



Using Applied Improvisation to Develop Social-Communicative Competence in Adolescents with ASD

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**CENTER ON EDUCATION
AND LIFELONG LEARNING**

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Indiana Institute on Disability and Community



Disclosures

I have relevant financial relationship(s) with the products or services described, reviewed, evaluated, or compared in this presentation.

I am employed by Indiana University, where I direct Camp Yes And: an improv summer camp for teens on the autism spectrum and educators. I also am part of a research team that has received grant funds to study the impact of the camp.

I have no relevant nonfinancial relationship(s) to disclose.

Disclosures

This session has
been designed to
be **interactive** and
participatory.

Building Connections Program

<https://vimeo.com/171129826>

The Hideout Theatre: Austin, TX



Overview of autism

Difficulties in social use of verbal and nonverbal communication

Restricted, repetitive behaviors or interests

Symptoms present in early development*

Causes significant impairment in social and workplace settings

Is not better explained by intellectual impairment or another condition

1:68



Critical issues for adolescents

Cognitively-able teens with autism exhibit the most difficulty with:

- Conversational reciprocity, eye gaze, and prosody

Bidirectional effect

- Anxiety – peer interaction

Bullying, victimization

Low self-efficacy related to secondary school experiences

Decreased quality of life, isolation



Social interventions for adolescents

Behavioral therapies

Individual/group social skills therapy

Parent training

Musical intervention

Peer mediation

Video modeling

Preferred interests

Drama and improvisational theatre

- **SENSE theatre**



Educators of teens with autism

Federal law requires schools to educate children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment

40% of students with autism spend 80% or more of their time in general education classrooms, and another 18% spend 40-79% of their time in these classrooms



Critical issues for educators

Many teachers don't believe they are able to teach students on the spectrum effectively in general education settings

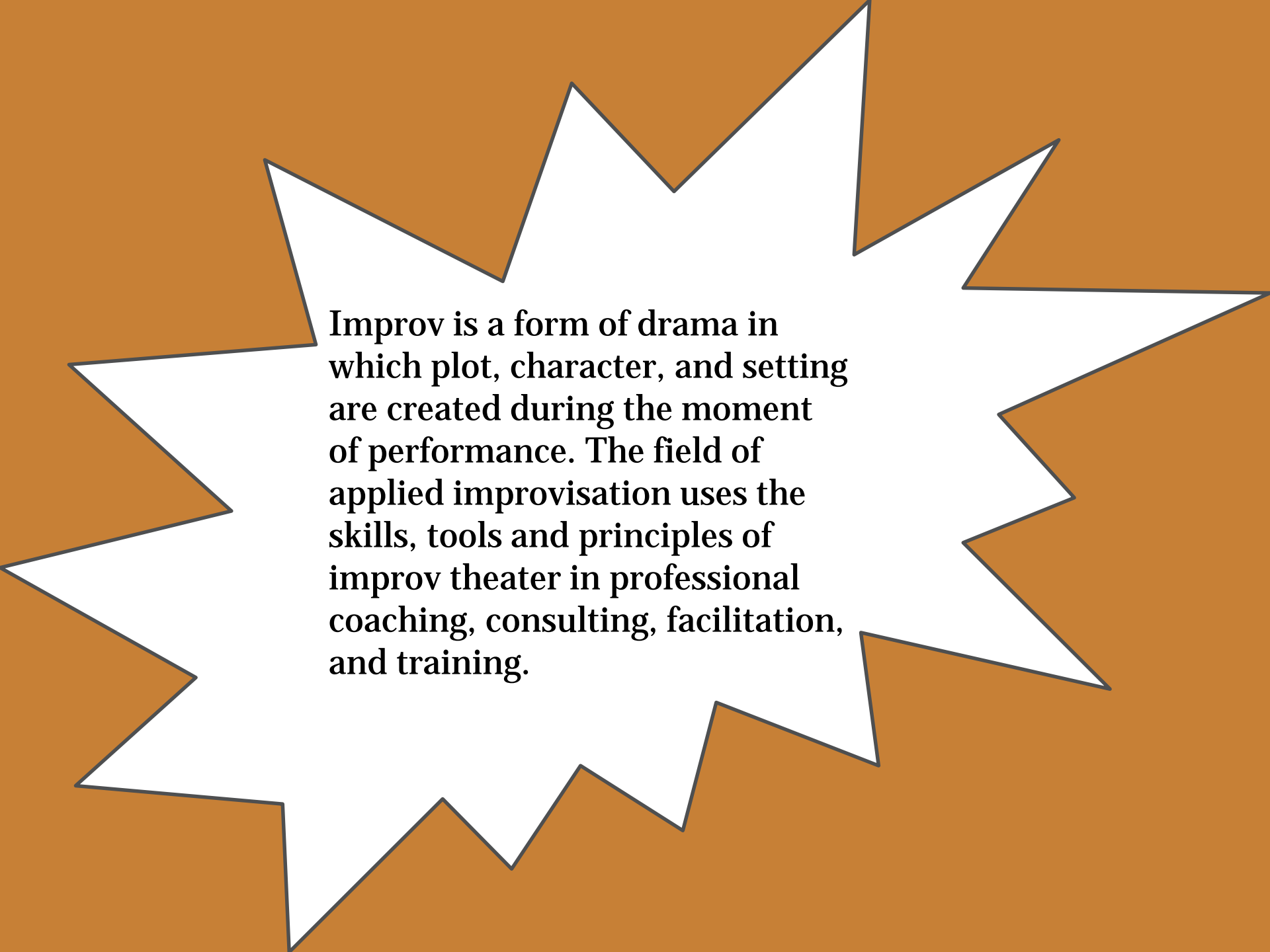
Pre-service general education teachers receive little training in teaching social skills and/or students with special needs

Fewer than 10% of in-service educators implement new practices as a result of attending traditional professional development workshops

- Providing opportunities for practice, feedback, and coaching greatly increases implementation of new practices

“So there’s this camp called Camp Yes [And]. It’s an improv camp, and you should go because there are a lot of fun games. It teaches you a lot. It makes you better at communication. You get to meet new people. You might make new friends, and you get to do a performance at the end which would be pretty fun.”

