

## A “Special” Education

By Kelly Brady

“You know, thanks so much, but I’m not really interested in acting any more,” I apologized to Anne, the nice woman smiling at me across her desk. “I was actually thinking of just being a classroom volunteer?”

I was interviewing for a volunteer position at The Help Group, a network of schools and living facilities in Los Angeles for people with special needs. Noticing “MFA from NYU’s Graduate Acting Program” on my resume, Anne suggested I might be interested in working with young people in an after-school acting program. However, at the time I had no interest in helping young people (especially young people with special needs!), gain false hopes to pursue what I had found to be a brutally disappointing profession.

Anne was not to be deterred. “You know, they made a film about The Miracle Project, which is the group we have doing theatre here. Why don’t you watch it, and then let me know if you don’t think it’s something you might be interested in?” I grudgingly went home to watch “Autism: the Musical,” but instead of finding an exploitative tale of pushy parents forcing their children with autism into an acting career, what I saw was deeply moving: kids who shared the same thoughts, feelings, and hopes as everyone else, but possessed a different way of expressing these desires to the world. Performing in front of an audience, these young people were getting recognized for their talents and not their deficits. These young people were being celebrated; on stage, no one was trying to “fix” them, to shape them into a world not yet designed for them.

I was reminded of my own experience growing up and being “different”: my second grade classmates telling me how “stupid” and “weird” I was when the teacher wasn’t looking. I remembered the sharp alienation and loneliness until I found acting, where I could become someone people wanted to pay attention to, a place where my “weird” humor, imagination and silly voices were welcomed with laughter and applause instead of rolling eyes and snickers. The children in “Autism: the Musical” wanted the same thing. They just wanted a chance to shine.

I reported for my first volunteer shift with The Miracle Project a week later. I was nervous of the students at first – they made noises and movements I didn’t understand, and I didn’t know how to communicate with them. Once we got started, however, I realized quickly the boy hiding his head in sofa cushions was merely having a tantrum like any kid would who was tired, overwhelmed and wanted a snack. To my surprise, he responded to me when I went over and tried to joke with him like I would any other third grader. Something profoundly shifted in me at that moment, because I left my first Miracle Project rehearsal excited, inspired and counting the days until I could go back and hang out with the kids. For the first time, I started to seriously consider that a career existed that could make me as happy as I had been as a performer.

I did so well with The Miracle Project that The Help Group offered me a position as a classroom aide several weeks later. I was assigned to a classroom of teenagers with severe special needs. Most were non-verbal and many were unable to successfully use an assistive communication device to convey their needs. I had to shift my attention to closely observing what my students were doing and saying without words. Careful attention revealed my students were speaking a very clear language all their own. Each student was a riddle to solve, and solution led to breakthroughs as well as a whole new set of puzzles to unlock.

I observed the challenges and joys that come from being a special education teacher. One day on the playground a fellow aide remarked, “Theses, these children are not a problem. These children are beautiful. It’s the other adults that are difficult!”

I wanted to accept the challenge, and decided to go all in and pursue a teaching license in special education. Before long, I found myself back in New York City, enrolled in the New York City Teaching Fellows on my way to a second Master’s degree in special education, and pursuing a job as a full-time special education classroom teacher in NYC public schools.

My first principal had other ideas. “Oh, you’re an actor?” she exclaimed, looking over my resume. “Can you do theatre with the students? I want a spring show. Shakespeare!”

The following spring I found myself directing “Romeo and Juliet” with twelve middle school students in District 75, the NYC Department of Education’s school district for students who have such severe intellectual and/or physical challenges they require highly specialized instruction unavailable in general education settings. District 75 students are largely taught in “self-contained” classrooms containing 6 to 12 students, taught by one teacher, one classroom paraprofessional, and usually several “1:1” paraprofessionals who are assigned to a specific student for the duration of the school year.

The goal of public education for students with special needs is to align every educational experience with the same curriculum their neuro-typical, general education peers receive, such as reading grade level appropriate texts, history and social studies, science and mathematics. Creating appropriate adaptations can be a challenge, as learning is cumulative and – in the case of intellectual disabilities – many students struggle with mastering the basic skills needed to foster proficiency (such as letter identification, which is a building block for independent reading.) Finding a way to make grade level content accessible to students with intellectual disabilities is a never-ending challenge requiring creativity, ingenuity, insight, and empathy – a tall order when also tasked with the myriad responsibilities teachers must manage every day to keep their students safe and engaged.

I thought about what a neuro-typical middle school classroom would be encountering, and what a typical middle school play might look like. “Romeo and Juliet” was grade

level appropriate, centered on universal themes of love, conflict and misunderstanding, and was a staple of middle, high school and college theater productions.

My students may have been diagnosed as having learning challenges and intellectual disabilities, but, contrary to popular theories that individuals with autism experience challenges with relationships, I saw my students engaging daily in the same crushes, arguments and parental conflicts the two “star-crossed lovers” in Shakespeare’s play encountered.

I wanted to find a way to bring this material to life for my students, as well as their friends and families. I was lucky to stumble across Brendan P. Kelso’s “Playing with Plays” series: adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays which combined contemporary dialogue with original Shakespearean prose and verse. Thus, Romeo would utter the line, “But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun! Man, she’s cute!” I hoped this approach would allow my students to experience the poetry and rhythm of the original text, yet also empower them to understand and embody the meaning of character relationships and plotline. Would my students be able to make sense of the material, and be able to remember their lines and their blocking? We forged ahead in spite of these questions, built a set, and invited parents to an evening performance.

