

Reflections from the Teaching Artist Training Institute: Arts Education and Autistic Students

By Debra Disbrow, Teaching Artist

It would be obvious to say that working with children with autism has its challenges. What might not be so obvious is the tremendous role that the arts can play in addressing the challenges of teaching students with autism. When I was selected as one of the teaching artists involved in The Center for Arts Education and Marquis Studios' Teaching Artist Training Institute (TATI) at PS37R in Staten Island, I realized just what a difference the arts make in helping children with autism reach and exceed their goals.

TATI, a pilot program that is the first of its kind for CAE, offers professional development for teaching artists interested in working with children with autism. The program consisted of four observational visits and two Saturday seminars at PS 37R, giving us time with students in the classroom and our own time to reflect on our experiences together.

About the Institute

As students in the program, we heard presentations from the dedicated faculty and therapists at PS 37 R, observed Erica Rooney, a visual teaching artist from Marquis Studios in a residency at the school, and held discussions facilitated by CAE consultant, Russell Granet. With Granet's guidance, we made connections to what we were learning to apply in our own teaching practice. TATI became an inspiring dialogue between ten curious teaching artists of various disciplines and the expert practitioners who focus on children with special needs.

David Marquis, Executive Director of Marquis Studios, said that there were two important things to remember about working with people with autism. "First, it's a spectrum. Just because two people are labeled autistic doesn't mean they will act the same. There is a broad range in the autism spectrum. Second, while we can make improvements in speech, communication, etc. there is no cure."

Insight from Therapists

The school therapists focused on teaching us some of the complexities regarding the neurological part of the disorder. We learned or were reminded that it is common for children with autism to feel a sensory overload (many have an inability to screen irrelevant information) and to be sensitive to loud noises and bright lights. The rocking

Teaching Artist Tips

The teaching mentality is usually show, help, do, but always slow down and wait

They process bits and pieces of what you say to them. Be very clear and try to use symbols

Make sure you have frontal access with every student. Always try to stand or sit in front of them when you engage with them

Activities need to be concrete, never abstract

Break down tasks into simpler and more basic elements

Remember that it's a process and there is always more learning

that you see with many children with autism can be either trying to withdraw from or stimulate the vestibular system (the inner ear) and can be a way to calm themselves down.

Children with autism might also have challenges with body awareness and depth perception. Therapists at PS 37R spoke about the importance of collaboration within the faculty, trading each other's techniques, and keeping it simple. They stressed that they are trying to maximize the potential the children have. The insight gained from speaking with the therapists was invaluable as we observed the children in the classroom environment.

Classroom Observation

After hearing from PS 37R experts, we had the opportunity to observe teaching artist Erica Rooney from Marquis Studios work in the classroom. Rooney, who has the patience of an angel, enters the classroom with an energy that she has all the time in the world and challenges each student in ways their classroom teachers might not think of.

Rooney not only uses visual

art as a tool for learning, but many other art forms as well. She strategically begins with music and dancing to encourage social interaction and a sense of play. She engages with each student individually as she calmly sings their name while making eye contact and depending on each student's comfort level, either gently dances with them or slowly moves their hands.

As an observer, it is a very beautiful thing to watch a child begin to come out of their inner world and make eye contact or start to smile.

Working with Erica Rooney

"You are jumping into an ocean that is deep - it will pull you deeper and deeper. It has so many mysteries. It could become a life changing experience for you," Erica Rooney said. "You have to feel that you want to connect with them. You have to throw out your lesson plan if it's not working. Give up assumptions. Observe. Give up your purpose about what art serves. I think of art as a sensory motor activity, not a product."

Rooney takes Polaroid pictures every class of each student working on his/her art project. Not only is this to remind the students the next week of what they had done before, but also to encourage social interaction by giving each student a different picture than his own and asking him to hand it to the other student. I was surprised that most students had been socially aware enough to be able to point or say the name of the person in the picture or even talk about what that student was creating. These kinds of challenges that Rooney poses to her students are what



The PS 37R Teaching Artist Training Institute team

I find good teaching to be all about.

Reflecting with Peers

After going behind the scenes in the classroom, all ten of us would reflect on ways to adapt our findings into our own teaching practice. We talked about breaking down lessons into simpler tasks and sequencing, following a clear schedule and repeating that schedule so the students can feel comfortable knowing what comes next (and changing it every so often so they don't become fixated), using concrete directions, challenging the students by asking questions and being patient for a response, and encouraging independence. We also divided up into smaller groups based on our individual disciplines and brainstormed ways to adapt lesson plans. One teaching artist stressed the importance of being deliberate. "Good teaching is deliberate, but especially for this population."

My Changing Perspective

From these lessons, I learned the importance of using art to support sensory awareness development. For example, encouraging the students to feel the texture of material they are working with, to smell or use it to make a sound, engages them further. And because they are visual learners, a visual schedule and visual cues using pictures or symbols throughout the lesson can create clearer understanding.

What has been most inspiring to me from my time at TATI was watching those kids transform into more communicative and engaged human beings while they were working on something arts related: to watch a child become more concerned about others as he sings to each of his peers and gleam with pride when finished, to see a child meticulously hang her art project on the wall when her teacher treats it as a respected piece of art, or to hear a child's sense of wonder and curiosity when a new art project is introduced for the first time. It validated for me why I became a teaching artist in the first place - not to necessarily make children into artists, but to use the arts as a tool for learning and encourage its beneficial effects.

I remember one parent saying, "He can't tell me about his day. I'm like Sherlock Holmes. Communication and social skills are the hardest things for them, but if they can show who they are artistically and creatively, you're reaching our children on another level." As autism cases continue to rise and at a time when "we are educating people out of creativity," (a quote Granet gave us from Sir Ken Robinson, a creativity expert who challenges our school systems and acknowledges multiple types of intelligences), I am grateful that CAE and Marquis Studios

partnered together for this pilot program, which coincidentally is growing next year from ten teaching artists to twenty. For me, witnessing a caring community like PS 37R and being surrounded by like-minded individuals interested in the therapeutic value of the arts was truly inspiring. Yes, teaching a child with autism is challenging and unpredictable, but I could see every child's potential when observing in the classroom and believe that student will be my teacher as well.

