

**Finding Their Voice: An Action Research study
exploring the needs of student actors with
Learning Disabilities and/or autism in singing
and voice lessons including managing industry
expectations and challenges**

Researcher - Lucy Rivers
Student number 2335811

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Context

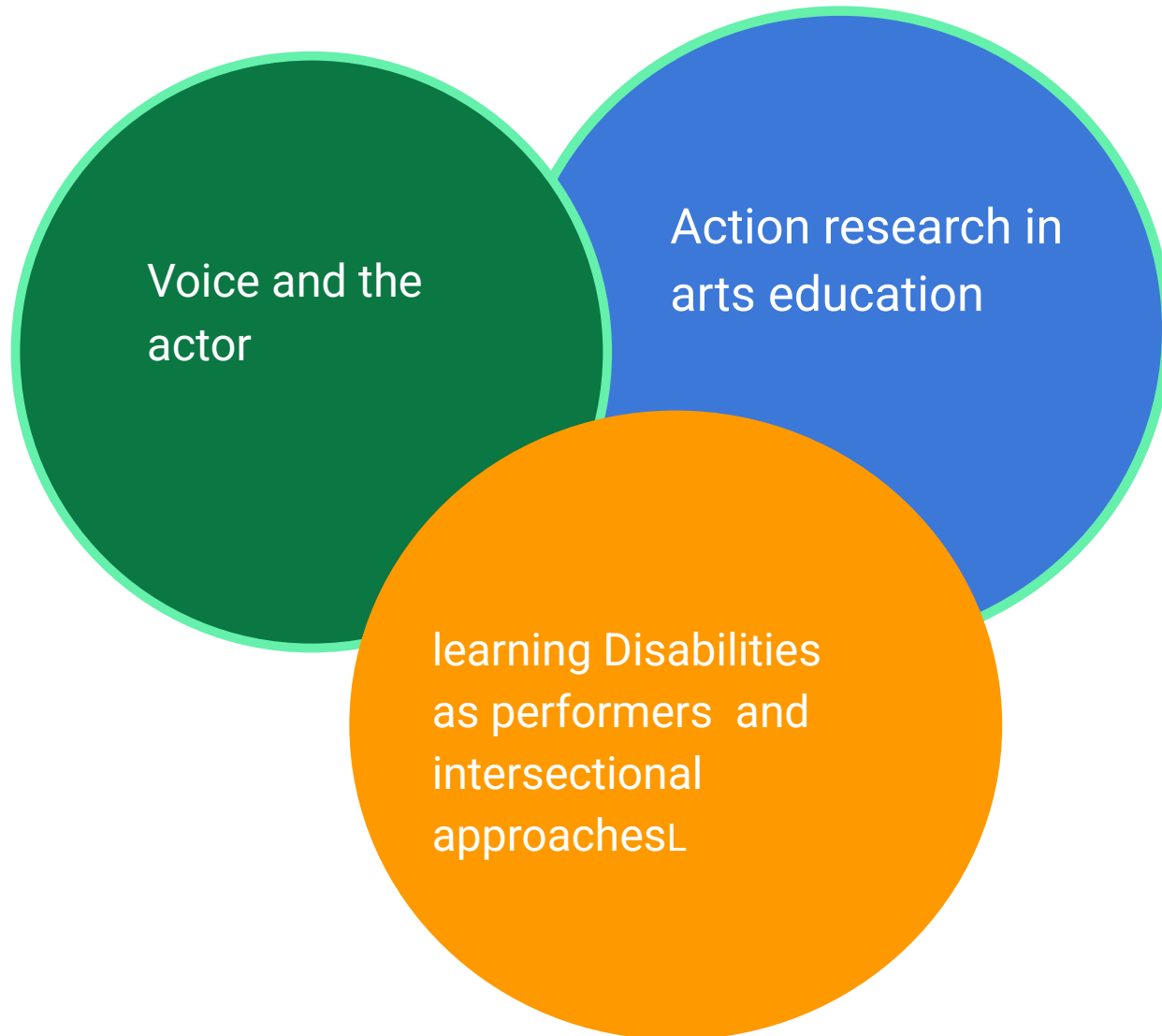
- An action research study with students from Hijinx academy.
- Traditionally, the voices and experiences of learning disabled and autistic adults have not been heard or taken into account.
- To ask industry professionals about current vocal challenges they perceive and reflect on inclusivity within the profession.

