

Children's Autism: A state of play

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My daughter is 14 and has children's autism. She has no language and can not point, but she can draw. When she practiced art, she became calm for long periods of time. I say this because at other times, Agnes could self harm or bite.

When she was in a drawing 'flow', she wouldn't stop. She would literally draw the paper into pieces, unless we gave her a new blank paper. This is what i call co-operation. If we took the paintings away at the right time, they were wonderful works of art – some even ended up in galleries.

At a certain time, Agnes began using music as a bodily experience, when she was drawing. She felt the music through her fingers, like a conductor. If i tried to dance with her, she wasn't interested.

As parents and practicing artists, we had attempted to help our child articulate herself: as any parent would.

Drawing had become an important way of being together. I began to believe that as an artist, I was able to give joy, trust and stability to someone who had huge problems otherwise communicating.

Autistic children have impaired social skills, they often find it very hard to collaborate. Activities need to be introduced very carefully. I had many doubts about how best to do this.

I decided to answer some of my own questions by inviting some students with children's autism, to participate in a small artistic venture.

I found a fantastic studio space, in a local art school, where I could work with the children over a period of time.

I ended up with four students, each with their own personal teacher. They would visit me one day a week, for a few weeks.

Questions I wanted answered

Could I teach them anything? I wasn't a teacher.

Could I understand my daughter better, through interacting with others in her spectrum?

Could I start an art academy for children with autism?

Could I give them hope?

How would the teacher's respond?

Who would come?

I soon had my answer: **Donna - Stian – Knut - Elling**

All between 11 and 13 years old. All with children's autism. All in my daughters class. All four are re-named for this presentation.

The Meeting

We meet up in the art school. It's a huge old building. There are paintings, canvases, mess and art work in progress. I was curious to see how a new space would affect the children.

These children are used to tiny individual rooms, in which they work with their personal teachers. Each minute of their day is

planned in detail. They need routines. **Donna:** «it's really messy here, someone should clear up! It stinks!».

They ran through the rooms, intoxicated, very curious, letting their hands touch everything.

Stian says he is very challenged being in this new space. After a short conversation with his teacher, it is decided that he won't quit. He struggles on with the challenges the new space has given him.

In the room, there are four large work tables, carefully placed in the space. A nice presentation, but it won't survive the chaos of reality.

Warm Up and Labels

Our warm up is simple enough for everyone to do, but will give me a good indication of where each child is, mentally, verbally and perhaps emotionally.

The idea is to see how curious they are, and to see at what level they can investigate each object.

- What words do they have to describe the objects?
- Hard, smooth, soft, porous, hairy.
- The objects are taken out of context. Can they still guess at the objects use?
- Can they stay focused with such an activity?

The answers to these questions will really shape the rest of the course.

I wanted to teach the children simple terms, for describing things. I gave them some categories:

Technique - Texture – Pattern - Function

I then asked them to fill out small labels. The labels would test their organisational skills, their level of ownership, and their hand skills with writing and design.

- **Knut** loved labels.
- **Elling** needed his teacher to write everything.
- **Donna** was immersed in details, but forgot the challenge, drawing a cartoon character instead.

I discovered a lot! They could keep focused over a suprisingly long time. (*their teachers were amazed*).

Some could write. Some couldn't. Many could work independantly. Some needed a lot of help.

The table was soon ordered with long rows of neatly arranged objects. People with children's autism are known to have a love of organising, arranging and categorising everything.

Circles

Now we have a good idea of what we can expect. I explain what we are going to do. We are going to create a large wall painting, of the Universe.

We shift task. We begin to create a lot of circles. These will later become the planets. We do this by drawing around, pots, bottles, LP's, anything round.

It all seems so simple. *BUT* using a grey pencil and having to draw carefully, proved either too challenging or not motivating enough.

Elling only wants to draw if he can draw a smiling face in each circle.

Donna wants to continue with her little Manga character called «*Kobe*».

Knut draws his circles by hand without using pots and plates. They are very small and uneven. It becomes obvious he knows a lot about the planets: their names, colours, sizes and the distances between them. But his labels talk about: nice, strong, funny.