An essential component to our rehearsal process was the help of our “related service providers,” the school team of physical therapists (PT’s), occupational therapists (OT’s), and speech-language pathologists (SLP’s) provided by law in every public school serving students with special needs. Ms. Amy, our SLP, took the time to adapt the lines with picture symbols, placing a visual representation of a word directly above the text to support the reader. Ms. Amy also incorporated memorization, pronunciation and articulation into her individual and group speech sessions. Our PT’s and OT’s worked with the students on remembering their blocking, holding props appropriately and modifying our stage combat.

One week before opening night one of our OT’s began to worry. “I don’t think these kids are going to be able to do this, Kelly,” she said, looking at the motley crew whacking each other with rubber swords. I smiled, very seriously assured her I wouldn’t do anything that would set the kids up to fail, and corralled the actors for another run through.

I rented costumes from the Theatre Development Fund, because the best part of acting is getting to wear costumes, and I wanted my students to have the experience of wearing pieces that had originated on Broadway, at the Metropolitan Opera and at the Juilliard School. When we had our first dress rehearsal, the kids were beside themselves.

Bucking the stereotype that children with autism don’t like to interrupt routine, change clothes, or use their imagination, the minute my students donned their velvet doublets you could see the excitement about the upcoming performance take effect. The kids knew something special was going on, and they were relishing the special attention. My

students were trusted and empowered with fancy masks, fake swords and a backdrop carefully painted by our amazing instructional coach Ms. Rachel to look like a town square in Italy. The kids were creating a world where they had power, agency, and routine – and they were garnering attention for what they were doing right instead of what they might be doing wrong.

Thanks to the help of a huge team of Speech Therapists, Occupational Therapists, and classroom teachers, “Romeo and Juliet” was a success. Because of their hard work, the students had memorized their blocking and their lines, and handled the anxiety of performing in front of an audience with perfect grace. Our staff had rallied under a common cause, designing programs, selling baked goods to pay for the costumes, taking time out of their packed days to run lines with students, and creating a feeling of excitement in the building.

Our student’s families had the opportunity to see their “special” children perform in a middle-school play, just like they would were their children in a general education school setting. Brothers and sisters presented their siblings with flowers, fawned over their costumes, and played with their props. Families posed for pictures with the children costumed in velvet and brocade. Teachers were in disbelief that their students were able to sustain focus and commitment for over an hour, without needing micromanagement, and in front of a live audience of mostly unfamiliar faces.

Our school administration was so impressed that the following year, several of the students were promoted to a less-restrictive classroom setting. In special education the goal is for each student to gradually gain more independence and self-agency, requiring decreased supports from staff until the student is able to function throughout the school day with the least amount of staff support needed, setting them up for their best chance at independent living post-school. In New York City the less-restrictive a classroom setting, the more chances a student has for vocational training in high school, giving him/her the opportunity to not only gain work experience but also be compensated for their work by earning a small paycheck.

Most importantly, the students were proud of themselves and what they had accomplished. They immediately began asking what the next play would be. (I chose “Hamlet”.)

Teaching theatre to students with special needs has opened my mind and heart in ways I could not imagine. I am honored with the opportunity to see these youth make a transformation; to see the delight in their eyes when they try on costumes and explore props; to see the joy they get from making puppets and finding an outlet for their imagination. I am continually surprised when my students come alive with creativity, intelligence and depth of feeling that exceeds their neuro-typical peers. There is so much life flickering below the surface of young people with special needs. All they need is the proper conduit to express it.

Performing Arts can provide this lifeline. Performance can show families, parents and the students themselves they are capable of far more than what might have been previously expected of them. Families gain the normative experience of going to see their children in a play. Young people harness imagination and creativity while trying on social roles that may have previously eluded them. Falling in love, fighting, being a parent, having power, taking risks, and even the concept of death.

Onstage, students can explore these universal themes in a safe environment. In the rehearsal room a student has every chance to “do it again” until they achieve the objective of the scene. Students practice interacting with others with the safety of knowing exactly what is coming next. An actor knows how their fellow actors will respond onstage, what will happen as a result, and where they are going to move in space. There is safety in the knowledge that no matter what happens onstage, normal life resumes the moment rehearsal is finished. The dead will rise, hurt feelings will be mended, arguments will disappear. Students learn by doing that nothing, good or bad, is ever permanent, and this can empower them to take risks in their own lives. The arts are transformative, not only for the art-makers, but for the facilitators, families, friends and audience members who witness the art. Students and educators are “learning by doing” on the stage, continually testing their own expectations, patience and creativity. Both the teacher and student are on their feet, experiencing, hypothesizing, testing and recalibrating what is working and what isn’t. Truth, in art and life, is constantly examined and explored by students and teachers working together to make meaning.

As much as I am grateful for the opportunity to provide a chance for my students and fellow educators to find empowerment in their creative work, I feel I gain more than I give with each production or class. I have the daily opportunity to explore the individual beauty that resides in each of us, with some of the most incredible surprises coming in the unlikeliest of packages.

Access to the arts, especially the performing arts, to young people with special needs must be a requirement for effective education. Who knows what hidden beauty lies waiting to be born, and what limitless potential can be unlocked, for both the student and the teacher.

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