- 2016 teen



Improv is a form of drama in which plot, character, and setting are created during the moment of performance. The field of applied improvisation uses the skills, tools and principles of improv theater in professional coaching, consulting, facilitation, and training.



Camp Yes And (yesand.indiana.edu)

A five-day summer camp for teens on the autism spectrum and educators

Mornings: Improv for educators

Afternoons: Educators help to facilitate improv camp for teens

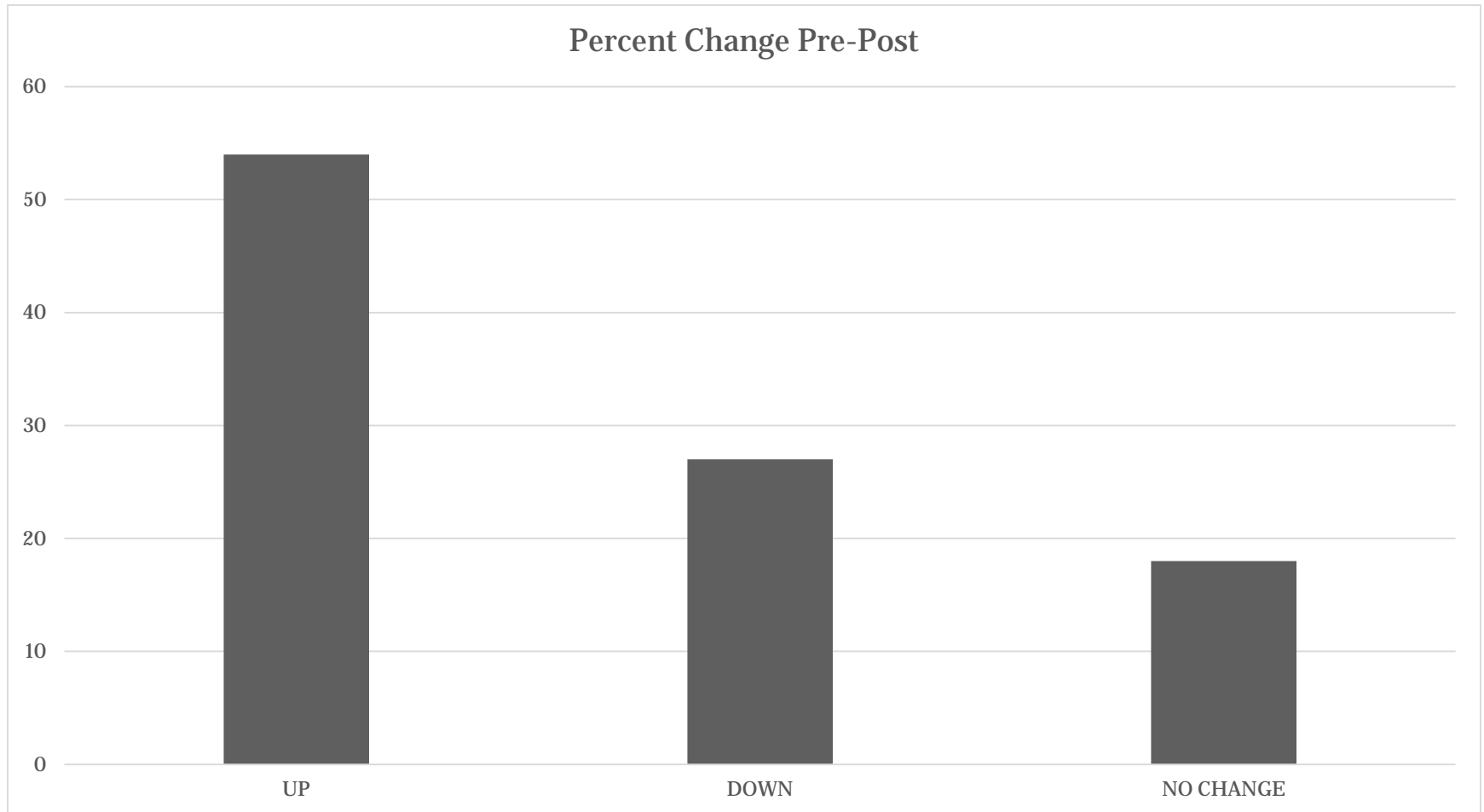
Combines direct service with professional learning for educators

