

**ARTS BASED THERAPY FOR ENABLING PEER TO PEER SOCIAL INTERACTION
BETWEEN NEUROTYPICAL CHILDREN AND THOSE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

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Abstract

When we speak of inclusion of children with special needs (CWSN) emphasis is often placed on developmental work and skill training without adequate regard to emotional, and creative drives. This paper outlines the use of Arts based therapy (ABT) as an intervention in an inclusive environment that consisted of a heterogeneous group of eight children with special needs (Autism, ADHD, Developmental Delay, Down's syndrome and Mental Retardation) and neurotypical peers. ABT is the evidence-based use of multi-art forms that includes music, drama, dance, play, fine arts, imagination and story-telling to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship. The aim was to see progress in language, and cognition domains of CWSN when complemented with a group of neurotypical children. The research study showed a progressive trend in the domains identified. Interestingly the Social Dynamics domain and Speech domain showed the greatest improvement. The embodiment Projection Role (EPR)-based tool was used to assess the overall dramatic development of the study group.

The structure of ABT worked well not only by providing fluidity to the methods but also served as a detailed and holistic evaluation tool. Peer mentoring and buddy programs for CWSN have shown to benefit the social-cognitive growth of their mainstream peers as well. Four out of the 8 children in this study are in integrated mainstream schools today. The principle of integrated therapeutics augurs to a possible future where the modern, alternative and complementary health systems in concert make a crucial difference to both the healthcare and education sectors.

Keywords: Arts based therapy, children with special needs, peer mentoring, holistic, therapeutic goals, and social dynamics

Introduction

The population type for this study was a heterogeneous group CWSN and neurotypical children in a play school setting. The ABT sessions were planned with the use of the various arts media in alignment with the individual therapeutic goals as well as the collective goals of the inclusive group. The art forms included music, visual arts, theatre and drama, play, movement and dance, storytelling. The criteria for selection were based on their peer interactions levels. Four of the children were in the autistic spectrum and the other 3 were with developmental delays and one with Down's syndrome. Three out of eight were speech impaired while the other five had speech delays. There was a clear shift of focus from motor-sensory domain to speech and social domain through the study. Social and Communication Developmental Observational Chart to monitor any 'Behavioural' changes with regards to social dynamics over time at school and home. EPR- Based Assessment Tool was used to assess the levels of Embodiment Projection Role of the study group and monitor any transitions during the study time.

Hypothesis: Arts Based Therapy can serve as a tool to foster social awareness between CWSN and neurotypical children by creating buddy models that facilitate internal peer interaction.

Review of Literature

CWSN tend to communicate at an early intentional or pre-intentional level. They may adopt atypical, idiosyncratic, non-verbal or augmentative (assisted) methods of interacting with the world around them' (Coupe-O'Kane and Goldbart, 1998) pave the way for multi-modal arts therapies to assume a forefront responsibility in this task. The effective uses of the art forms are being studied carefully and advocated across the globe by various figures, including neuropsychologists and scientists 'years of neuroimaging have now given us a plausible or putative mechanism by which arts training could now influence cognition, including attention and IQ' (Posner reported at a symposium by Mehta 2009, for original, see Posner 2005)

Across the fields of psychology, education, speech and language evaluations, IQ tests and other standardized tests are usually inadequate for assessing the depth and complexity of a social learning disability. A child's ability to do well on

most standardized testing in no way proves or disproves the possibility that he or she may have a significant learning disability related to social thinkingⁱ.

Educational systems seem to focus more on the cognitive and intellectual paradigm but somewhere fail to address a child's the emotional quotient. This is when we fall back on the arts. Through the creation of spontaneous images or objects, the unconscious surfaces and is made conscious, visually available for the rational mind to look at.

Arts based therapy that encompasses music, drama, play and visual art is a form of expressive therapy. Experiencing art both passively and actively can improve brain function, motor and cognitive performance. Children with special needs have an ability to think visually - "in pictures." That ability can be turned to good use in processing memories, recording images and visual information, and expressing ideas through drawing or other artistic media.

Music and visual art help to improve skills in areas such as communication, social skills, sensory issues, cognition and motor skills. It is a natural "reinforcer" for desired responses. Music helps those with sensory aversions to certain sounds to cope with sound sensitivities and in auditory processing. In a study by Duffy and Fuller (2001) found that an 8-week music therapy intervention in social skills development in moderately disabled children resulted in an increment in terms of turn taking, imitation and vocalizationⁱⁱ.

Self expression through visual art therapy can help to increase communication and social skills, develop a sense of individuality, build of relationships, and facilitate sensory integrationⁱⁱⁱ. Play is the basis for the child's emotional, cognitive and social development. Through dramatised playing the child learns to develop their physical confidence, their imagination, and their social responses^{iv}.

Dance and movement use simple movements to help children form appropriate brain connections. The vestibular, proprioceptive, visual, motor, sensory and auditory systems are significantly enhanced. Dance/Movement Therapy has been a successful intervention in the treatment of autistic children.

