

Don't hang your dreams in a closet: Sing them, paint them, dance them, act them ...

Martin Comte

Abstract

The paper challenges some of the social and cultural attitudes to disability today and ways in which The Arts can be used to express and bring our dreams to life. It highlights issues relating to children who need special education, children who attend special schools, children who, for whatever reason, do not attend mainstream schools. It questions whether governments regard each special needs child as “a valued member of our community”. Questions explored in the paper include: Do governments ensure that special needs children are extended “every courtesy and assistance”? Does the community in general regard these young people as valued members of our society? What is the attitude of government to such children when they reach adulthood? And how does government show that it values them then? Does government in fact extend every courtesy and assistance to special needs children when they reach adulthood?

Keywords: disability, special needs children, special education, special schools, social and cultural attitudes to disability, arts therapy, arts education.

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About two years ago I attended a UNESCO sponsored conference on The Arts in Portugal with Bella Irlicht, Principal of Port Phillip Specialist School, and Pam Russell – two of the major forces behind this symposium.

After the conference in Lisbon ended I arranged to spend a few weeks in Paris. On leaving my hotel in Lisbon for the airport I was conscious that traffic congestion was sometimes a problem, so I left very early in fear of running late for the plane. As it turned out it was a perfect run and I arrived at the airport several hours before the plane was scheduled to depart. But clearly I was not the only one afraid of missing my plane: the airport lounges, not the

roads to the airport, were congested. There were people everywhere, and not enough seats.

I couldn't bear the thought of waiting for three or four hours in such a congested lounge, trying to find a seat and knowing that if I left it even for a few minutes I would lose it. So when I went to check-in I gave the lady behind the Air France counter my Qantas Club card, knowing full well that Air France, with whom I was flying, was not a Partner Airline of Qantas and that I would not be able to use the Air France lounge. Nonetheless, I thought it was worth a try. Anything was worth a try, given the crowded airport. But, as I knew would happen, the nice young lady told me that there was no reciprocal arrangement between Air

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France and Qantas for using each other's airport lounges. I put-on my most disappointed face and for some reason it touched her because she asked me if I had any other card. I looked in my wallet and, apart from my credit card, I only had a Victorian Senior's Card – a card that the Australians in this audience will know is given to anyone over the age of 60 who is not in full-time employment. But I was desperate. The nice lady asked me what sort of a card it was and I said, quite truthfully, that it was a special card given by The Government of Victoria to senior people – people who are special. After all, it does look extremely official and imprinted on it are not only the words 'The Government of Victoria' but also the Victorian Coat of Arms. I could tell that the very nice lady behind the desk was curious. And then I read to her and myself what the card actually says: "The holder is a valued member of our community. Please extend every courtesy and assistance." Signed, The Government of Victoria. Even I was impressed for the first time! Indeed an air of confidence descended on me as I emphasised again that this card was reserved for very special people: Senior People. And I was one such person. A senior person so highly regarded by my government that they gave me a special card to take with me wherever I went to let people know that I was "a valued member" of the community. And the government – my government - wanted anyone who met me to extend to me "every courtesy and assistance." By now the nice lady behind the desk was extremely impressed. She asked if she could take it to show to her supervisor to see if this might in fact enable me to access the Air France Club Members' Lounge.

Shortly after she came back beaming, with her supervisor alongside her. They were going to allow me into the Air France lounge. And they asked me for my boarding pass that had just been given to me. They wanted to change it. They upgraded me – from Economy to First Class. And before I knew it, somebody was picking up my hand luggage and escorting me to the lounge

– not the normal Air France Club Members' lounge, but the Air France President's Lounge! It was obvious that they were extremely impressed to have such a dignitary who travelled with a special card given by my government that said that I was a valued member of the community and deserved every courtesy and assistance. Believe it or not, I was blushing.

This true story has made me think how nice it would be if the sentiments on my Seniors Card that I got simply by reaching the age of 60, could be extended to those children who are the subject of this symposium – children who need special education, children who attend special schools, children who, for whatever reason, do not attend mainstream schools. Does my government regard each one of them as "a valued member of our community"? Does my government ensure that they are extended "every courtesy and assistance"? Indeed, does the community in general regard these young people as valued members of our community to whom every courtesy and assistance should be extended? And what, further, does my government think of them when they become adults? How does it show that it values them then? Does it extend them every courtesy and assistance in adulthood?

The title of my address is "Don't hang your dreams in a closet: Sing them, paint them, dance them, act them ...". I was excited a few weeks ago to read the program for a conference on special needs children being held in London in October this year, where one of the presenters will be giving a paper entitled "Touch, Shout, Smell and Glow! – The multisensory 'X' factor in teaching learners with profound and multiple learning difficulties or profound Autism." I'm determined to read the paper when it is published because I suspect that it will discuss in detail what I will simply be glossing over.