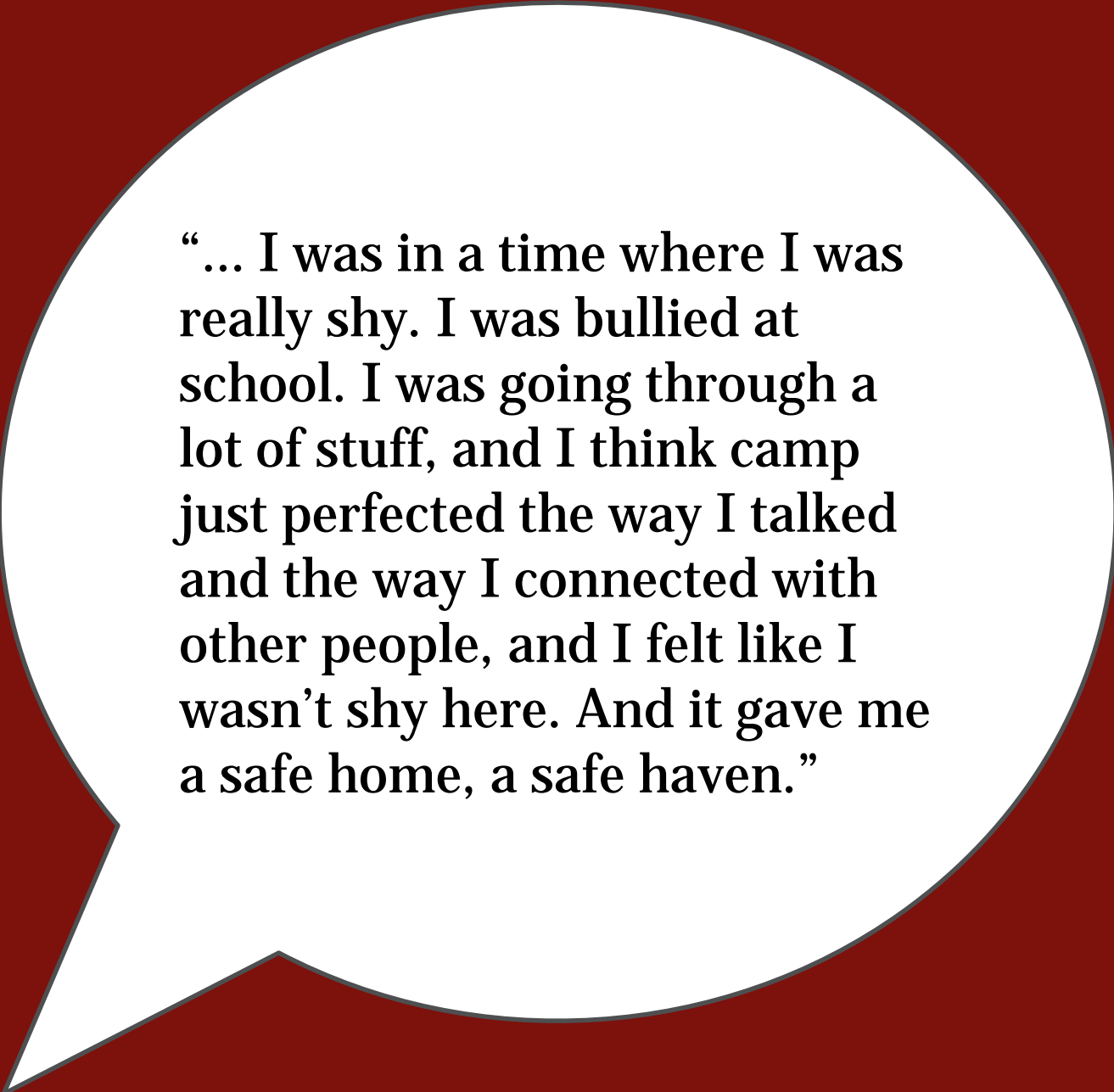
Practice, feedback, and coaching for educators (plus follow-up)

Research Design

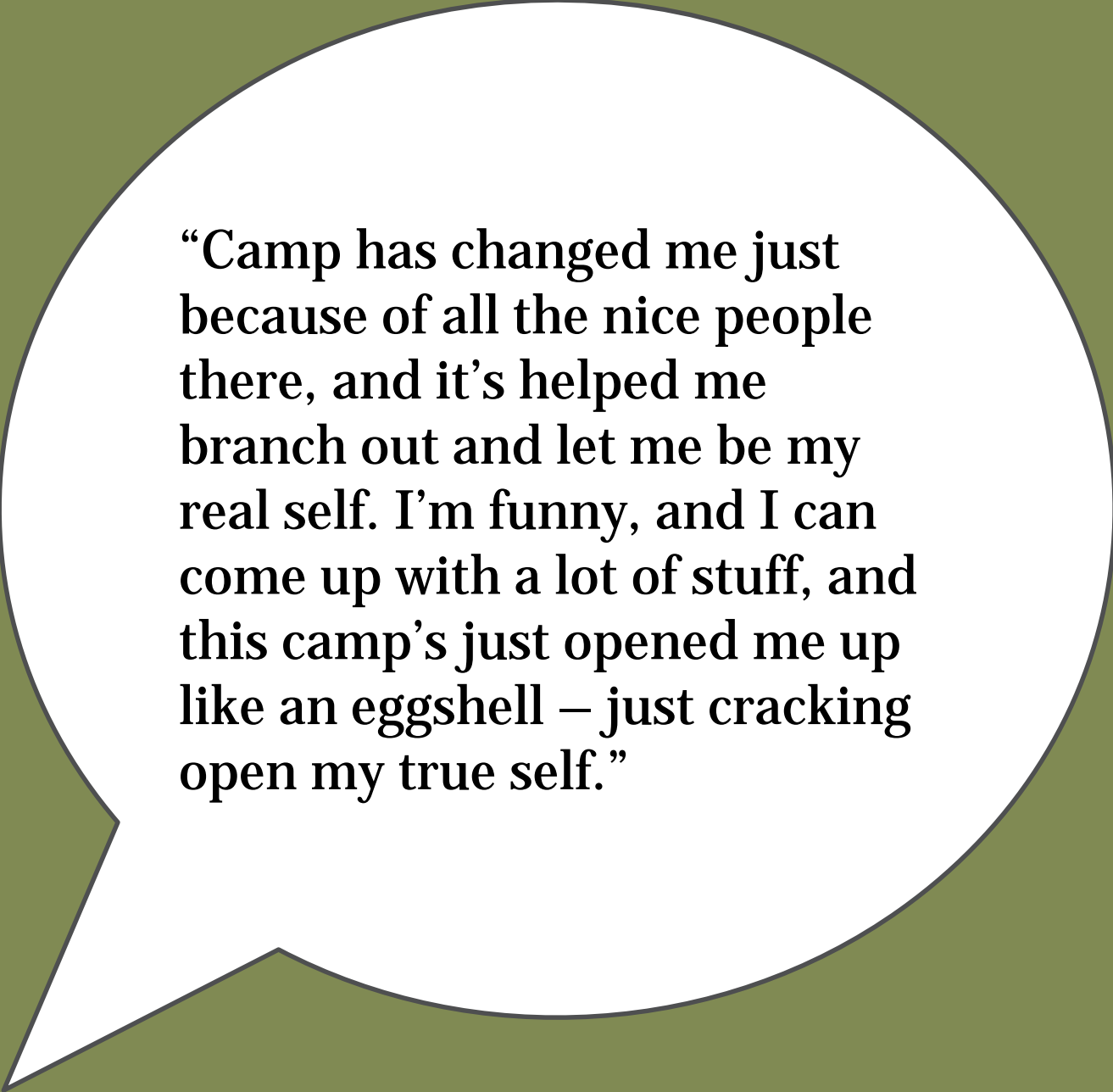
- **Investigators: Ansaldo, Cole, Forrest, Hopf**
- **Students**
 - **Quality of Communication Life Scale – Adapted**
 - - 2 baselines (1 week apart)
 - - 1post-survey (immediately following camp)
 - - 1post-survey (1 month following camp)
- **Teachers**
 - **Autism Self-Efficacy Scale for Teachers (ASSET)**
 - - 2 baselines (1 week apart)
 - - 1post-survey (immediately following camp)
 - - 1post-survey (1 month following camp)