“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

Objectives

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.
4. To support the students to become confident, self-aware and skilled for the profession.

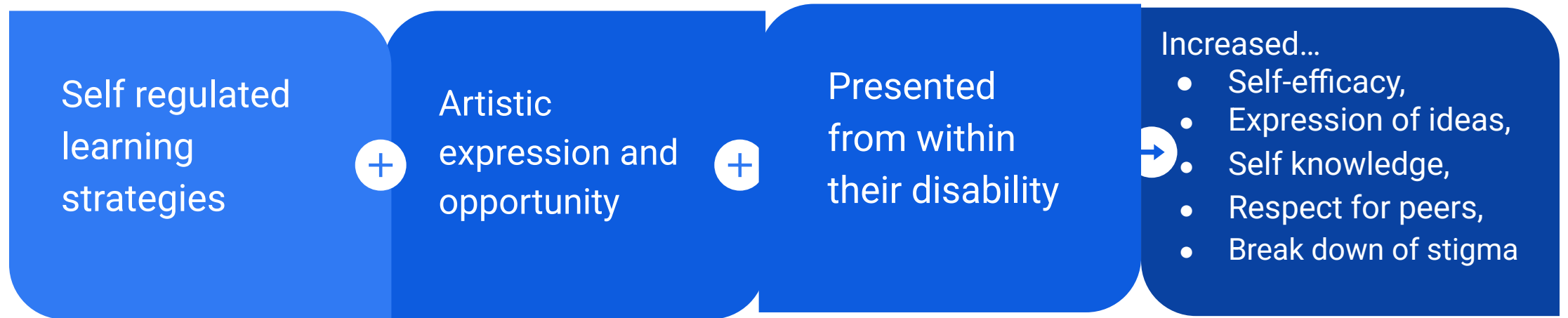
Literature Review



Key articles

- Kirby, (2023).
- Pui, (2019).
- McAllister-Viel, (2022)
- Richards et al., (2019).

Key findings from the literature review



Methodology & Methods

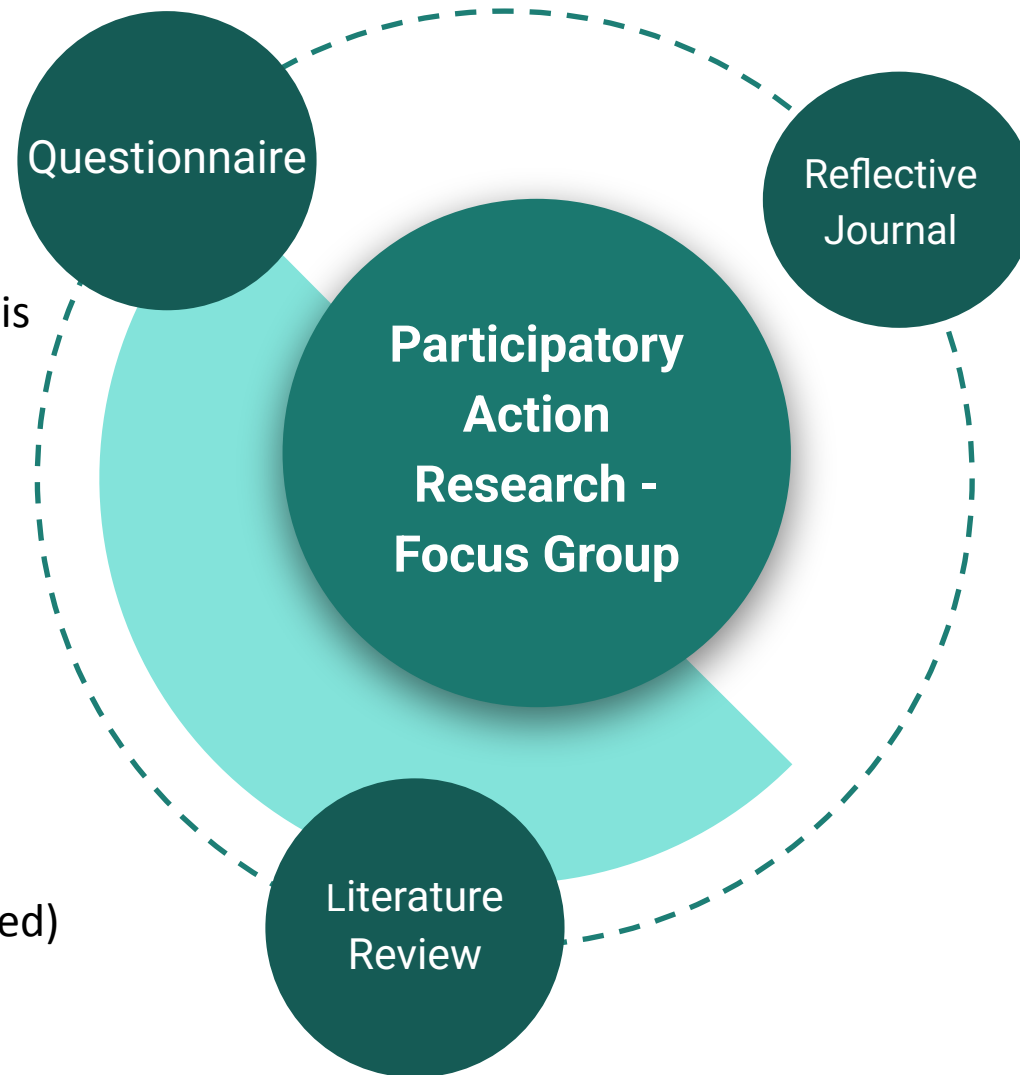
- Social Constructivist Paradigm
- Inductive Qualitative Approach
- Insider Research
- Braun and Clarke's (2006) Reflective Thematic Analysis
- Triangulation of data

