

Module 3

BMPF 7326 D

Research Question:

"Finding Their Voice: A Participatory Action Research Study. What are the challenges, lessons and learning aspirations of a group of learning disabled and/or autistic student performers regarding their singing and voice classes, including managing industry expectations and challenges?"

Word Count: 6407

By Lucy Rivers

Student number 2335811

Table of Contents

Proposal.....	page 4
Research Report.....	page 4/5
Introduction.....	page 6
Literature Review.....	page 7
Methodology and Methods.....	page 10
What Happened.....	page 12
Ethical considerations.....	page 13
Quantitative results from Questionnaire.....	page 14
Qualitative results from the Questionnaire.....	page 19
Results from Focus Group.....	page 22
Discussion.....	page 23
1. Challenges with Lyrics, languages and vocal technique.....	page 23
1a. Challenges with learning songs.....	page 23
1b. Challenges with breath work, diaphragm and pitch.....	page 24
2. Strategies that help with song learning.....	page 25
3. Emotional responses and expression through singing.....	page 26
4. Learning Aspirations.....	page 27
4a. Individual Learning.....	page 27
4b. Music Making.....	page 28
A Summary of what I have learnt.....	page 28
Conclusion and Reflection.....	page 29
References.....	page 30

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.....	Timeline table.....	page 5
Figure 2.....	What happened next table.....	page 12
Figure 3.....	Participants table.....	page 13

Figure 4.....	Quants results Qu. 1.....	page 14
Figure 5.....	Quants results Qu. 2.....	page 15
Figure 6.....	Quants results Qu. 3.....	page 15
Figure 7.....	Quants results Qu. 4.....	page 16
Figure 8.....	Quants results Qu. 5.....	page 16
Figure 9.....	Quants results Qu. 6.....	page 17
Figure 10.....	Quants results Qu. 7.....	page 18
Figure 11.....	Quants results Qu.10.....	page 18
Figure 12.....	Qual results Qu. 1.....	page 19
Figure 13.....	Qual results Qu 2.....	page 20
Figure 14.....	Qual results Qu 3.....	page 21
Figure 15.....	Cluster diagram of themes.....	page 22
Figure 16.....	Summary table of What I have learnt.....	page 29

Appendices.....	page 34
------------------------	----------------

Appendix A.....	RTA Codes	Page 34
Appendix B.....	Consent Forms.....	Page 35
Appendix C.....	Focus Group Questions.....	Page 36
Appendix D.....	Participation Sheets.....	Page 37
Appendix E.....	Hijinx permission letter.....	Page 38

Proposal

I am a freelance artist working within theatre, and teach voice and singing with students at Hijinx Academy in Cardiff. Hijinx are a pioneering and inclusive theatre company and have Academies all over Wales offering professional actor training for learning disabled and/or autistic actors. Although there have been a number of action research studies for groups of children with learning-difficulties, there is less known about adults and very little research relating to voice/singing within this community. Therefore, I will be collaborating with 15 participants from the Academy South group for this Participatory Action Research study, hearing their views, their reflections and their experiences and collectively coming up with learning goals. Alongside that I want to collect research from a number of industry professionals regarding vocal expectations and demands on today's performers, to get a context for the research.

The consequence of this research will hopefully help guide me on where to focus my teaching, but I also hope that this process will give the students self-advocacy and self-knowledge to “recognise their own learning needs and become active participants” (Pui, 2019, Pg. 140). The wider ramifications might be that other teachers/facilitators in Hijinx and other similar companies could repeat this method of action research with their own students and slowly we as teachers and arts organisations can gain a broader insight into what particular challenges, knowledge and support we need to give this particular community of students and actors to help them thrive as individuals and performers. Therefore, due to the collaborative nature of the research, and within a social constructivist paradigm, I believe a qualitative methodological research approach is best, using a Participatory Action Research design. My research methods will include a literature review, a focus group with the 15 student participants from Hijinx academy, open-ended questionnaires to 6 industry professionals, and I will keep a research journal.

Timeline

<u>Task</u>	<u>Start date</u>	<u>End Date</u>	
Write participation sheets and consent forms for Focus Group and Questionnaire and invite participants.	1st May 2025	12th May 2025	
Literature review	1st May 2025	15th July	
Focus group questions and run focus group.	1st May 2025	19th May 2025	
Write the online questionnaire.	5th May 2025	12th May 2025	
Reflective Thematic Analysis of focus group and write-up findings.	28th May 2025	15th July 2025	
Analyse mixed methods Questionnaire data and write-up findings.	23rd June 2025	15th July 2025	
Write up research report	28th June 2025	15th July 2025	

Figure 1

As an insider-researcher there will be many ethical implications relating to bias and the fact that the participants are considered vulnerable adults. I will make every effort to mitigate these biases by being rigorous with following the measures which include: sending out detailed participatory forms which emphasise they can pull out at any stage, accessible consent forms for all participants and their parents/guardians to sign, transparency regarding my existing relationship with them and my acknowledgement of my own ontological perspective, preparing appropriate questions, having an assistant facilitator present during the focus group, making sure the space is safe and accessible, keeping a reflective journal, providing anonymity using pseudonyms, and deleting any data collected

once the research is submitted. The project will also undergo ethical review by the UWTSD ethics committee.

Personal Learning Outcomes:

1. To help the students' self-advocacy and self-knowledge, giving them a voice in their learning and development.
2. To develop my professional practice as a teacher/facilitator.
3. To make the industry more inclusive via listening to the experiences of performers with autism and/or learning disabilities.
4. To support the students to become confident, self-aware and skilled for the profession.

Research Report

Research Question:

"Finding Their Voice: A Participatory Action Research Study. What are the challenges, lessons and learning aspirations of a group of learning disabled and/or autistic student performers regarding their singing and voice classes, including managing industry expectations and challenges?"

Introduction

I am conducting my research within the organisation Hijinx Academy in Cardiff, an actor training course for adults with learning disabilities and/or autism where I currently teach on a freelance basis. Hijinx (which has Academies all over Wales) is one of two such organisations in the UK offering training to this community and it is a company that has constantly led the way in inclusive theatre.

“The heart of our work is always our learning disabled and/or autistic artists, who constantly challenge perceptions of what theatre and film can be and how they should be made.”

Hijinx website (2025).

I have decided to do insider research with one of my academy groups to collectively reflect on the voice and singing learning I have led so far, consider challenges and potential solutions and to make goals for the future. It felt important to get a context for this research, so I have also asked industry professionals to fill out a questionnaire on challenges faced by actors regarding voice and singing. This Participatory Action Research feels important, particularly with this community, to be able to hear directly from my students and to listen to their thoughts, feedback and desires.

I hope that this research will be useful for my own personal professional development as their teacher/facilitator, and also insightful for the group as whole, enabling self-reflection and ownership for their future learning. Personal outcomes will be that I have a better understanding of what approaches have worked and what challenges still arise, and I can tailor future classes towards our collective goals. Wider ramifications could be that I share my findings with the other voice tutors in Hijinx, plus it could be a repeated study that is done with other similar groups and organisations and help build a better picture of the sector and to make the industry more inclusive.

