the student as if they were applying for a job by asking them why they would fit for whichever type of job the educator provides.
- ✓ The student will be encouraged to respond with why he or she feels they would be an adequate candidate for the job.
- ✓ The second portion of the game is for the teacher to ask the student to pretend they are a different character applying for the job.
- ✓ An example would be the educator asking a student why they would be a good candidate to be a cheerleader, The student would respond with for example "I am positive and I love to dance." The educator could then say "let us pretend you are a sloth. Do you think a sloth would be a good cheerleader? Why?".

[Click Here for a Video Example](#)

Time to Add Drama to the Classroom!

All games can be modified for each individualized classroom. Make sure to continue a positive environment when introducing these games. Some games may be more difficult for others and may cause frustration. Continue with the activity but modify if this will ease the insecurities of students.

Now is the time for you to make magic in your classroom! Have fun and enjoy every moment!





A Classroom Guide to Improv Fun

Madelyn Kaplan

Resources

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