Methods:

The ABT sessions were planned with the use of the various arts media in alignment with the individual therapeutic goals as well as the collective goals of the inclusive group. The art forms included music, theatre and drama, play, movement and dance, storytelling. The action research phase of 35 sessions was designed as if it were a single ABT session with the three parts -artistic communion, focussed creation and closure. This meant that the project was in three parts of 12 sessions, following the flow of a ABT session design. The three parts were group dynamics and interactions (*artistic communion*), therapeutic goal/s (*focussed creation*) and improvisations (*closure*).

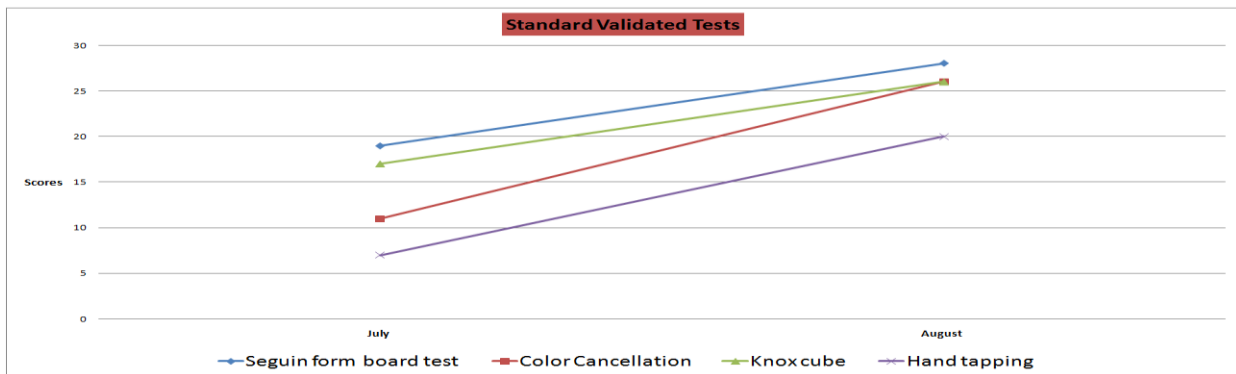
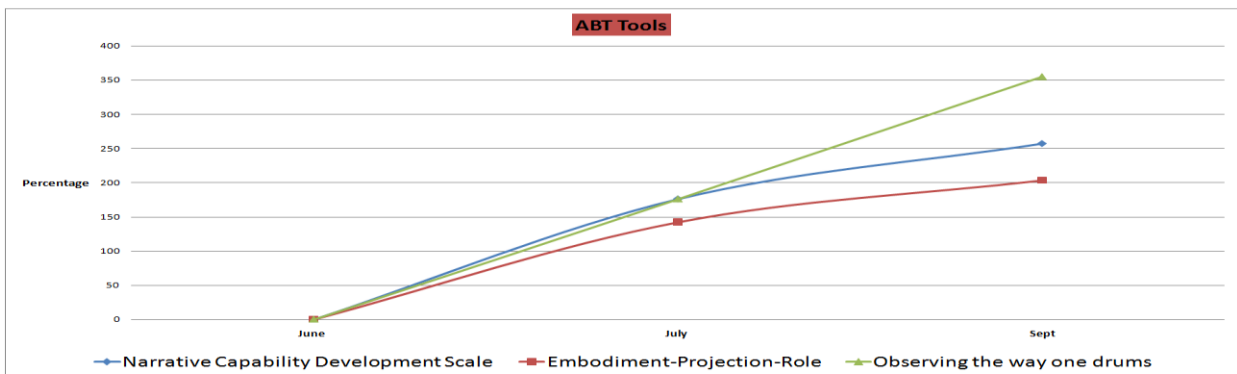
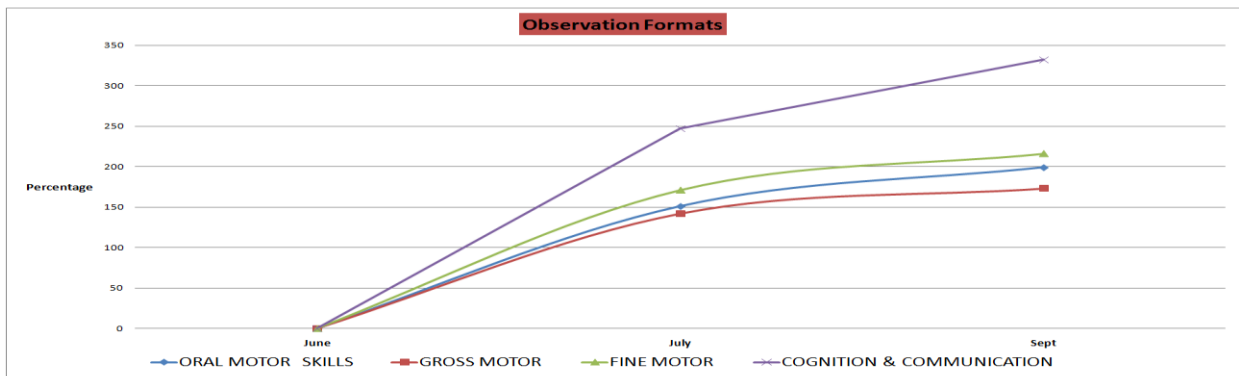
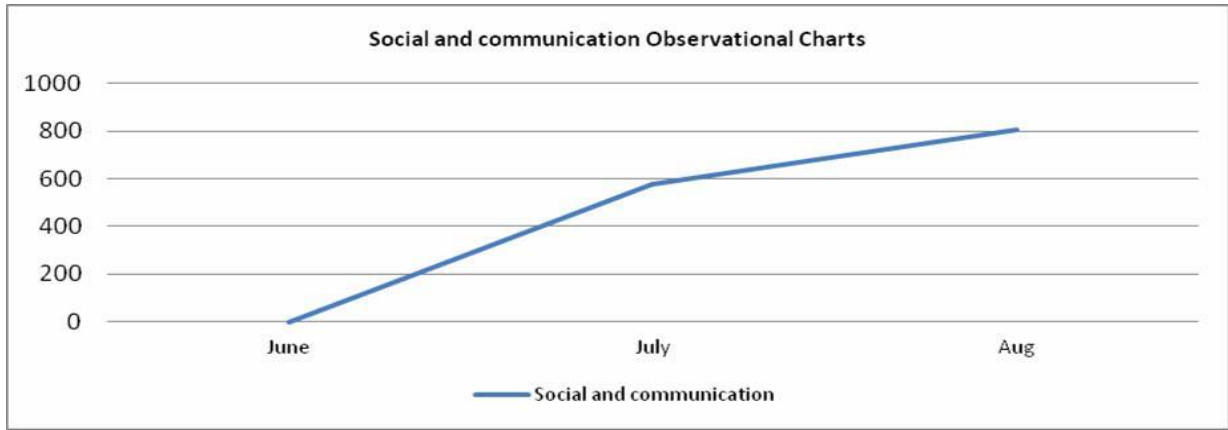
Each of the art forms used aided in both addressing the need of the group better and also addressing the skills in the various domains. The EPR based sessions & the drumming sessions were most enjoyed by the children. Improvisations and techniques in the visual arts media served as a great tool to enhance fine motor skills. Voice and stories helped to work on the cognitive ability of the group. The structured play sessions addressed parameters in the social dynamics domain with ease.