Literature Review

I decided to use a narrative literature review methodology, to try and gauge patterns and themes from the literature and which best suited my qualitative research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My inclusion criteria was action research with learning disabilities focusing on arts and self-reflection, also delving into learning disabled research literature, and actors voice literature. As well as peer-review articles I sometimes had to use grey literature (textbook and online press articles) to be able to cover more recent thinking and context on the subject which is still under-researched.

I quickly decided on Participatory Action Research (PAR) so I started by looking at other examples of PAR trying to focus on educational settings where the students had learning disabilities, and generally trying to get a more in-depth look at the different models. In James and Augustin's (2018) article about the pedagogical advantages or disadvantages of action research, it focuses on three different models of how to approach a research project, and I found Macintyre's cyclical model most useful which has three stages; "a planning phase, and implementation phase, and an evaluation phase" (Macintyre 2000, p.1). Macintyre's model starts with a deep reflection of current practice and then focuses on finding the research questions, alongside an understanding of the ethical biases that arise from PAR. One of the ways to mitigate bias is the triangulation approach of collecting multiple data, and this led me to think about having a focus group with my students alongside a questionnaire from the industry, so I can get an idea of the context in which we are learning.

Generally, there are few examples of where action research has been used with adults with learning-disabilities, and more when it is used for arts-based therapies, but I did come across two papers which were very helpful from Pui, (2019) and Kirby, (2023) which were about empowering voices through PAR and arts-based learning. Kirby (2023) stresses that as well as the meaningful, lived-experience feedback, engaging and involving adults with learning disabilities can be a development opportunity in itself. This inclusive approach feels very important to me considering that this community (particularly adults) generally do not get asked about their experience, and therefore existing research may not accurately represent their voices and interests (Nind, 2008, Richards et al.; 2019, Kirby, 2023; Scior & Werner, 2015). There was an example of participatory action research with young people with learning disabilities who attended a music therapy program by Richards et al. (2019) and they used focus groups, video diaries, song writing and interviews to document their experience (Kirby, 2023). The findings of this study indicated that community-based arts research and participation is a successful way of promoting voices of people with Learning disabilities and challenging stigma (Richards et al., 2019). This is clear evidence of where PAR has been beneficial to the participants and their confidence, and dispelled negativity and stigma in the wider community.

Pui talks about how a group of students with learning difficulties in Hong Kong are engaged with self-regulated learning strategies which gives them a confidence and self-efficacy in their lives which is lacking elsewhere, enabling every student voice to have “its own meaning and value” (Pui, 2019, p.127). They employed self-regulating learning strategies which included goal setting, planning and self-monitoring, and this approach of getting students to self-reflect and explore their feelings and responses to their learning was very effective in progressing their learning (Pui, 2019). This idea of learning disabled and/or autistic adults unable to have self-efficacy in their lives is backed up by multiple research including Mencap (2019), Downs Syndrome toolkit (Chryssovergi et al., 2022) and Kirby (2023). It made me think of my students and how I could incorporate these themes into the focus group. To specifically talk and reflect on the voice and singing work I’ve been doing with them could be a really useful lesson, not only for me as their teacher but their own self awareness and personal goal setting. This research in Hong Kong with learning-disabled students revealed that self-regulatory learning strategies increased students' expression of ideas, knowledge about their own needs, and respect for their peers (Pui, 2019).

I was also interested in looking at literature that gave alternative and non-ableist ways of looking at voice pedagogy. I find Tara McAllister-Viel (2019, 2022) very inspiring when it comes to interrogating and challenging the ableist language we use in the voice studio and asking voice teachers to “critically reflect on their role as ‘trainer’ and (re)consider their expectations of character and actor” (McAllister-Viel, 2022 p.196). This idea of critically reflecting on one’s own teaching is key for this research project, and in particular for this group of students, to challenge and question some of my own teaching methods assumptions. Kaite O’Reilly is another interesting academic/writer and practitioner who constantly challenges the established views on voice teaching and reminds us that not all actors have the luxury of “disappearing” (physically or vocally) into a role, but rather they should own and present from within their disability” (2017, p34) .

MENCAP (2019) states that adults with learning disabilities generally find it takes longer to learn and understand things, and there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that this group also faces many societal challenges including stigma, and social exclusion (Nind, 2008, Richards et al.. 2019; Kirby, 2023; Scior & Werner, 2015). So to engage this community and listen to their voice in shaping their own learning and development is the only way to bring

about real social change and there is evidence that the arts is an effective way of opening up these learning opportunities which lead to greater self-confidence and expression (Rodríguez Herrero et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2019). It seems clear that to encourage this self-advocacy is very important, but to be able to respond in a meaningful way to bring about real change you need the right support from the teacher and organisation (Kirby, 2023). Considering the literature, I felt motivated to put my learning into practice and try to generate some of this meaningful change by finding the most suitable methods and methodology.

Methodology and Methods

My worldview philosophy on most things is to be open and curious about the multiple ways of seeing and experiencing the world, and to question and interrogate our western established patriarchal assumptions and “facts” that have often been made without taking into consideration the voices and experiences of marginalised groups. For example, McAllister-Viel (2019) often talks about the need for a more intersectional, intercultural and interdisciplinary approach to voice pedagogy for actors, and believes we need to reconsider the materials and language of voice training to make it more inclusive and responsive. It is no surprise then, that I have decided to use the Social Constructivist paradigm for this research, due to its ability to look at a wide range of complex views via open-ended questions and engage in a more collaborative approach with participants to collectively dig into finding answers from experience (Creswell, 2016). This methodology takes on board many subjective views and meanings which have been formed through interactions with others and are seen within a historical and cultural context (Creswell, 2009). Considering the nature of my research question and choice of participants who have a mix of learning-disabilities and/or autism, it feels fitting to use an inductive qualitative approach employing a Participatory Action Research to enable me to hear my students experience, and give us some tangible strategies and goals to use in future lessons (Pui, 2019, Kirby 2023).

I decided on an hour-long focus group as the most useful and accessible method of data collection and a practical solution considering their timetable and level of focus (Mencap, 2019). I will analyse this data using Braun and Clark’s Reflective Thematic Analysis (RTA)

method, as this seems the most applicable for finding meaning from experiences and conversation (2006). RTA is particularly suitable for my constructionist, participatory action research, as it is an inductive method which immerses you in the data, and the rigorous six phases of refining and analysing is one where themes emerge and are discovered as you go...

1. Getting to know the data.
2. Generate initial Coding (interesting features of the data).
3. Searching for potential themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

(Braun and Clark, 2006, p.87)

I also wanted to build a picture of current vocal demands and challenges from performing arts industry professionals. For this, I asked seven colleagues to fill out an online questionnaire using a mixed methods approach including a mix of open ended questions and quantitative closed questions e.g. establishing their specialism and asking about their preference for types of vocal skills. I appreciate this will be a very small sample for qualitative research, which has its limitations, but it gave me an idea of some themes that are deemed important for contemporary performance.