Stian is still struggling: by now he is conversing in a nonsensical mix of German and English: «I am the captain on the boat, ich bin der fuhrer!» He then begins to howl. His teacher decides to take him back to their school.

Painting The Universe

The task is to paint the Universe!

With big body movements, they cover the huge canvas in dark blue.

The tasks today will demonstrate collage techniques. It will demonstrate how taking one thing and placing it in a totally new setting, can magically create an unexpected third story. To help them understand this, we mix base colours: blue and yellow suddenly become green! They are amazed!

Whilst the Universe dries, we move to last weeks canvas which is full of circles. I ask them to bring each circle to life, with

paint, and create the planets: Some become sand red, some deep water blue, others brown. We give them labels: Earth, Jupiter, Mars...

Now the planets need time to dry...

The Universe must have stars!

Next we will do some splashing/dripping techniques on the dark blue Universe, using lots of water and pale pink/yellow colours.

Donna is filmed as she starts to paint, dancing with her whole body, dripping paint rhythmically like a drummer. She also decorates her hands with delicate patterns. She reminds me of how Agnes became a conductor whilst listening to music; Donna seems to be physically experiencing the universe as she paints. It seems that people with children's autism, seem to have this ability to physically embody an experience. Now Donna's alter ego, the manga character Kobe, is forgotten! The universe is dripping with colourful stars.

«*It was fun doing The Universe*», says **Elling** when they leave.
«*I liked doing the painting performance dance!*» says **Donna**.

Creating The Collage

The table of painted circles, have been cut out. By cutting them out, they have become objects. We take them by the handful and glue them in among the stars, in the deep blue universe. The universe is complete.

Growing Pains

There are many ways of moving out of your comfort zone. The next phase of my work with them, was meant to be a repeat of several of the tasks we had worked on already; but presented in a looser, less clearly defined style. I had succeeded in creating

a trusting group dynamic. I had achieved one of my central aims. I had done this by using very clearly defined frameworks. Now I wanted to see if they could excel at similar tasks, with less framework?

It is typical of people with children's autism, that they may have extreme gifts and abilities, which are often overshadowed by a complete lack of basic skills most people take for granted. By making the new tasks less rigid, and more open to interpretation, the children began to find things more and more difficult.

In their daily life at school, they were used to working in very small private spaces. This helps them to focus, feel safe and calm. Interacting with each other, is normally so distracting as to be ineffective for learning. In their school, some students even need sound proofed rooms. Random noises can be an overwhelming distraction.

As the longer challenges develop, I notice the children becoming more insecure, more distracted and unsettled.

- **Elling** becomes annoyed with his running technique, he needs comfort and encouragement from his teacher
- **Knut** is annoyed he is not first into the body suit. He becomes engrossed in learning a camera.
- **Donna** is preoccupied with painting her hands, and brings to life her alter ego 'kobe' again.

The group dynamic is breaking down. The freedom of these new tasks proved to be too much for them.

Framing and owning

We are nearing the end of our time together.

I have prepared two cardboard frames for each student: One big, one small. They move around the Universe, finding parts of the painting they want to take home.

Interestingly, Donna decides to donate her beloved character Kobe, in the Universe.

What now?

It has been a challenging course. There was growth on all sides. The artist, the students and the teachers.

There are several important factors to notice. The fact that this workshop over several weeks was arranged within a professional framework; held in a well equipped art school.

The students participation was arranged through their school

These elements of collaboration between institutions and myself, gave us the security to try, succeed and at times to fail, knowing the framework would tolerate it.

This experience is quite different from an after school activity where parents assist their children.

Could I teach students with special needs? Yes.

Did i understand my daughter better? I did. I understood where she was in the autistic spectrum.

Could I increase their self confidence? I was able to give them a space in which they could be confident and creative.

How would professional teachers respond to my teaching?

It turns out they were inspired. They took many new ideas back to their classroom.

Was there a need for my type of activity? Definitely. I am now planning to start an art school for people with special needs.