My paper, 'Don't hang your dreams in a closet: Sing them, paint them, dance them, act them ...' has a two-pronged focus:

Firstly, it implies the importance of educators and decision makers allowing themselves to dream; it implies the importance of educators and decision makers giving themselves permission to dream. Because I believe it is through dreaming and re-imagining that we can open our minds to more possibilities. It is through dreaming that we can unleash our creativity and find new or at least better solutions to the way we think and act. Dreaming is relatively easy: the hard part for some is permitting themselves to do it. It can take courage to allow yourself to dream. But once you have dreamt, putting your dream into reality can be the easy part. Sadly, too often we leave our dreams in the closet because we convince ourselves that they could never be brought to fruition. I hope however that during this symposium you will take your dreams off the coathanger and share them. In the process I hope that you will dream some more. And I hope that others will dream with you. And in sharing your dreams you will also be sharing your sense of the world – your reality.

The second focus implied in the title of my speech is that all children should be encouraged to give expression to their dreams and, where appropriate, use The Arts as a tool to achieve this. The Arts, I believe, have a power, a potency, to unlock traditional barriers to expression and communication. The Arts allow children to say what words do not. The Arts allow – indeed, The Arts facilitate – the expression of states of mind, feelings and emotions. The Arts, in other words, are not just important because of their aesthetic qualities, but also because they provide us with valuable tools for developing a child's potential outside the realm of aesthetics. That is, The Arts have a vital therapeutic role to play in the development of special needs children – far more perhaps than they do with children in mainstream schools. (But, parenthetically, I often think it is a pity that the therapeutic role of The Arts is not acknowledged in curricula in mainstream schools.) The Arts, indeed, allow all of

us to represent our reality in ways that words are often unable to do. In a sense, The Arts also allow us to hide behind masks – literal and metaphoric ones – as we express our thoughts, our needs and desires, as we explore relationships, and as we deal with difficulties. The Arts in education and in therapy are commonly seen as a way of 'making meaning'. And in the process we are allowed, indeed encouraged, to play. The Arts, also allow us to express our dreams. The Arts allow us to bring our dreams to life. And not only this: the Arts enable us to test our dreams in a safe and secure environment. Can you think of a more powerful tool for the development or education of children? I can't.

Where then does Arts Therapy sit? Put simply, arts therapy is a process that depends on some form of engagement with one or more art forms with a view to affecting or facilitating change – physical change, psychological change, emotional change, relational change, social change, and so on.

Is the role of the arts therapist closer to that of teacher or closer to that of artist? Maybe – probably – this is a question that shouldn't even be asked. The important thing is that both of these roles (teacher and artist) – if they exist at all – are subservient to the role of therapist.

This, then, raises for me the question of what the relationship should be between the arts therapist and the arts educator – the music therapist, for example, and the music teacher; the art therapist and the art teacher. What is certain is that their roles are substantially different. It concerns me sometimes when I come across special schools where the distinction would not appear to be clearly understood.

I am also concerned that we tend to compartmentalize arts therapy sessions from the mainstream of teaching and learning. We often segregate arts therapy sessions. I know that Bella is committed to assimilating arts therapy into the mainstream of what happens in the classroom. I personally believe that the principles of arts

therapy should much more strongly underscore all that occurs in the classroom.

One of the strongest images that I have carried around in my mind for twenty years is of a rather nervous four-year-old boy. He had no sight; he has been blind since birth. I watched as a dance therapist encouraged him to explore space – to walk around a room that had obstacles in it and to feel secure in each footstep he took. He was introduced to the dance therapist who picked him up and sang to him. And as the therapist sang he began dancing around the room with the boy in his arms. The therapist deliberately brushed past the two brick pillars or columns in the room so that the boy could feel them, whilst secure in the therapist's arms. The therapist then did the same with some chairs that had been randomly placed in the room. He did the same with the doors. For the first time the little boy began smiling. He began singing. He was dancing. He was exploring space. He was gaining confidence. And when the therapist put the small boy down and held him very close, with them both facing the same direction, together they moved around the room as if they were one person. The young boy began laughing. The therapist laughed. The boy's mother, who was watching, also laughed. Then, all three of them hugged each other and moved around the room together. The therapist had engendered such a strong sense of trust in this tiny boy. Next he faced the boy and they held hands and danced around the room, sometimes the therapist danced backwards and other times the boy danced backwards. And then the boy danced with his mother. And what was particularly brilliant was that the boy began initiating the direction of the movements. The therapist played some music on the CD player and they all danced. If I hadn't known otherwise I would have thought that a miracle had been wrought in that session and the boy had re-gained his sight. But I need to stress that this was just a normal day for the therapist and not every day unfolded with such

success. And not every child responds so quickly, so openly and so freely.

