

The Value Of The Arts for Students with Disabilities A Speech and Language Pathologist's Perspective

By Mark Corallo,

Since grade school, I've known there was something different about the way I learned. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I knew it was harder for me to take in information than my friends. The work appeared to be effortless for them, but the mere thought of an algebraic equation would make me shake uncontrollably. The bathroom was a preferred place of safety, as I would often say, "Can I be excused?" I learned that this strategy would get me out of difficult situations quickly. Who needed meaningless math when I could sit with the comfort of my anxiety until I knew the moment of sheer terror would pass?

While I didn't think too highly of myself as an academic student, I thought I was a pretty decent artist. My drawings and cartoons often won contests. When I made art, my imagination ran wild.

But my schoolwork and placement were based on my academic performance. "He's a nervous kid," my parents and teachers said. "The *Average* Track will be a good placement for him." That label haunted me for a long time. I believed I was average. I knew that I had much to offer, but lacked the confidence I needed to excel.

In middle school I began to develop a love for acting and dancing. However, as no one offered these opportunities to me, I would often act in my room and/or dance there, copying moves from MTV videos. I began to resonate more and more with the arts. I could remember songs with ease, dance on a dime, and my passion and motivation soared when it came to acting.

The key word here is motivation. Although I presented with learning challenges, I was determined to overcome them and prove to others that I was much more than "average". I auditioned and landed a dance spot on *Club MTV*, a weekly television dance show. I began acting and continued to draw. I worked extremely hard to overcome many of my difficulties, particularly focus, with which I continued to struggle.

In college I stumbled onto speech and language pathology. It was a way of doing something I'd always wanted – to help children. And it was my biggest challenge as a learner. I had to study harder than ever before. The course work was tough, the students were competitive and I needed to rise to the occasion. The tool that I had, however, was self-reflection and the ability to say, "Ok, you struggle. Now figure out how to help you". I did, received a master's degree from St. Johns University, and entered the professional world.

A new speech and language pathologist, I quickly saw that many students were not motivated by what I was taught to teach in graduate school. I needed to figure out a way to get kids communicating more naturally and holistically. As I thought about my own experiences, the phrase "Intrinsic Motivation" kept coming back to me. How silly was I? Intrinsic motivation is pretty much why anyone learns.

After a few years, I began working with a not-for-profit that provided theater opportunities for

students who were deaf and hard of hearing. Attending one of their shows was *the* light bulb moment for me. I was hooked by the teaching philosophy of educational theater. I knew this was what I was meant to do. On stage I could target so many speech and language goals at once. These included:

- Articulation skills
- Listening skills
- Reading and vocabulary
- Social interaction

It was brilliant. I observed students self-monitoring the clarity with which they spoke, asking the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary words, listening and attending to what their peers had to say. Theater was unmistakably an amazing way to reach Deaf and Hard of Hearing students and meaningfully help them address their communicative issues.

After several years I developed a theater program for children on the autism spectrum. As the term suggests, those with Autism present with a range of skills and deficits. This is particularly true in the areas of receptive/expressive language and social communication. Such deficits may include:

- Initiating communication
- Using longer sentences
- Responding to questions
- Peer-to-Peer Interactions
- Making appropriate comments
- Following and giving verbal directions
- Understanding personal boundaries and space
- Deficits in perspective taking

I have integrated theater arts and dance with speech and language therapy to support speech, language and social language development, ascertain student interests, and assess learning/growth.

Examples include:

- Turn taking through line development
- Supporting memory via line memorization
- Listening and responding to questions from peers to support social interactions
- Knowing where to stand in proximity to another peer
- Knowing when to initiate conversations
- Awareness of what your body looks like when you listen
- Emotional development of characters
- Understanding point of view and characters' feelings (aka, Empathy)

Theater provides the opportunity to teach skills and social interactions naturally and in the moment.

As does music and dance, both of which have been infused in our programs to support expressive language, listening, following directions and interaction with others. Using peers to

physically model, students imitate their colleagues, which further develops attention and engagement to tasks at hand. Students have been observed to initiate and request various songs that are motivating to them. Self-advocacy is an extremely important and often much-needed skill in the students with whom I work.

It has been a privilege to have a career that allows me to combine my passion for the arts and teaching. I cannot express enough how much I believe in the infusion and alignment of the arts with speech and language therapy.

Truly, bringing creativity and the arts together can foster a naturalness to communication that is often missing in more direct teaching approaches. My belief as an artist, teacher, and administrator is to raise the whole child by whatever means or interests the child may have.

Many of my students may not have the cognitive ability, self-reflective capacity and awareness of others to find strategies to overcome their learning differences as I did. They do, however, possess the ability to shine and showcase their skill sets through the arts. I have witnessed students who learn differently rise to the occasion when needed academic and communicative skills are presented through the arts. It is up to us as educators to continue to be creative and think outside the box in order to provide students the opportunity to succeed through whatever modalities and creative experiences are the most meaningful for them. Being diagnosed with ADHD in my later years, I know that tapping into a child's ability to learn through the arts can allow them to show the world and themselves what they are truly capable of, regardless of any diagnosis.

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