When researching vocal expectations of professional actors in the performing arts industry I found an interesting study which took 39 neuro-typical actors (men and women) and had their voices assessed by different professionals, measuring their Global Vocal Performance (GVP) which refers to “versatility, vocal flexibility, and clarity, along with projection, range, stamina, and variability” (Marcos et al., 2022 p1). The need for actors to have expression and range alongside clarity and vocal hygiene/health is an idea shared with many voice masters working with actors including Berry (1992), Rodenberg (2000) and Linklater (2006). I found it extraordinary that such vocal qualities referred to as GVP could be measured and compared in this way, but it also highlights the main criteria the industry looks for in actors. This insight was useful when preparing my questionnaire for industry professionals as I

could use these GVP criteria in the questions and see if my answers correlated with the literature.

What Happened

<u>Task</u>	<u>Start date</u>	<u>End Date</u>	
Prepared participation sheets and consent forms for Focus Group. Invited participants from Hijinx Academy.	1/5/25	12/5/25	
Reflective journal	1/5/25	current	
Literature review	1/5/25	15/7/25	
Prepared Focus group questions	1/5/25	19/5/25	
Facilitated Focus Group (recording audio from my iPhone and transcribing the audio using Otter ai application).	20/5/25	20/5/25	
Online questionnaire using Google Forms	5/5/25	12/5/25	
Invited via email industry professionals to complete the questionnaire. Including a consent form.	12/5/25	20/6/25	
Reflective Thematic Analysis of focus group using Braun and Clark (2006) six phases method.	28/5/25	15/7/25	
Analyse mixed methods questionnaire data using Thematic analysis for the Qualitative data. .	23/6/25	4/7/25	
Wrote up research report and sent in 1st Draft	28/6/25	15/7/25	

Figure 2

Participants table

Participants for Focus Group	12 students from Hijinx Academy
Participants for Questionnaire	7 Industry professionals

Figure 3

Ethical Considerations

As an insider researcher, I already had a relationship with my participants which helped with access and trust, but also raised ethical implications of unwanted bias. I tried to mitigate any unwanted bias by following a strict ethical process already laid out by the university UWTSD ethics committee including; all participants have understanding and full consent of what they are participating in, and that their involvement including data is safe and protected at all stages of the research. I also triangulated my data by referring to multiple sources including a literature review, a personal journal of self-reflection, and a questionnaire which helped to mitigate the bias of insider research (Chavez, 2008, Van Heugten, 2004).

My colleagues at Hijinx gave me useful feedback about accessibility for the students' participatory sheets including advice on size of font and creating 'easy read' versions of the forms. They also advised me to change one question and to frame it slightly differently to avoid any unwanted confusion. I was also advised to give the students two weeks notice for consent forms so that they had time to get signatories from their parents/guardian if appropriate. For some of the participants who are living independently I was advised they would not need a parent/guardian to sign the consent forms and their signature would be enough.

When finding the participants for the questionnaire I used purposive convenience sampling allowing me to invite participants with the relevant criteria to ensure they would be able to answer the questions. There is also a potential unwanted bias considering they were not a

random sample, but I ensured anonymity and there was no reason for these professionals to not answer truthfully, in fact it meant I could trust their vast experience and insight on the subject.

Quantitative Results from Questionnaire

1. What is your primary role in the performing arts industry?

7 responses

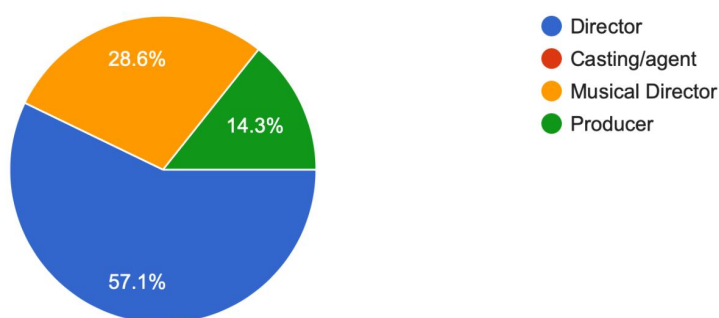


Figure 4

Professional colleagues in the performing arts industry were contacted ($n = 7$). 6 were directors, 2 of those were musical directors and 1 was a theatre producer (see figure 4). 6 of the participants were theatre professionals and 1 of them specialising in musical theatre and 1 director worked in television. I focused my attention on theatre as that is the area which requires more rigorous vocal technique.

2. What type of productions do you primarily work on?

7 responses

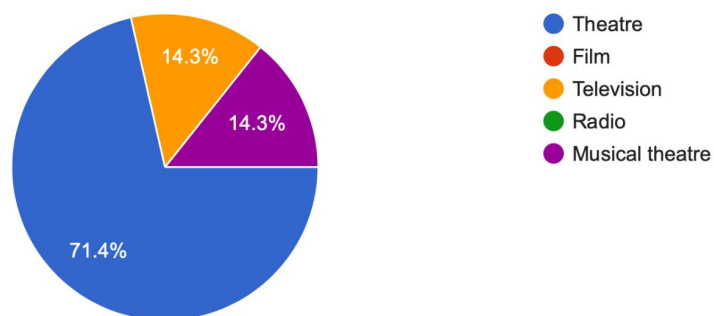
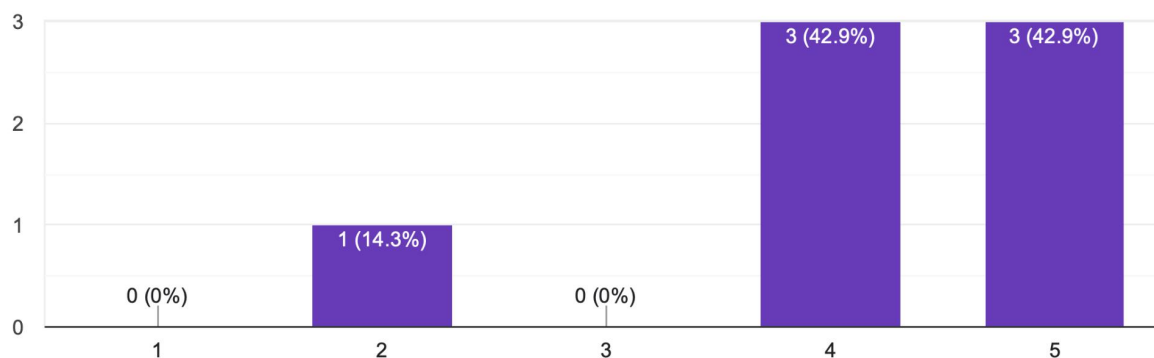


Figure 5

3. How important is it for actors to have some experience of voice training?

7 responses



1 = not very important. 5 = very important

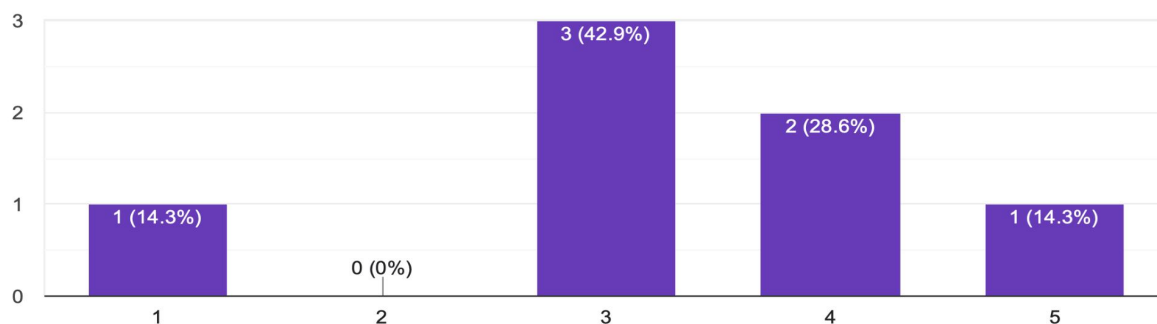
Figure 6

In questions 3-6 I asked participants to rate their response on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being not very important and 5 being very important. Interestingly, 85.8 percent of participants felt that voice training experience was important or very important (4 or 5), and that corresponded with the professionals who work within theatre (figure 6). In regards to how important it was to have experience of singing, the most common response was clustered around the middle

with a medium of 3 (see figure 7), which reflects that singing ability is not required in all types of productions and not at all needed for most TV, but is still considered a useful skill.