It concerns me that in Australia – more so than in some other countries - we tend to think in terms of individual arts therapies (dance therapy, music therapy, art therapy, drama therapy) rather than working across the arts therapy modalities. I have no doubt that there will be discussion of the relative merits of engaging in the singular arts therapy modalities (such as music therapy) and other approaches (such as Expressive Arts Therapy) where the therapist works across the modalities. As Phil Jones has posed in his excellent book entitled *The Arts Therapies: A Revolution in Health Care*, "Does it make any difference to the client if they have access to only one art form or to a variety of art forms within the therapy?" (p. 96). In other words, does it matter which modality (or combination of modalities) is used in therapy?

And let us not lose sight of the fact that there are different emphases within the arts therapies. To quote Phil Jones again, "It is not as if there is one approach that dominates the arts therapies as a whole, nor even a single approach within one modality such as art therapy or music therapy" (p. 221).

I suspect that these will be some of the issues you will be discussing. But in engaging in the debate we must be careful not to lose sight of our mission – and that is to work with special needs children in order to help them fulfill their potential. As an aside, I think that my dance therapist who worked with the four-year-old blind boy was more a creative arts therapist.

But I have a much more important concern than that of singular arts therapy approaches versus multi-arts approaches in therapy. I am greatly concerned that teachers who teach in special schools are not given additional – or adequate - training in the arts so that they can effectively and with confidence use the arts as tools in the development of children. Tools for their physical development. Tools for

their emotional development. Tools for their psychological development. Tools to help them communicate. Tools for making meaning. Tools to assist them to make sense of their world. In other words, The Arts as therapy. And so I ask you to consider the ideal training in arts and arts therapy for teachers and others who work with special needs children.

But to take it a step further, I want to argue for a model of teacher education that enables teachers to dream and, if appropriate, to take their dreams out of the closet and translate them into reality when working with children. My model would ensure that teachers of special needs children know how to shift their dreams from coathangers to practical classroom experiences using The Arts with great confidence. Such a model will require teachers to become much more familiar with The Arts as tools of learning and change. And equally it will require teachers to be better trained to be creative in their thinking and teaching; it will, indeed, require them to dream.

And when I suggest that teachers should be encouraged to dream, let us not lose sight of the fact that some of the greatest inventions in the world, some of the most successful ventures, have occurred because people gave themselves permission to dream. I think that Descartes was only half right when he said, several hundreds of years ago, "I think, therefore I am." What a pity that he didn't say "I think and dream, therefore I am."! But he was suspicious of dreaming. Dreaming, sadly, has long been frowned upon in Western education. Pity the poor child who is accused of 'day dreaming' in class. Yet in Australia we have the example of our own Aboriginal cultures where The Dreaming or The Dreamtime is a core element.

Allow me to share another concern in relation to arts therapy in special school settings. I'm disappointed at the relative lack of ongoing school-based research into arts therapy in this country. Research that focuses on the use of arts therapy with children in special schools and other

related settings. I strongly believe that school systems, universities and individual schools themselves could do much more in this regard.

Forgive me for indulging myself in expressing such a long list of concerns.

As you know, this symposium is organized around three Key Perspectives:

Firstly, Philosophy. What is the nexus between The Arts, Arts Therapy and Special Education?

Secondly, Program Implementation. How can teachers develop skills and understandings to use The Arts and Arts Therapy in Special Education?

And thirdly, Leadership & Strategy. How can we shift understanding at a community or policy level to advocate for the importance of The Arts and Arts Education in Special Education?

Although I have already made passing reference to all three of these perspectives, I would like to tease out a little more the third Perspective of Leadership & Strategy because it is the one, it seems to me, that holds the key to achieving the aims that are implicit in the first two Perspectives. This third Perspective relates to government, decision makers and the community acknowledging – not on a plastic card – but in reality that special needs children are valued members of our community and accordingly we will offer them every assistance. This must become enshrined not only in government legislation but equally in practice. And it must be enshrined in our collective community psyche. It is an issue not only of Leadership and Strategy but also of Advocacy.

Unfortunately, overall, the status and provision of The Arts in Australian schools have not improved over many decades. We have several State and Federal Government reports dating back to at least the mid-1970s that lament the provision and status of The Arts in schools, from preschool through primary and secondary school. This of course is not to deny impressive pockets of success – wonderful pockets of success – but that is simply what they are: pockets of success.