The data collection protocols of observations formats, standard validated tests and the ABT assessment tools were used.

Results:

A marked similarity in the growth pattern of the group across the standard validated tests and the evaluation tools (observation formats and ABT tools) was observed. The graphs below clearly indicate that the use of new and innovative techniques and tools showed an immediate growth pattern. Sustaining the progressive trend further would require repetitive and improvised usage of the techniques. While most of the new measurement tools showed substantial improvement in the children, further validation came from the fact that the standard psychometric tools showed very similar growth patterns as compared to the new measurement criteria (ABT tools) used.

Children with Mental Retardation, Down 's syndrome were found to be more social than the children in the autistic spectrum. Using ABT as the basis for the sessions, the autistic children were buddied with neurotypical counterparts during most socio cognitive sessions. The children with Development Delays pushed themselves in areas of gross and fine motor, vocalization of speech and communication. The children were allowed to interact with least amount of intervention and minimum facilitation.



Discussion

The research project was conducted with a heterogeneous population of CWSN in an inclusive environment. The idea behind the inclusion was that increased social interaction enhances acceptance of persons with disabilities, facilitates their social skill development, and promotes positive community attitudes toward disabilities. Both 'normal' children and children with special needs can learn from each other, leading to acceptance of one other. The study was to encourage peer learning through the development of peer interaction to provide alternative learning spaces for children with special needs other than a therapy set-up or with their parents and care-givers. Most parents with special needs children go by the notion that their children require constant monitoring by care-givers/parents and focussed learning without allowing them to explore media on their own in other spaces.

Most often the children in the spectrum were brought into the activities by their neurotypical counterparts with some facilitation and initiation by the facilitator. The children with developmental delays embodied the songs and moved around as much as they could while their ASD buddies sang after being prompted to do so. Arts Based Therapy allowed fluidity and flexibility within its structure. The artistic rituals, opening and closure, and the artistic creation allowed the children and facilitator to take small risks and play with the various arts forms and the group explored small successes within the given spaces. The study also noted positive shift in other domains like cognition and memory, gross motor and fine motor development .

With most of the educational systems whether in therapy or inclusive set-up, the structure is very rigid. It does not allow one to explore the emotional parameters. Whereas ABT is more organic in form for learning that allows the facilitator and children to intuitively fill these flexible structures using various art forms. This allows one to redefine therapy for CWSN as learning that is personal, hands on, organic and playful.

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