4. How important is it for actors to have experience of singing?

7 responses



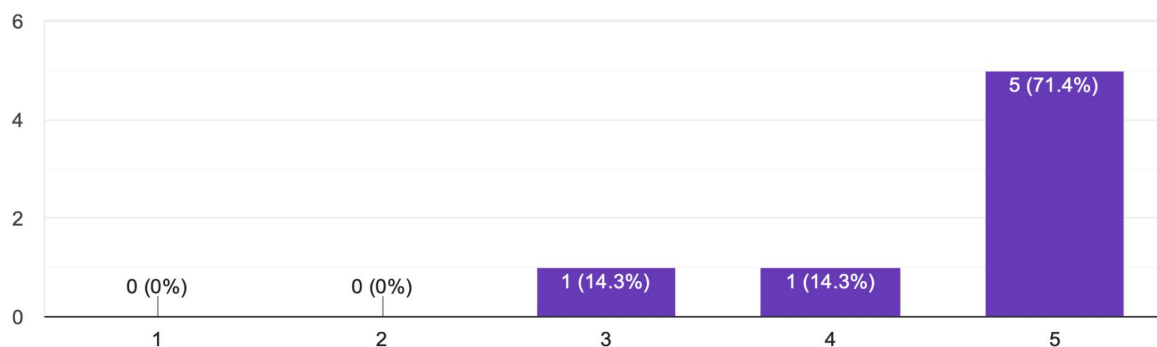
1 = not very important. 5 = very important

Figure 7

The results for the importance of vocal stamina (see Figure 8) were universally high with an average mean score of 4.57 out of 5, and the majority of participants thought it was a very important skill.

5. How important is it for actors to have good vocal stamina?

7 responses



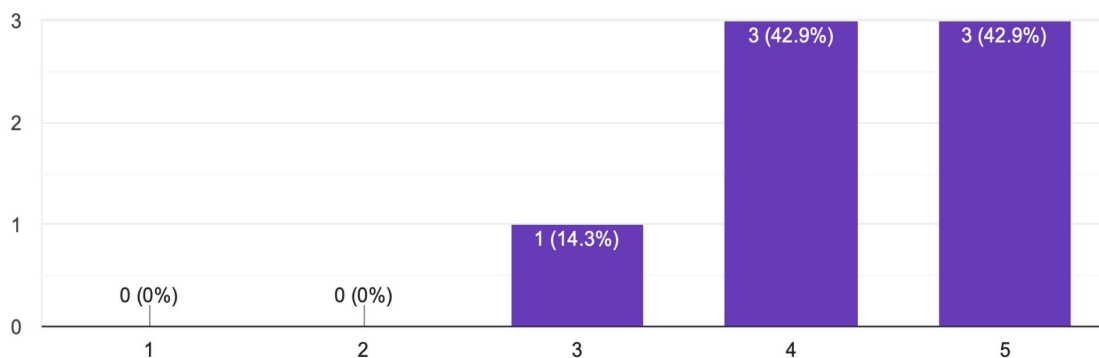
1 = not very important. 5 = very important

Figure 8

There was also a strong result for communication skills with the medium answer being number 4, and 6 out of 7 participants regarding these skills important or very important.

6. How important is it for actors to have good communication skills?

7 responses



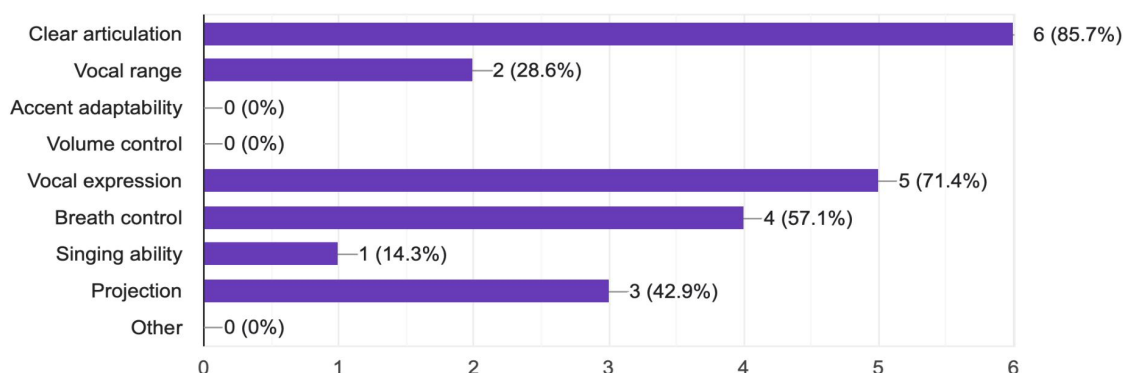
1 = not very important. 5 = very important

Figure 9

The top three vocal skills that participants regarded as most useful in actors were: clear articulation, vocal expression and breath control, with projection in 4th place (see figure 10). This reflects the literature on the qualities that are needed for a good Global Vocal Performance voice “versatility, vocal flexibility, and clarity, along with projection, range, stamina, and variability” (Marcos et al., 2022 p1). This correlated to the earlier answers regarding stamina and communication being important and singing less important. It was interesting to see that there was no interest in accent adaptability or volume control, and that would ring true with more modern trends to keep accents authentic (Linklater, 2006).

7. What top three vocal skills do you consider to be most useful in a performer?

7 responses



Number of participants

Figure 10

10. Have you worked with any learning disabled and/or autistic actors?

7 responses

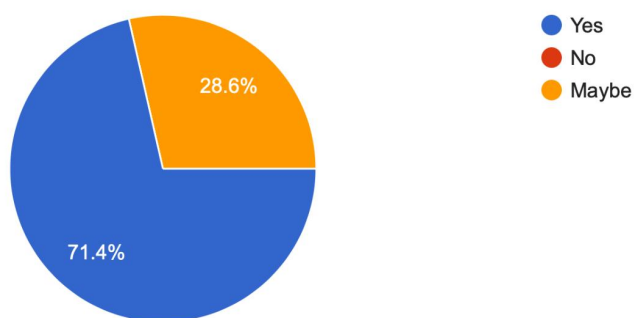


Figure 11

As you can see from figure 11, six of the participants had worked with learning-disabled actors, and the other two felt that they maybe had. This was the first time I mentioned learning-disability because I wanted the previous answers to not be clouded by any unwanted bias or assumptions relating to disability. However, it is interesting to have all participants say they have probably worked with learning-disabled actors, as that is not reflective of the industry as a whole (Whitfield, 2019, Wiegand, 2020) and is more likely linked to my particular contacts within the profession. However, it is a very promising result

even from such a small sample of professionals, as it shows that things might be changing and moving forward in regards to inclusion and representation of learning-disabled and/or autistic actors being employed in the performing arts.