For me – and I have no doubt for you – the importance of The Arts for us as human beings is self evident. But if we look at school curricula and practice, this importance is rarely given due acknowledgement. Nor is the importance of The Arts sufficiently acknowledged in the training of preschool, primary (elementary) or special school teachers. One only has to look at the amount of time given to The Arts in teacher education today compared to 30, 40 or 50 years ago to see how much things have changed for the worse: today, considerably less time is given to The Arts in the preparation of teachers who work at the preschool and primary school and special school levels. And Australia is not unique in this respect.

Let us for a moment try to imagine what life would be like without The Arts. Twenty years ago some colleagues and I developed a brochure that said: "Imagine Life Without the Arts". I want to share the spirit of this brochure with you. And to do this I would like you to put on the eye mask that you have been given. (If for some reason you do not have one, just close your eyes.)

Imagine Life Without the Arts . . .

No music

No paintings

No theatre

No posters

No photos

No CDs

No films

No DVDs

No wallpaper

No novels

No poems

No short stories

No Christmas or Birthday Cards (well . . . maybe boring ones)

No jewellery

No buskers

No dance parties

And so on . . .

What a dull world it would be. [You may remove your mask.]

Of course it would be a dull world without The Arts. How poorer humanity would be. I'm sure you won't find a bureaucrat or decision maker who would openly disagree – yet, when it comes to education or special education, and when it comes to the training of preschool, primary school, or special education teachers, there is much reason for thinking that we live in a world where The Arts really don't matter much at all. Surely we won't have to resort to a plastic card that says "The Arts are valued members of our curriculum community. Please extend them every courtesy and assistance within the curriculum." Signed, The Government.

I have argued, of course, that not only are The Arts integral to education but, further, that The Arts as used in Therapy are integral to special education. In advocating for Arts Therapy to be more pervasive in programs dealing with special needs children it is of course important that we identify exemplars of best practice. And I stress that I'm not merely referring to examples of schools where children have a weekly Art Therapy, Dance Therapy, Music Therapy or Drama Therapy session and then it's back to the main business of the day. No! I'm arguing for something much stronger where The Arts as Therapy are used as tools by teachers and assistants in the classroom in the normal course of teaching on a daily basis. I'm arguing for the principles and practices of the Arts Therapy modalities to be much more integrated or assimilated into daily classroom practice. I'm arguing for all teachers and others who work with special needs children (not just the therapists) to be trained to regularly employ at least basic arts therapy skills and practices in order to better facilitate children's growth and development.

Strong words! But this is precisely the thinking that went into the design of a new curriculum for all children at Port Phillip Specialist School a few years ago.

The necessity for advocacy for special needs people was brought home to me in quite a

different and disturbing context from a most unexpected source less than a year ago. I have a dear friend from my university days, Carol MacInnes, who is here this evening. We've been friends for 44 years. We both love good food and wine and sometimes we go to extreme ends to indulge ourselves. For the past two years we have been specializing in the pubs of Melbourne and beyond in search of the perfect pub meal.

Last year Carol broke her hip and had to have an operation to insert a special pin to help it mend. The operation was successful. But what was not successful was the treatment she received from then on. Medical and paramedical staff saw not the Carol who has managed to be mobile throughout her much of her life with the use of a walking frame, but instead someone who has a history of breaking countless bones in her body since birth and who now was flat on her back in a hospital bed. It was apparent to Carol that the medical staff were only concerned to ensure that she could sit up in bed so that she could read and watch TV. It was clear that they then envisaged that she would eventually go home and spend the rest of her life in a wheel chair. And this was the start of Carol's problem. She had great trouble convincing doctors and paramedics that she was used to doing more in life than simply sitting up. She has successfully mobilized herself in a frame for years. She has taken herself overseas in her frame. She goes shopping in her walking frame. And, as I said, we go out wining and dining on a regular basis accompanied by her walking frame.

But no – it seemed as if there was a consensus on the part of the staff in the hospital that as long as Carol was able to sit up their work was complete. Carol tried telling them just how mobile she had been before her fall. But it fell on deaf ears. Now let me stress on you that Carol is extremely articulate. And she's very experienced in stating her needs. She has a Bachelor of Music degree, having majored in both piano and flute. She has taught these instruments in schools and

privately for many years – but her spirits were diminishing on a daily basis because no-one was accepting the fact that she intended to be just as mobile after her recovery as she had been before her fall. Throughout her life she has had the will and fighting spirit to ensure that this happened. But now Carol was failing. I visited her in the hospital one day when she was at rock bottom. I went home feeling depressed and extremely angry. And then I sat down at my computer and typed-up the Carol MacInnes Manifesto. It gave her background. It listed her many successes as a student, as a teacher and as a performer. It noted what a rich family and social life she enjoys. It detailed the types of activities that she was used to participating in.