Focus Group participants -

12 learning disabled
and/or autistic student performers from Hijinx

Questionnaire Participants -

7 performing arts industry professionals (self employed)



Questionnaire Findings

What they find important:

- Vocal training
- Vocal Stamina
- Good Communication
- Vocal articulation
- Vocal Expression
- Breath Control
- Some experience of singing

Challenges they See:

- Articulation/diction
- Vocal expression
- Lack of vocal self-knowledge
- knowledge of vocal health.

“Many actors lack the full bodied muscularity that is required to make themselves heard throughout these spaces, even when mic'd”

Participant F

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

Participant C

Accessibility/inclusivity:

“Needs a change of process and flexibility in the industry”

Participant A

“Giving them time, educating the sector and adapting working environments”

Participant E

Key themes and Findings from Focus Group

1. Lyrical Challenges

2. Vocal technique challenges

3. Strategies that help

4. Enjoyment and emotional expression

5. Goals

1. Lyrical Challenges

“Too many words” “Tricky long words” “wordy”

“Some of the songs are hard” “confusing words”

“Welsh is a beautiful Language but trying to sing when you don’t even speak a single word is a bit daunting”

“Need to break down the words”

2. Vocal technique challenges

“Struggle with the high pitch”

“Long breath is hard”

“I find the diaphragm exercises difficult...It hurts my stomach”

“Difficult to hold my breath...I feel nervous”

“Frustrating when voices are too loud”

“Sometimes singing can make me gag”

3. Strategies that help

- Guitar and violin accompaniment to songs.
- Adding actions and move to the lyrics
- Listening to the song first
- Understanding character
- Breaking down the words and more repetition
- Seeing the lyrics written down
- Different genres of music.

4. Enjoyment and emotional expression

“Love” “Happy” “comfortable” “fun” “passionate” “melancholy” “joyful”
“cool” “vulnerable” “Chilled”

“Teacher was always ‘You’re not in pitch’”

7 out of 12 said that they felt like a more confident singer

5. Goals

- Some individual singing tuition (auditions songs).
- Music-making without words/lyrics.
- More song-writing.
- Rhythm games.
- Work on tuning/pitch.
- Singing in character and text work.

Conclusions

- Group have made some tangible goals to work towards
- They have engaged in their own self-regulated learning
- Interesting results from questionnaire regarding demands
- Strategies to help with vocal challenges.
- Insight into the challenges the group face (i.e not too many lyrics).

Reflections

- Started some self-reflection but I would like to continue this journey of self-regulated learning.
- I found it hard to not dominate on the focus group - should have taken a more exercise/activity approach.
- Time pressure of one hour also made this tricky.
- Questionnaire was limited by very small sample.
- Helped with professional development and gave me tangible strategies and goals to work on.
- Could be useful to share findings with colleagues.

References

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

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).

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

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.

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