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Stage for Success

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When it comes to better preparing kids on the autism spectrum for learning and social environments, Kansas State University’s drama therapy program is showing how theatre techniques can have a starring role.

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

Sally Bailey, K-State professor of drama therapy, supervised second-year graduate students Mike Rogers, Sarah Edwards and Sherry Brown as they provided the camps for about 30 kids this summer. Bailey’s students also work with the school district’s after-school programs during the academic year.
The collaboration between the K-State drama therapy program and USD 383, the Manhattan-Ogden School District, is the only one of its kind in the county. The after-school and summer activities — which Bailey characterizes as a partnership with the drama therapy program — have been a success from the very beginning — have grown. Based on the after-school program’s enthusiastic summer camp offered four years ago morphed into four separate camps in summer 2016. The camps are organized by the autism department USD 383 and offer activities for the students’ range of needs and ability levels.

The strength of the partnership helps K-State graduate students work with students from around the country with a range of experiences. Brown compiled her undergraduate degree at K-State in secondary education with a concentration in speech and theater. Rogers earned a Bachelor of Arts from Manhattan’s University and lived in Hong Kong, where he taught English and drama for the last five years before coming to Manhattan to study drama therapy. Edwards came to K-State after completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater education at Belmont University in Nashville.

As more students come to K-State to study drama therapy and benefit from this ongoing community connection, a second drama therapy professor will be needed. The students also learn from “W" e value partnerships and the attraction they have for people who are in the same boat. These kids can benefit from working with others face-to-face, but the most important thing is the building relationships,” Edwards said. “The kids are really comfortable. I never in a million years thought I’d make a movie with middle schoolers.”

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

“The creative process isn’t always smooth. Campers experience many differences of opinion, but Edwards always ensures they find a positive solution. In a regular school environment, teachers and staff may not have the time to do that, and it makes a difference in how the students relate. Edwards noticed students narrating conflict with help, but at other times because of the positive relationship they established.”

Brown’s group worked on basic social skills by learning about emotions. She used a variety of games and art activities to support that goal. One popular activity is balancing which each child’s physical and emotional response. Students stretch up to depict a grateful giraffe, or fold their arms in to become a caring koala bear. They have daily lessons teach in how to give a compliment. Nonverbal students or students who lack emotional processing time participate. The group doesn’t leave them behind.

One of the major lessons Brown has learned is that students on the autism spectrum shouldn’t be defined by labels. “I think I’ve realized how can you have all the skills in the world as a facilitator, but the most important thing is the building relationships,” Edwards said. “The kids are really comfortable. I never in a million years thought I’d make a movie with middle schoolers.”

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