And then I returned to the hospital with multiple copies. We hatched a plot. From then on Carol ensured that every doctor, nurse, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, medical student (and there was a steady stream of them) – she ensured that each one of them was given a copy of her Manifesto. What's more, she made them read it before she would allow them to examine her, before she would allow them to work in therapy with her, and before she would answer any of their questions. The turnaround was almost immediate!

Why am I telling you Carol's story? It's obvious, I'm sure. Here is someone who leads a very active life who at a time of crisis was losing courage to advocate for herself. How much more do special needs children need to be protected and supported to ensure that appropriate advocacy takes place on their behalf rather than them being assessed simply on appearance as to their potential or capabilities!

Every special needs child – not just every senior citizen – must be guaranteed the right to be regarded as "a valued member of our community." Every special needs child – and not just every senior citizen – must be extended "every courtesy and assistance" – not, metaphorically speaking, simply assisted to sit-up

in bed so that they can watch TV.

You see, I want teachers, decision makers, educational bureaucrats, and governments to dream of the possibilities for special needs children. I want them and all of us here tonight to dream and re-imagine what special education in and through The Arts could do for children. I firmly believe that despite the advances that have been made we can still do much more for children with special needs than we are doing today. These children have every right to be valued members of our community and to be treated throughout their lives as such. They must not be marginalized. And I don't have to tell you that there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that social inclusion can positively affect mental and physical health in a variety of different ways. It is therefore in the interests of special needs children and the broader community that as children and adults they be allowed to participate as fully as possible in mainstream society. This must be at the forefront of our deliberations as we re-imagine special education during this symposium.

As we seek to re-imagine special education I want to share just one other thought with you. Increasingly I'm attracted to the notion of 'gifting'. That is, giving a present – a gift. 'Gifting' is a term that is not used a great deal in education – but I think it should be. We talk mainly of teaching. But the notion of 'gifting' has a certain appeal – especially, it seems to me with respect to special education. 'Gifting' is a relatively small and even marginal stream of thought in the fields of philosophy, ethnology and even sociology. For me, the notion of gifting is closely aligned with a concept of dignity that all special needs children must feel. 'Gifting' implies a reciprocity that I find enticing: the notion of the receiver of a gift (e.g., a student in relation to a teacher) also giving back. The 'giver' (the teacher) is also the 'receiver'; the teacher then again gives back. Gifting also entails, it seems to me, a sense of generosity

that is not normally discussed in relation to teaching and learning. Gifting is not simply the one-way process that we often associate with teaching and learning. I'm personally attracted to the notion of teachers being both givers and receivers – not simply givers, which is how we often portray the teaching-learning process. The notion of gifting, I suggest, acknowledges the uniqueness of each child: teaching on the other hand, is more commonly associated with interchangeability – the notion that one child is basically the same as another. So in re-imagining special education during this symposium I would ask that you give some consideration to a broader concept than merely one of teaching and learning.

I must stop this as I'm just indulging in yet another of my dreams – another of my re-imaginings – in relation to special education: the dream that maybe we could re-conceive the concept of special education – indeed, education, teaching and learning, in general.

Finally, in closing, I would like to encourage you to take your eye masks with you to every session of this symposium as a symbolic reminder of three things: Firstly, that by putting on these eye masks you are able to dream. And those around you are able to dream. So bring your dreams out of the closet and share them with others. And in the process of sharing your dreams I know that you will also be sharing the realities of your experiences. Secondly, I want your eye mask to be a reminder of what it is like to be deprived of some form of sensory stimulation – just as the children we are speaking of are deprived of various forms of physical, psychological or sensory stimulation or capability. And, thirdly, I want your eye mask to be a symbolic reminder not only of the potency of The Arts in all of our lives but, most importantly, as a therapeutic tool in special education.

You see, I want all governments to ensure that special needs children are valued members of their community and extended every courtesy

and assistance. And if anyone in education needs to dream it's not only those involved directly in special education, but also the governments and bureaucrats whose decisions can have such a profound effect on the extent to which we can dream, and, indeed, whether we can do it in colour, in stereo, in 3D. Whether, in fact, we really can sing our dreams, paint our dreams, dance our dreams, or act our dreams.

I wish you all a very happy Dreaming – a very happy Re-Imagining – throughout this symposium.

Reference

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