Preliminary outcomes for teens

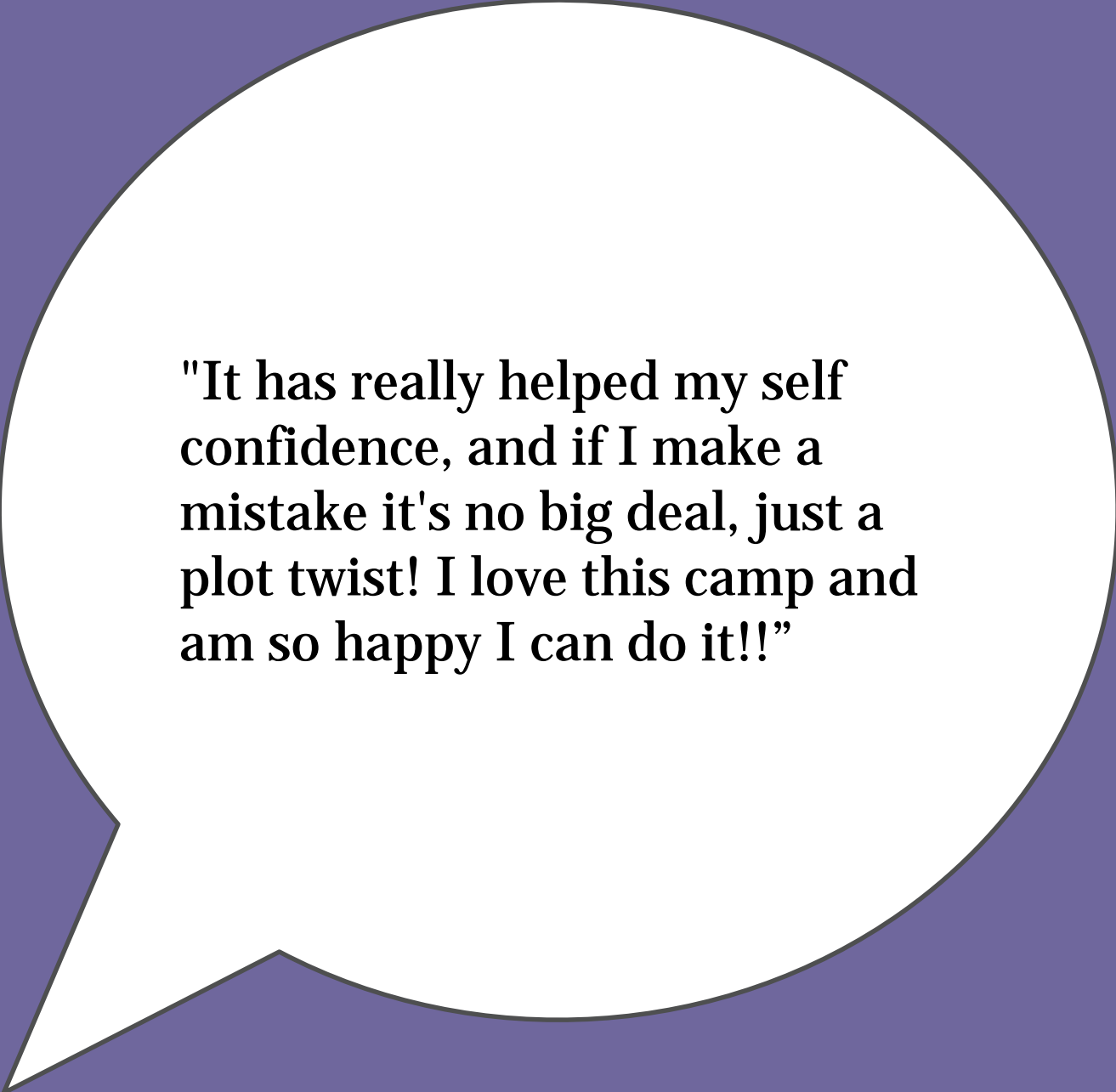




“... I was in a time where I was really shy. I was bullied at school. I was going through a lot of stuff, and I think camp just perfected the way I talked and the way I connected with other people, and I felt like I wasn’t shy here. And it gave me a safe home, a safe haven.”

