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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to make explicit some assumptions about the creative abilities of people with developmental disabilities, and offers constructive strategies for replacing negative ideas and attitudes with positive attitudes. The paper points out that: a high degree of artistic ability can coexist with considerable impairments in other areas of cognitive functioning; there is potential for growth in the creative capacity of adults with mental retardation; when a variety of art materials is routinely available and open-ended activities are offered, art group participants will take initiative in their work and express their preferences; persons engaging in creative art experiences are learning much that is useful, by acquiring a constructive mode of expression of feelings, exercising cognitive functions, and improving fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination; and the art of persons with developmental disabilities may appear child-like but actually reflects the adult's experience and inner vision. The paper concludes that the satisfying and constructive process of creating can and should be available to everyone, regardless of disability. (JDD)

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YES WE CAN:
OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO CREATIVITY

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Paper presented at the 117th Annual Meeting of the
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YES WE CAN: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO CREATIVITY

People with developmental disabilities have creative abilities which frequently remain undeveloped. Common perceptions about talent and intelligence, as well as perceptions about the nature and place of art contribute to a lack of access by these persons to creative experiences. What are some of the ideas and attitudes about art which have a negative impact on persons with disabilities? This paper will attempt to make explicit some of these assumptions in order to begin to replace them with positive attitudes and constructive strategies. The "myths and misconceptions" presented below are based on the author's experience as a trainer and consultant working with administrators and direct-care staff of agencies serving persons with developmental disabilities.

Myths and Misconceptions

1. My People Wouldn't Be Able To Do Those Things, or You'd Have To Be Smart To Do That

"You'd have to be smart to do that" was a comment made by a resident of a group home when I invited him to participate in a visual art group. His hesitancy and intimidation reflect attitudes held by many persons in our society. There is a common assumption that creativity is linked to intelligence, and that, therefore, persons with mental impairments can't be creative. This assumption fails to recognize the varied aspects of intelligence which may not manifest themselves in IQ test results. A high degree of artistic achievement can coexist with considerable impairments in other areas of cognitive functioning (Henley, 1986; Ludins-Katz & Katz, 1990).

Another assumption frequently encountered is that creativity is a rare commodity limited to a select few. Many persons who

are unfamiliar with any art form use creativity in their everyday lives, on the job, in managing a household or parenting their children. Traditional views of art history have taught us that creativity has been the exclusive property of a series of talented geniuses. This elitist perspective perpetuates values which place the academically trained artist over popular and folk art forms, and Western art over so-called "primitive" art.

Although some persons use their creativity more than others, and some persons are endowed with more talent than others, the presence of a disability does not preclude the capacity for creativity, the impulses toward which are "deeply rooted" in all of us early in life (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982, p. 8). In adults with mental retardation, where the creative capacity may have been completely untapped, we can assume there is potential for growth and change. Physical challenges can be reduced through adaptations of the artist's equipment (Ludins-Katz & Katz, 1987).

Many persons believe that artistic achievement requires the ability to render objects realistically. As some persons with mental retardation have not achieved the developmental stage at which representational (realistic) art work is possible, their artistic efforts are devalued. In fact, the important elements of artistic expression can be found both in works which hang in museums and in the nonrepresentational (abstract) art frequently made by persons with developmental disabilities. These elements, color, line, form and composition, may be used with greater or lesser success which does not necessarily relate to whether or not the artist has a disability.

2. They can't make choices.

Creativity will flourish where there is the freedom and ability to make decisions. When discussing the introduction of an art program into agencies serving older persons with developmental disabilities, I have noted that staff are sometimes

skeptical of the individuals' capacities for choice making. However, this skepticism probably is more a reflection of the art group participants' lack of experience in exercising this ability and a reflection of staff misperceptions, rather than an innate limitation of the individuals involved. The ability to make choices requires that risk taking be tolerated and decision making be encouraged. When a variety of art materials is routinely available and open-ended activities are offered (allowing the participant to determine the outcome of the art work) art group participants will begin to take initiative in their work and express their preferences (Harlan, 1990).

3. They're not learning anything useful.

A woman with mental retardation proudly shows her completed painting to a staff person. The staff person responds only by insisting that the woman name the colors that have been used.

This response reflects the idea that the art experience is primarily justified in terms of its ability to teach objective information and identifiable skills. In addition, measurable behavioral outcomes may have to be reported to legitimate the activity. Because of the emphasis which has been placed upon the development of vocational and self-care skills, persons with mental retardation may not have had a recognized right to develop an inner life, an emotional and creative life. Art is perceived (not incorrectly) as being similar to play, a seemingly dangerous proximity for those who must be trained to be independent and productive adults.

In fact, persons engaging in creative art experiences are learning much that is useful. They are acquiring a constructive mode of expression of feelings, an alternate method of communication which may be more viable than speech where there are verbal deficits. They are exercising a variety of cognitive functions, including judgment, organization, sensory perception, and memory. They are strengthening the capacity for making

choices and expressing preferences. Improvement in fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination are other benefits of art making.

4. We can't display their work because it looks childish.

Staff are sometimes reluctant to display the art work made by persons with disabilities because of disapproval from administrators or surveyors who perceive the work as inappropriately child-like. Age-appropriateness is a well-intentioned concern which unfortunately, can become a victim of bureaucratic inflexibility. (One activity leader told me her agency allows its clients to use crayons but insists that they be referred to as "wax cylinders" in all paper work.) When we encourage people to make drawings and paintings and then quietly avoid displaying such work, we can expect that creativity will not be enhanced.

The first question which can be posed in response to this perception is, is the work childish or is it underdeveloped? Some immature aspects of the art may reflect the fact that the individual has not yet received adequate support for their art making and stimulation of their creativity in order to make a well developed work of art. Has the activity been presented in an adult manner, with adult materials?

Additionally, work that may appear child-like actually reflects the adult's experience. Each picture or sculpture contains the sensory impressions, memories and personal preferences accumulated over the lifetime of the individual. A drawing made by an older man with whom I worked depicted a house, trees and flowers, as well as an object which I couldn't identify at first. The man, who had worked as a domestic for part of his life, explained that it was the well from which he had drawn the water to wash the family's laundry.

Finally, the art of persons with developmental disabilities presents a different vision. People with disabilities may see

and express their worlds in ways that appear strange to others. So-called "outsider art" refers to work which seems untouched by the mainstream of society, but rather is dictated by an inner vision. The power and sophisticated simplicity of this kind of work has been recognized by collectors and others in the art world, and is much sought after (Cardinal, 1972; Gaver, 1990). Because of a fear of differences, are we trying to hide the work of persons who have mental impairments?

Conclusion

Creativity involves a transformation of feelings, ideas or images out of which something new and unexpected emerges. The creative transformation changes the relationship between the individual and his or her environment (Arieti, 1976). This satisfying and constructive process can and should be available to everyone, regardless of whether they have a label of disability.

For every misconception about art, creativity and disabilities, there is an alternative view which affirms the capacities of persons who have developmental challenges. The job of those of us who believe in the necessity of the arts is to spread the word to others who lack familiarity with the creative process. We need to share information about the importance and validity of this process to the people with whom we work.

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