Qualitative Results from the Questionnaire

I concluded the questionnaire with three open ended questions:

1. What are the most common vocal challenges you see with actors?
2. What would you like to see more of from actors entering the industry?
3. What can be done to help make the industry more accessible and inclusive for learning-disabled and/or autistic actors?

QUESTION 1 answers

What are the most common vocal challenges you see with actors?

Vocal skills	Articulation	Diction	Vocal stamina	Vocal Expression	Vocal health	Projection
Number of participant mentions	5	5	3	3	2	2

Figure 12

Articulation and Diction were the areas that they found the most challenges in actors, which are an issue for big theatre spaces in particular. One participant expressed their frustration of contemporary actors not being able to vocally fill big theatre spaces and offered up a list of potential reasons for this ...

“Lack of or a decline of training in vocal skills, more focus on screen acting, reduced budgets for vocal experts to work on shows, and a lack of rigorous training for deaf and disabled artists.” Participant F

QUESTION 2 Answers

What would you like to see more of from actors entering the industry?

Vocal Skills	Vocal expression	Vocal health	Self vocal knowledge	Vocal Technique (stamina, diction)
Number of participant mentions	3	4	4	2

Figure 13

QUESTION 3 Answers

What can be done to help make the industry more accessible and inclusive for learning-disabled and/or autistic actors?

Strategies	Adapting to needs	Flexible approach	Different Process
------------	-------------------	-------------------	-------------------

Number of participant mentions	5	5	3
--------------------------------	---	---	---

Figure 14

From these results in figure 13 and 14, we can see that articulation and diction is a major challenge for actors and yet these qualities are rated as the most desired skill. It also seems that participants want to see more vocal expression and “embodying the voice with intention” (Participant D).

There was a feeling from industry professionals that contemporary actors do not have enough awareness about their own voices regarding how to use it effectively and keep it safe.

“An inability to sustain a run of shows and properly support and care for their voice throughout the period”. (Participant C)

Overall, these results were enlightening, and concerning for the sector in as far as the lack of skills seen by professional actors. However, it is reassuring that good vocal health and voice technique are still regarded as important skills alongside vocal expression and self-knowledge.

“It starts at representation, and making sure that creative spaces are safe, free from prejudice and bullying behaviour” (Participant G)

This comment is reassuring in regards to the evidence of an awareness and slow shift towards a more inclusive, accessible and flexible industry environment where the needs of learning disabled and/or autistic actors are taken into consideration.

Results from the Focus Group

The primary focus of my study was based around a Participatory Action Research focus group with twelve of my students from Hijinx Academy. I have been teaching them voice and singing on and off for 18 months, and this was an opportunity to really delve deeper and reflect on our learning and discuss challenges, highlights and future goals. We did an hour-long focus group and to collect the data I used Braun and Clark's (2006) Reflective thematic analysis (RTA) methodology because it is the most likely approach to produce tangible learning strategies and goals.

Cluster diagram of Themes

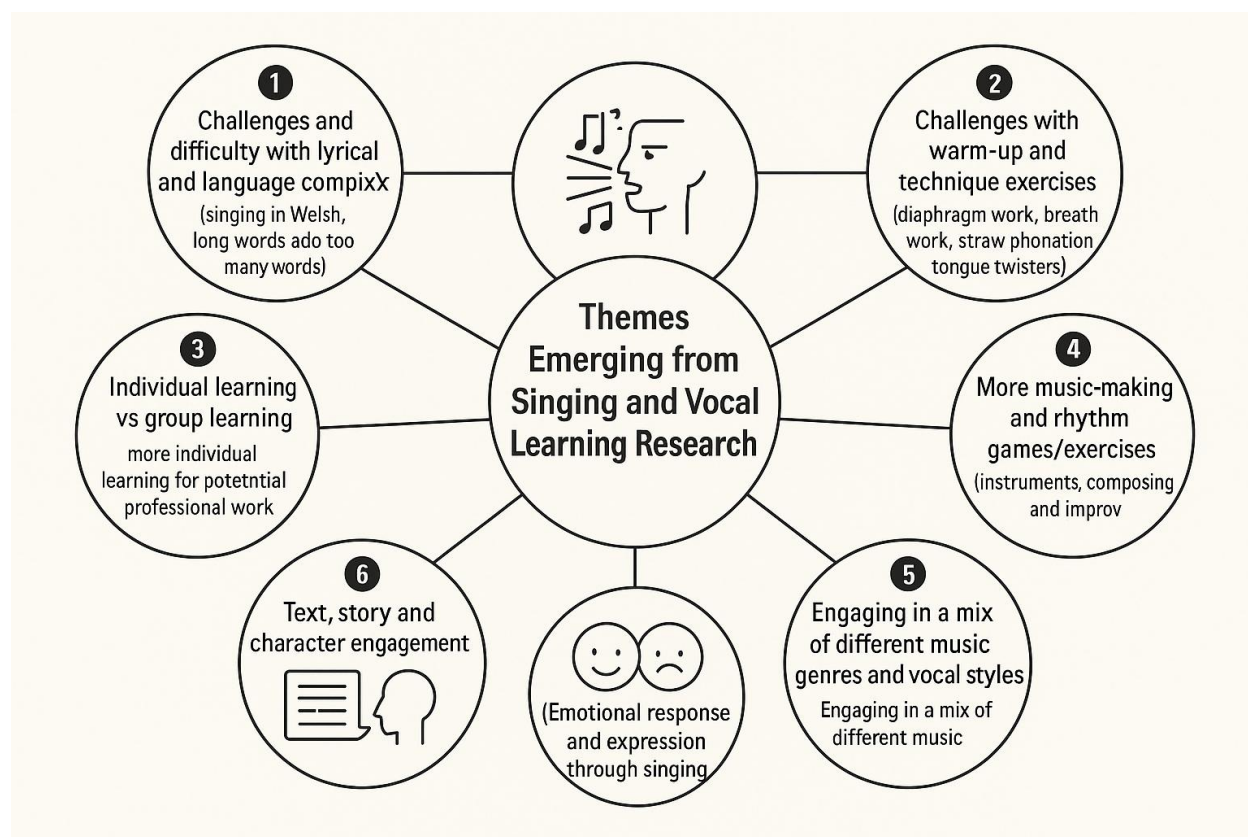


Figure 15

(Image made with the help of Chat GPT)

Discussion

After refining, I was left with four main themes (with two themes broken into sub-themes) that came from the findings of the Focus group. The first was Challenges with lyrics, language, and vocal technique exercises which I have broken down into two sub themes: Challenges with song learning, and challenges with vocal technique. It seemed clear that the complexity of lyrics was a big challenge and there were a number of warm-up exercises relating to breath, diaphragm and pitch which were difficult. The second theme relates to strategies that help with song learning. The third was about emotional responses and expression through singing, and the fourth was about ‘Learning aspirations’ which I broke down into two sub-headings: Individual learning and Music Making. With all of these themes I have attempted to triangulate my findings with the questionnaire responses, the literature review and my own experience and reflections.