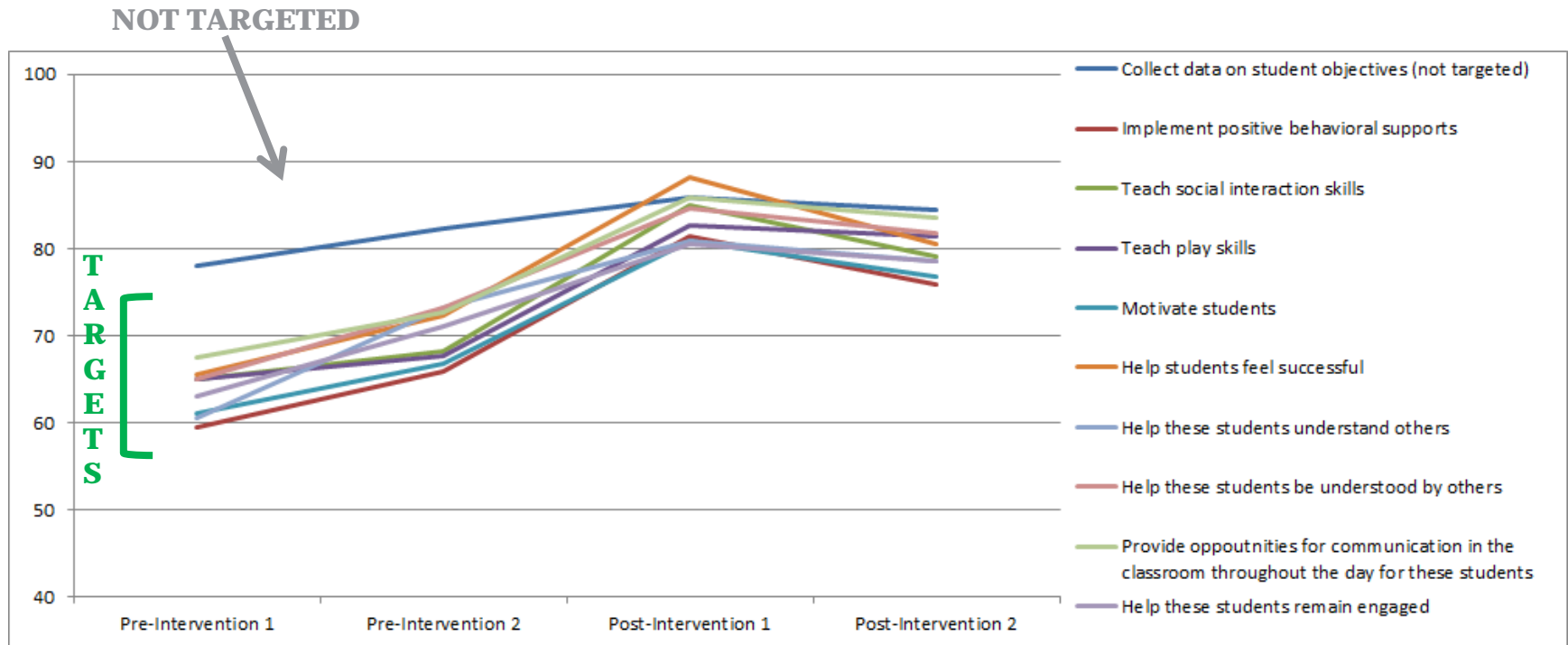



“Camp has changed me just because of all the nice people there, and it’s helped me branch out and let me be my real self. I’m funny, and I can come up with a lot of stuff, and this camp’s just opened me up like an eggshell – just cracking open my true self.”




"It has really helped my self confidence, and if I make a mistake it's no big deal, just a plot twist! I love this camp and am so happy I can do it!!"