1. Challenges with lyrics, language and vocal technique

1a. Challenges with learning songs

“Too many lyrics” or “Tricky long words” were key phrases that came up multiple times by nearly half the group (particularly those with Down Syndrome) during our discussion when asked about the main challenges relating to singing. It is obvious that in my attempt to teach a song each session from a different genre and style, I have failed to always make the song selection fully accessible for some of the group. According to the Down Syndrome Tool Kit, reasons that children with DS experience speech difficulties is because of a number of varying factors that differ for each individual, which include; differences in anatomy and oral structure, hearing problems, difficulties with replicating the sounds, slowed learning, and short term memory deficits (Chryssovergi *et al.*, 2022).

This poses a tricky balance to strike, particularly when findings from my research questionnaire suggests the industry expects some singing experience, and I know the group

also get a lot of pleasure from learning musical theatre numbers. I know from my literature review that introducing new words and language through song is an important tool for developing cognitive and communication skills often used by music and language therapists (Kent & Vorperian, 2021; Kirby 2023). So some intervention and pushing in this area is beneficial but I must take on board the feedback so as not to alienate those who find language and long words difficult. There was also some push back about learning a song in the Welsh language...

“Beautiful language but trying to sing when you don’t even speak a single word - it’s a bit daunting.” Participant 5

I appreciate that this is an area where the students (particularly the English students) felt very out of their comfort zone. We discussed the pros and cons of singing in a different language with some of the group expressing how much they enjoyed singing in their native language, particularly those who spoke Welsh. So in this case, using the Welsh language is the more inclusive approach as long as it is simple.

1b. Challenges with breath work, diaphragm, pitch

When asked about challenges relating to warm-ups, exercises relating to breath work and diaphragm exercises dominated the conversation.

“It hurts my stomach when we do diaphragm exercises” Participant 8

This was the first time I had heard about pain or discomfort, even though I had been aware of a student unable to do certain SOVT exercises like the straw phonation technique so I adapted to similar exercises. I know that breath work and support is a tiring and sometimes uncomfortable feeling, particularly for some of the students who have Down Syndrome as they can have differences with the structure of the lips, tongue, velopharynx, larynx and lung capacity (Kent & Vorperian 2021). Research by Cahalan et al (2022) showed group singing with good breath control helps “reduce breathlessness, lower fatigue, and improve voice quality” (pg. 5). Indeed the actors’ voice literature is always talking about

the importance of clarity, vocal support and expression (Linklater 2006; Marcos et al., 2022). The questionnaire findings also reflect that articulation, vocal stamina and support are areas which actors in general find challenging, and so I must find ways of pushing these areas without any physical discomfort.

“I struggle with the high notes, particularly on the sirens”. Participant 2 Focus Group.

Pitch and range was another area which students struggled with, but it was good to hear that this was an area they wanted to work on and get better. It was also reassuring to hear their love of tongue-twisters as that is a great example of where wordiness is the whole point, and although difficult to begin with, the regular repetition results in weekly progress which the students enjoyed experiencing.

In regards to warm-up exercises being challenging, I can see there is an improvement week on week and the group acknowledged that most of them would now know how to warm-up their voices. This relates to the response from participant F in the Questionnaire about “lack of rigorous voice training” for actors and learning disabled performers, and I would say this is an issue because these groups have mostly been excluded from mainstream drama schools (McAlistire-Viel, 2019; Wiegand 2020). Also, unless you are working with one of the big flagship theatre companies (RSC, National Theatre) there is no vocal coaching on hand, and there is more of a trend towards screen acting (Linklater, 2019).

2. Strategies that help with song learning

We discussed strategies that have helped with song learning, and also explored new ideas of what could be useful additions, considering the challenges that they expressed.

“Need to break down the words “ Participant 3 Focus Group

Visual aids like writing down the lyrics were mentioned by a number of the group as being a useful way to learn a song, alongside listening to a recording of the song first. Making up actions and dances to the song was also very popular, and a few participants enjoyed

adding in some British Sign Language to go with the lyrics. Brady (2008) talks about the use of Augmentative or alternative communication systems (AAC, such as sign language, visual prompts, pictures, object symbols) that may help with communication for individuals with adults with Down Syndrome.

“More singing in character” Participant 12 Focus Group.

There was an interest in doing more character work, mood and themes found within the songs, something that gets a bit lost when we run out of time. They also expressed an enjoyment of learning different styles and genres...”Sing in a musical” Participant 4 focus group, “More acoustic music” Participant 8 Focus Group. Other measures that we discussed that might help to tackle the song learning were: to take longer on the learning of the song, to cut down how much of the song we learn, and to take more time explaining the more difficult lyrics. I know that songs which they are familiar with are easier to learn, so it might be a case of simpler song choice coupled with longer learning time.

It was reassuring that the various methods I already use help with the learning of the songs and there were a number of new strategies to implement for the future. Also useful to be reminded that I need to keep mixing up the styles and genres to suit everyone’s different taste and learning needs. This time to discuss and self-reflect as a group on what would be useful was linked to my literature research regarding the power of action research to gain self-knowledge (Pui, 2019; Kirby, 2023).

3. Emotional responses and expression through singing

We talked about the feelings the students get from singing songs, and there were a whole gamut of emotional responses:

“Makes me feel happy and chilled” Participant 1

“Passionate and joyful” Participant 11

“I feel like everyone’s looking at me” Participant 8.

The overwhelming response was that singing brings about a mixed emotional response that is overall positive, however one participant talked about a previous bad experience with a singing teacher

“teacher was always - you’re not in pitch” Participant 9, Focus Group

This was an important reminder to me, that I have a group who bring various experiences of singing, and it’s good to recognise this and be sensitive to these feelings and vulnerabilities. It can be so damaging to have negative comments from teachers for anyone particularly if you already have had to face stigma all your life (Mencap, 2019; Pui, 2019; Kirby, 2023). Luckily, I know this student has gained enormous confidence in singing, and as a group they agreed they had gained more confidence in singing in the last 18 months.

“I want to sing in a musical” Participant 9, Focus Group.

There is also much literature that backs up the idea of singing increasing self-efficacy and higher rates of mental well-being with people who frequently engage in group singing (Richards et al., 2019; Kent & Vorperian, 2021; Cooper et al, 2024).

4. Learning aspirations

4a. Individual learning

An interesting conversation about group versus individual learning came up, and 8 of the 12 participants were keen to have some one to one time on their singing, particularly those who want to work on audition pieces. There is a capacity issue for me, but it has made me consider running some workshops where I find a way to spend time looking at individual audition songs.

“It’s frustrating when voices are too loud” Participant 12, Focus group.

Having some small or individual sessions would also benefit those participants who have a sensitivity to loud noise, which they currently manage by wearing ear defenders.

4b. Music making

“Some people don’t sing at all. Might be easier for them to make music”

Participant 8 focus group.