Preliminary outcomes for educators

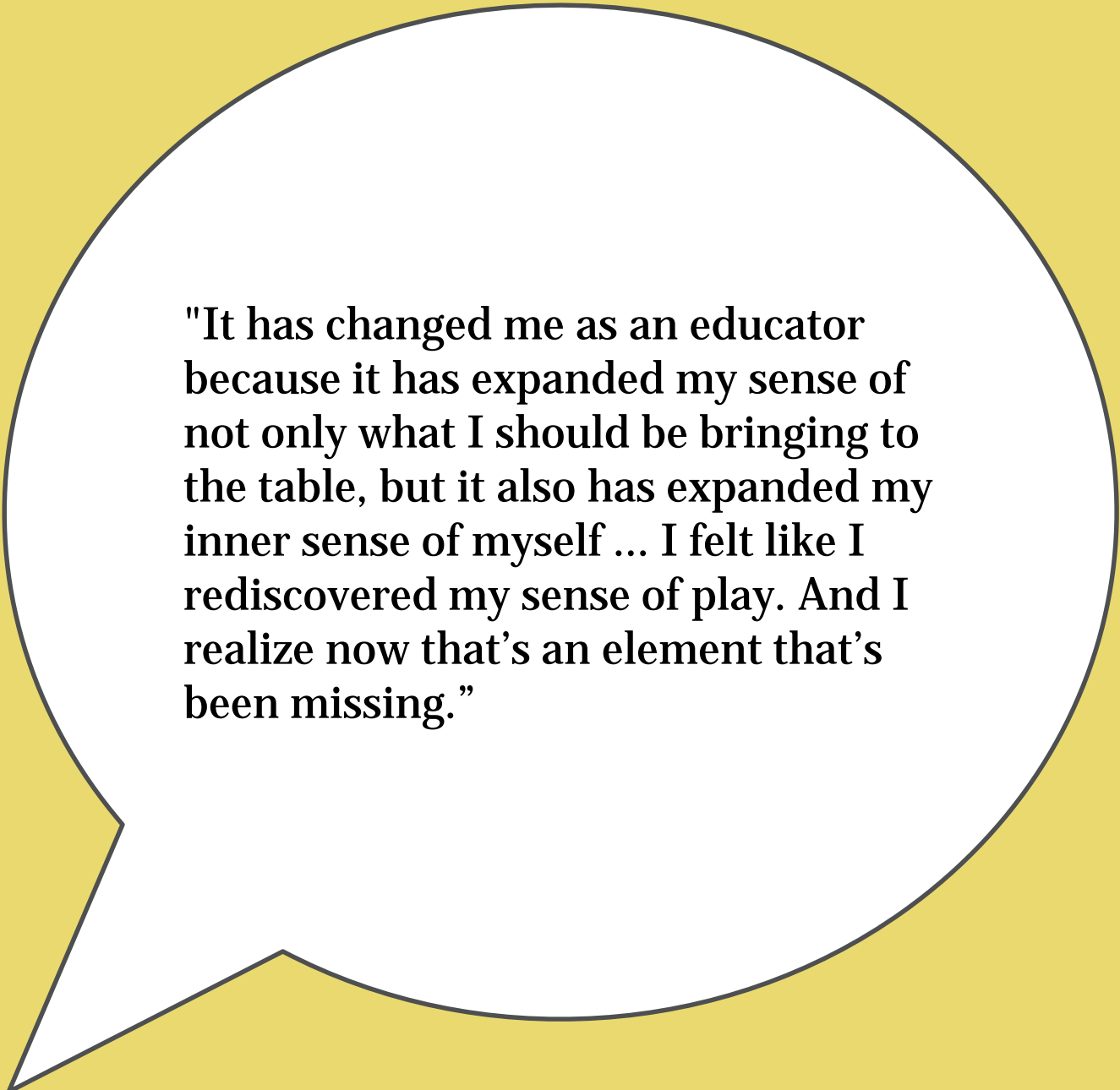




“I’m just super impressed with how spontaneous they can be ... and the fact that they are able to jump in and respond to each other’s comments and make it appropriate and related to the comment ... there’s a lot of potential here for communication and dialogue and interaction with kids with autism that [I thought] was a little bit more difficult to do in the past.”



"Several times this week, I found myself wishing I was more like them. They are brilliant, courageous, and compassionate, topped with a sense of humor. I knew that but didn't realize the magnitude. I believe I have a whole new level of respect for them."



"It has changed me as an educator because it has expanded my sense of not only what I should be bringing to the table, but it also has expanded my inner sense of myself ... I felt like I rediscovered my sense of play. And I realize now that's an element that's been missing."



Let's improvise!

Listening

Accepting

Supporting

Taking Competent Risks

Letting Go of Mistakes



Improv Basics

(Adapted from the Connect Improv Curriculum, ©2015 Lacy Alana, LCSW)

Everybody Come Over Here If ...

- Group stands in a cluster in one area of the space
- Player walks into open space and states: Everybody come over here if ... you like ice cream, you read books, you play video games, etc.
- If statement is true for group members, they go toward person who made statement
 - Players may position themselves along a continuum of how true the statement is for them
- Rinse and repeat
- Addresses: Reciprocity, turn-taking, narrow interests

Whoosh! Bang! Pow!

- Group stands in a cluster in a circle
 - Pass energy to left or right by saying “Whoosh!” and moving hands in that direction
 - Reverse direction by crossing arms in front and saying “Bang!”
 - Pass energy across the circle by making eye contact, pointing, and saying “Pow!”
 - Skilled groups can make up their own additions
-
- Addresses: Eye contact, reciprocity, turn-taking

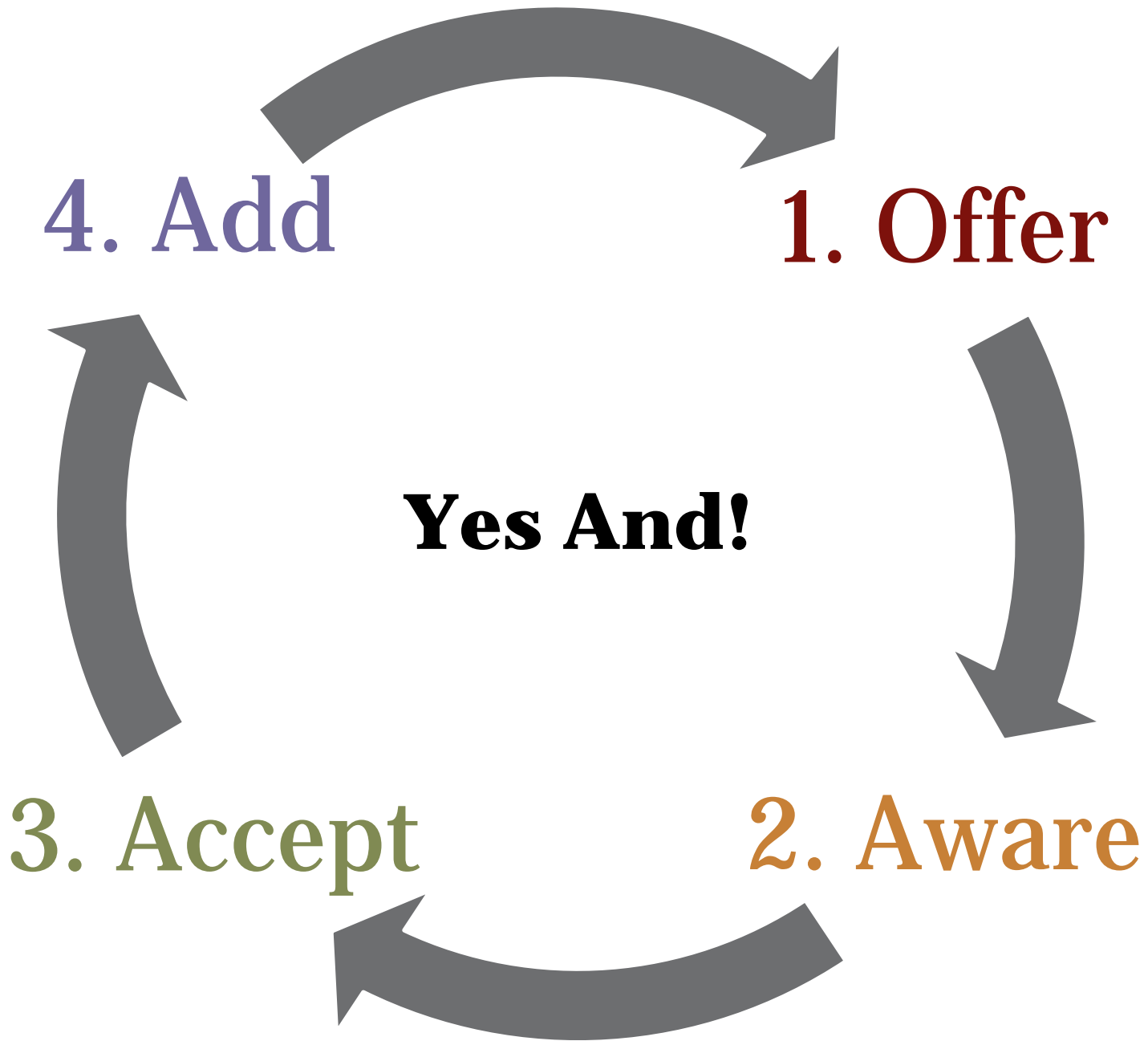
Failure Bow

- One at a time, each player shares a real-life mistake (e.g I spilled my milk this morning, I forgot to put on deodorant, I forgot we had a quiz this week in science) and takes a bow
- The group wildly celebrates
- At any time, a player may choose to take a bow and say “I failed!” The group will celebrate.
 - No one may call for a Failure Bow on behalf of another
- Addresses: Reciprocity, dependence on routine



Yes And

(Adapted from the Connect Improv Curriculum, ©2015 Lacy Alana, LCSW)



I'm a Tree

- **Group stands in a circle or back line**
- **Player steps forward, says “I’m a tree,” and poses in tree-like position**
- **Group is instructed to imagine what might go in this picture with the tree (e.g. a bird, a nest)**
- **Another player steps forward, says “I’m a [bird],” and poses in corresponding position**
- **A third player steps forward, says “I’m a [nest],” and poses in corresponding position**
- **First player selects another person to stay (e.g. “I’ll leave the bird.”)**
- **Other two players leave the stage, person remaining re-states what they are (e.g. “I’m a bird”), and group is instructed to imagine a whole new picture.**
- **Go back to Step 3, rinse and repeat**

- **Addresses: Body awareness, reciprocity, turn-taking, sharing control**

Partner Offer Practice

- In pairs, exchange 3-4 lines of dialog in a mini-scene
- One player initiates a line of dialog
- Partner repeats part of what is said and adds to it
- Exchange 1-2 more lines of dialogue to build

Partner Offer Practice: Example

- Initiate with an offer about where you are:
- “Wow, it’s cold in this barn.”
- “Yes, it’s cold in this barn. I hope the cows stay warm.”
- “Yes, the cows seem cold. Let’s get them blankets.”

Partner Offer Practice: Example

- Initiate with an offer about who you are:
- “[Knock, knock] It’s me the plumber. You called about a leaky faucet?”
- “Yes, I have a leaky faucet. It’s in the kitchen.”
- “Yes, and your kitchen sink is full of dirty dishes.”

Partner Offer Practice: Example

- **Initiate with a strong emotion:**
- “Ugh, I’m so mad!”
- “Yes, I can tell you’re really upset. Bad day at work?”
- “Yes, my boss just doesn’t treat me with respect!”

Partner Offer Practice

- In pairs, exchange 3-4 lines of dialog in a mini-scene
 - One player initiates a line of dialog
 - Partner repeats part of what is said and adds to it
 - Exchange 1-2 more lines of dialogue to build
-
- Addresses: Conversational skills, reciprocity, turn-taking, sharing control, emotional recognition



Co-Creation

(Adapted from the Connect Improv Curriculum, ©2015 Lacy Alana, LCSW)

Mirror Circle Challenge

- One player is the guesser and is taken out of room or turns away from group
 - Others in a circle and one player selected as leader
 - Leader makes movements that others copy and mirror
 - Guesser returns, stands in center of circle, has three chances to guess the leader
-
- Addresses: Eye contact, body awareness, joint attention, sharing control

The Giving of Gifts

- In pairs, Player A gives Player B an imaginary gift and states what it is
- Player B profusely thanks Player A, explaining why s/he has always wanted that exact gift
- Rinse and repeat
- Variation: Player A gives a vague gift (“Here’s a gift”), Player B identifies it, and Player A explains how s/he knew that Player B’s character would love it

- Addresses: Eye contact, body awareness, joint attention, sharing control



Characters/Emotion

(Adapted from the Connect Improv Curriculum, ©2015 Lacy Alana, LCSW)

Character/Emotion Walk

- Group walks around the space
- Call out various characters/types of people for group to embody: Ballerina, wrestler, robot, alien, etc.
- Invite people to greet each other in character
- Variation: Call out emotions that group embodies silently; invite group to make quiet emotional noise; if going well, invite group to greet each other

- Addresses: Body awareness, narrow interests, emotional recognition

The _____ Family Portraits

- 4-5 players on stage
- Get suggestion of adjective or decide yourself
- Instruct group to pose as the “adjective” family (e.g. the Silly family), count down from 5, group freezes
- Call one player at a time to step forward and deliver a short monologue about their character (e.g. name, role in family, likes/dislikes, etc.)