One of the most interesting future goals was to do more music making. How this would be achieved was not completely clear, but everyone agreed it would be fun to do some music with instruments and rhythms rather than learning songs. This throws up potential logistical and practical difficulties concerning finding multiple musical instruments, but I can see that focusing on music/rhythm games and improvisation would be a good goal and contrast to the song learning. We have tried song writing in the past and this was also discussed as a fun thing to reintroduce.

A summary of what I have learned

	<u>Challenges Highlighted</u>	<u>Collective Solutions</u>
<u>Focus Group participants</u>	Too many lyrics and complex lyrics when learning songs	Use AAC: visual aids, listening exercises, accompaniment, actions, break down the meaning of words, simpler lyrics, only learn part of the song, repeat songs over weeks.
<u>Focus Group participants</u>	Diaphragm, breath work, pitch accuracy.	Use and find fun games that can slowly build confidence and skill without pushing too hard. Adjust key signatures. Look at where to breathe when learning songs. Acknowledge

		progress and feedback.
<u>Focus Group participants</u>	Learning audition songs and tailored singing advice	Do some small groups or individual teaching. Cover various styles.
<u>Focus Groups participants</u>	Difficulty in singing songs	Do more music making, rhythm and music improvisation, character singing work.
<u>Questionnaire participants</u>	Articulation, stamina, vocal expression, vocal health and vocal self-knowledge.	More inclusive voice training, and more voice coaches in theatre companies.
<u>Questionnaire Participants</u>	Lack of representation of learning disabled and/or autistic actors in the performing arts industry.	A flexibility in the infrastructure and work schedules, and to acknowledgement and cater for specific needs to promote inclusive, safe and accessible working environments.

Figure 16

Conclusion and reflection

This research process has been an interesting learning curve for me, trying out so many things for the first time, an experience which has not always been smooth particularly in regards to how to best run a focus group. I found the time limit of one hour a little short considering the questions I wanted to cover and as a result I felt like I led from the front, rather than leaving time for discussion and for their thoughts to come without prompting. However, both the focus group and the questionnaire findings were of great interest and brought up some similar overlapping themes relating to self-knowledge and the importance of adapting to different performers and their needs. The questionnaire raised some

interesting thoughts in regards to the priorities of what directors are looking for, and the unanimous agreement that good vocal knowledge and expression is important.

However, the most interesting findings for me were related to my student participants and hearing about the various challenges of singing with a heavy emphasis on lyrics, and the thirst of wanting to engage in music making more as a whole. It was lovely to learn of their favourite songs which were varied but shared a common trait of being lyrically simpler i.e House of the Rising Sun, Amazing Grace, and rounds including I love the flowers and Kookaburru. The students expressed awareness of gaining confidence in singing many different genres and styles of songs over the time I have been teaching them. Most importantly, we have started the journey of self and collective reflection and they have hopefully found some confidence and ownership through suggesting new learning goals. Their feedback and ideas will greatly impact my professional development as a teacher/facilitator and our future classes and learning together. As far as making the industry more inclusive, simply by listening and learning from them I have made a small step towards inclusive practice, which I hope to share more widely with other colleagues and groups in the future. I also hope that this opportunity has given them some self-advocacy and awareness, and moving forward will give them confidence in shaping their own learning.

References

Berry, C. (1992) 'The Actor and the Text' New York: Applause Books.

Brady, N. C., Bredin-Oja, S. L., & Warren, S. E. (2008). Prelinguistic and early language interventions for children with Down syndrome or fragile X syndrome. In J. E. Roberts, R. S. Chapman, & S. F. Warren (Eds.), *Speech and language development and intervention in Down syndrome and fragile X syndrome* (pp. 173–192). Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co..

Braun and Clarke, (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology', 3 (2). Pp. 77-101. ISSN 1478-0887

Cahalan, R. M., Meade, C., & Mockler, S. (2022). 'Singstrong: A singing and breathing retraining intervention for respiratory and other common symptoms of long COVID: A pilot study'. *Canadian Journal of Respiratory Therapy*, 58, 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.29390/cjrt-2021-074>

Chavez, C. (2008). Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 474-494. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-3/chavez.pdf>

Chrysosovergis, Hannah, Chan, Prescott, Bell, Smith, Mulderrig, Randell and Porter (2022) 'Down Syndrome Toolkit for Paediatric Speech and Language Therapists' Available at <http://www.down-syndrome.org/resources/slt-toolkit> 2 © 2022 Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust

Creswell, J.W., (2009.) Mapping the field of mixed methods research. *Journal of mixed methods research*, 3(2), pp.95-108.

Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N., (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Gibbs, Cartney, Wilkinson, Parkinson, Cunningham, James-Reynolds, Pitt (2016). 'Literature review on the use of action research in higher education. *Educational Action Research*', 25(1), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1124046>

Grobler, H. B., & Wessels, S. (2018). 'Hear Their Voices: Self-configuration Experiences of Learners with Mild Learning Difficulties within the Learner–Teacher Relationship'. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 67(3), 243–262.

Hijinx website (2025) built by Illustrate Digital. Accessed June 2025; <https://www.hijinx.org.uk/academies>

James, F. and Augustin, D.S., 2018. Improving teachers' pedagogical and instructional practice through action research: Potential and problems. *Educational Action Research*, 26(2), pp.333-348.

Kent, R. D., Eichhorn, J., Wilson, E. M., Suk, Y., Bolt, D. M., & Vorperian, H. K. (2021). Auditory-perceptual features of speech in children and adults with Down syndrome: A speech profile analysis. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 64(4), 1157–1175. https://doi.org/10.1044/2021_JSLHR-20-00617

Kirby, M.L., (2023). *Exploring the outcomes of engagement with arts-based learning for adults with learning disabilities: a participatory action research project* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds).

Leavy, Patricia (2020) ‘*The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*’, 2nd edn, Oxford Handbooks 202; online Oxford Academic, 2 Sept. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190847388.001.0001>, accessed 24 June 2025.

Linklater, K. (2006). *Freeing the Natural Voice: Imagery and Art in the Practice of Voice and Language*. London: Nick Hern Books.

Macintyre, C. (2000). *The Art of Action Research in the Classroom*. David Fulton

Marcos da Trindade Duarte, Sampaio de Souza, Simões-Zenari, Nemr (2022), The Actor's Voice: Vocal Performance Assessment by Different Professionals,' *Journal of Voice*, Volume 36, Issue 3, Pages 440.e1-440.e9, ISSN 0892-1997, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvoice.2020.06.019>.

McAllister-Viel, T. (2019) ‘Training Actors’ Voices: Towards an Intercultural/Interdisciplinary Approach’ (1st ed.). Routledge.

McAllister-Viel, T. (2022) Embodied Voice and Inclusivity: Ableism and theatre Voice Training in Inclusivity and Equality’ in ‘*Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Nero and Physical Diversity*’. (1 Ed). Edited by Whitfield, P. Routledge. P.188-199.

Mencap the voice of learning disability (2019) Health inequalities. Available at: www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/research-and-statistics/health/health-inequalities (accessed 24 April 2019).

Nind, Melanie (2008). 'Learning difficulties and social class: exploring the intersection through family narratives.' *International studies in Sociology of Education* 18.2: 87-98.