- Addresses: Expressive language, emotional recognition



Narrative

(Adapted from the Connect Improv Curriculum, ©2015 Lacy Alana, LCSW)

Word-at-a-Time Adventure

- In pairs, players go on an adventure together, telling their adventure story one word at a time (taking turns) while acting out the story
- Give pairs a suggestion of location (e.g. jungle, castle)
- Instruct pairs that their story should involve encountering a creature and escaping from it
- Run a second round where players encounter a new creature, but instead of escaping, they have some kind of interaction with it

- Addresses: Expressive language, joint attention, sharing control

Story Spine Practice

- In pairs or small groups, players create a story one line at a time, taking turns and using stems from Kenn Adams' story spine



Story Spine

Once there was ...

And every day ...

Until one day ...

And because of that ... (x3)

Until finally ...

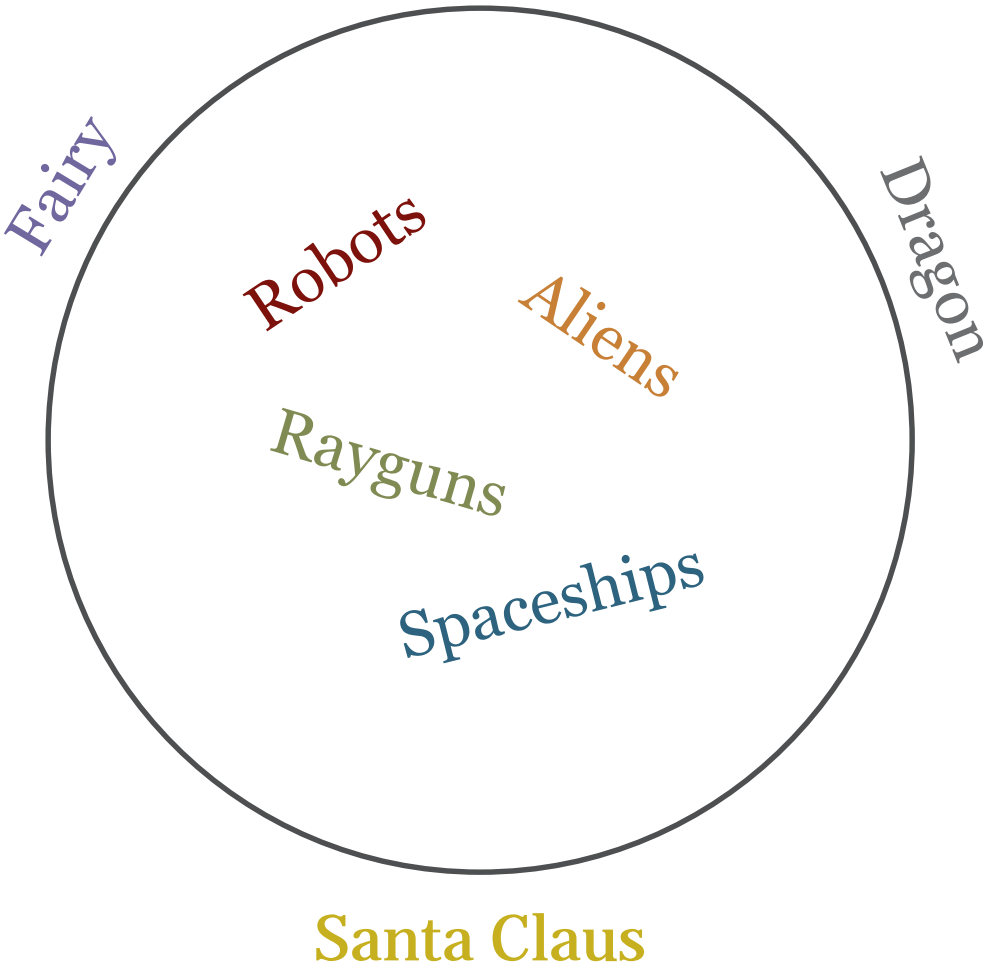
And ever since that day ...

(Adapted from *How to Improvise a Full-Length Play: The Art of Spontaneous Theater* by Kenn Adams)

Story Spine Practice

- In pairs or small groups, players create a story one line at a time, taking turns and using stems from Kenn Adams' Story Spine
 - Coach and encourage re-do's if story gets off track
 - Option: Tell genre stories
 - Option: In a circle, create a story one line at a time by passing a ball randomly about the circle
-
- Addresses: Expressive language, joint attention, sharing control

Circle of Expectations: Science Fiction



(Adapted from the Connect Improv Curriculum, ©2016 Lacy Alana, LCSW)

Typewriter

- One player sits to the downstage right and plays role of author; 2-4 other players will be actors
- Take a suggestion for a genre or title of a story that's never been written
- Author tells a story while actors act it out
- Players trade focus back and forth, allowing actors to move story forward through action and dialogue
- Use Story Spine and Circle of Expectations as guides

- Addresses: Expressive language, joint attention, sharing control

For more information

- **Jim Ansaldo:** jansaldo@indiana.edu
- **Camp Yes And:** yesand.indiana.edu
- **Building Connections:** www.hideouttheatre.com
- **Improv Encyclopedia:** improvencyclopedia.org