O'Reilly, K. (2017) 'But you know I don't think in words' In: G Brandstetter and H. Harung (eds). *'Moving (Across) Borders: Performing Translation, Intervention, Participation'* Berlin: Transcript Verlag, p. 93-116.

Pui, W., (2019). 'Empowering voices of students with learning difficulties implementing self-regulated learning strategies in a special school through participatory action research'. *Polish journal of educational studies. II*, pp.125-144.

Richards, M., Lawthom, R., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2019). Community-based arts research for people with learning disabilities: challenging misconceptions about learning disabilities. *Disability & Society*, 34(2), 204-227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1522243>

Rodenburg, P. (1997) 'The Actor Speaks: Voice and the performer' Methuen Drama (first ed)

Rodenburg, P. (2000) *The Actor Speaks: Voice and the performer*. Methuen Drama (second ed)

Rodríguez Herrero, P., Izuzquiza Gasset, D. and Cabrera Garcia, A., 2020. Inclusive education at a Spanish University: The voice of students with intellectual disability. *Disability & Society*, 36(3), pp.376-398.

Scior, K. and Werner, S., (2015). Changing attitudes to learning disability: A review of the evidence.

Snyder, H (2019). 'Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines', *Journal of Business Research*, Volume 104, Pages 333-339, ISSN 0148-2963,

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>.

Tranfield, Denyer, Smart (2003), 'Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review'

British Journal of Management, 14 (2003), pp. 207-222, 10.1111/1467-8551.00375

Van Heugten, K., 2004. Managing insider research: Learning from experience. *Qualitative Social Work*, 3(2), pp.203-219.

Whitebread, D., Coltman, P., Pino Pasternak, D., Sangster, C., Grau, V., Bingham, S., Almeqdad, O., & Demetriou, D. (2009). 'The Development of Two Observational Tools for Winnie Sin Wai Pui'. 144 Assessing Metacognition and Self-regulated Learning in Young Children. *Metacognition and Learning*, 4(1), 63–85.

Wiegand, C (2020). 'Mat Fraser: 'I'm Hardcore - I want Equality and I'm not Going to Stop' *The Guardian*. (online). Available at:

www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jul/21/mat-fraser-im-hardcore-i-want-equality-deaf-disabled-artists-theatre-mentors-graeae

Whitfield, P (2019) 'Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Nero and Physical Diversity'. (1 d). Edited by Whitfield, P. Routledge.

Appendices

Appendix A

RTA Codes

1. musical creativity and composition (e.g, more music making)
2. Emotional expression through music
3. Lyric complexity and language use (e.g, too many words, long words, tongue twisters, Welsh language).
4. Vocal technique and development, (range, pitch, breath control, diaphragm)

5. Narrative and romantic interpretation (text character and story)
6. More musical engagement through rhythm and instruments
7. Multisensory learning tools, (BSL, actions, writing lyrics, listening).
8. Individual learning needs (working in pairs or individuals on audition songs)

Appendix B.

Consent Form for Focus Group

Researcher - Lucy Rivers

Consent to take part in “**An Action Research study on supporting and exploring the knowledge, challenges and development of voice and singing learning for student actors with Autism and/or Learning Disabilities.**”

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time
- I understand that I can refuse to answer any question involved during the research process without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves filling out an online Semi-structured questionnaire.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.
- This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of the questionnaire which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I write about.
- I understand that signed consent forms and copies of the responses of the questionnaire will be retained safely on Lucy Rivers' laptop and will be password protected. This will be kept until September 2025 and then be deleted.

- I understand that under the freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further information.

Researcher: Lucy Rivers, Email: lucymeganrivers@gmail.com. Part of a Voice Pedagogy Masters degree with Voice Study Centre and affiliated with University of Wales Trinity St David's. Academic supervisor: Louisa Morgan. louisa@voicestudycentre.com

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher Date

Appendix C

Focus Group questions

Ice-breaker: What's your favorite song to sing in the shower?

1. General Experience with Singing and voice work

- Could you lead your own vocal warm-up as a group?
- Is there any vocal warm-up exercise you find challenging or difficult?
- Is there one you particularly like and find helpful?
- Can you tell me what singing means to you? How do you feel?
- Has doing voice work and learning songs helped your confidence in performing?
- Has doing voice work and learning songs helped your confidence in other areas of your life?

2. Learning Process

- What helps you learn singing and make it more fun? (only offer if stuck; listening, copying, flip chart lyrics, actions, accompaniment?)
- Are there things that make it more confusing and difficult?
- Are there any parts of voice lessons that are hard for you?
- Do you like learning in a group or on your own? Why?

3. Tools and Resources

- What kind of materials do you like best for learning songs or techniques?

4. Barriers and Challenges

- Are there things that get in the way of you enjoying singing?
- Have you ever felt frustrated when learning a song?

5. Aspirations and Motivation

- What would you like to be able to do with your singing in the future?
- Is there a song or artist that inspires you to sing more?
- Would you like to do more text work i.e Shakespeare or contemporary speeches? For showcase/auditions.

6. Feedback and Suggestions

- What would make voice and singing lessons better for you?
- What vocal skills are you missing?
- What's been your favourite song or round that you have learnt so far? Why?
- What songs/styles would you like to focus on more?

Appendix D

Participation Sheet for Focus Group
Easy Read version

Researcher - Lucy Rivers

5th May 2025

Dear Academy South 1 member,

I am writing to invite you to be a participant for a 1 hour focus group session as part of my research for my Masters. The focus group session will involve me asking some questions relating to voice and singing which

we can all discuss freely. This is an opportunity for us to chat and for you to share your thoughts, opinions and experiences regarding your voice and singing learning. You have been selected because you are a member of Academy south 1 and as your voice teacher I want to hear about what challenges and lessons you already know, what you need to develop, and together look at what we want to focus on learning in the future.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and you do not have to take part if you do not wish to. The focus group will take place on Monday morning 19th May 2025 for one hour from 10.30am -11.30pm, with a 15 minute break, after our usual warm-up.

There will be an assistant facilitator in the room as always, and risks are no higher than any other academy session. I will record and film the session for my own research and delete once I have analysed the information.

When I have completed the study, I will share the document with you all in one of our classes later in the year. Please contact me if you have any questions. Many thanks for your time and future participation.

Yours Sincerely,

Lucy Rivers

Appendix E

Hijinx Theatre permission letter;



Hijinx Theatre

Wales Millennium Centre

**Bute Place Cardiff
CF10 5AL**

Tel: +44 (0)29 2030 0331 25th

February 2025

Dear UWTSD,

Regarding the research project: ‘Finding a model for voice students to self-regulate, reflect and articulate their knowledge and learning’.

I hereby confirm that I approve of the research proposed about ‘reflecting on voice learning and how to prepare students for the profession’ to be carried out by one of our tutors Lucy Rivers at Hijinx Academy, Cardiff between April and July 2025. I also confirm that Lucy Rivers has the permission to carry out a workshop and focus group with our Academy South group for her research (depending on their given interest and consent from the students and their guardians).

Kind Regards,

Amy Griggs (Academy Director) and Emily Poole (Creative Coordinator – South)