

OBSERVATION OF THE ART-MAKING DEVELOPMENTS IN ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES BY AN ARTIST-TEACHER IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract: This submission is a live experience and reflection of a freelance visual arts educator in Singapore. I reflected on the development of adults with disabilities over twenty years and now, I envision how to create more person-centred art-making experiences.

My observation is that the change in the education for persons with disabilities is an influential environment because the school setting is one of the few community-based support systems.

My role as an artist-teacher to be thoughtful and intentional. Whenever I start a workshop for persons with disabilities, I learn to be mindful of their educational background and would adjust my content and delivery to meet their profile.

Background: Singapore turned 59 years old in 2023. The education for the people of Singapore went through changes with the most significant one in 2003, where the Ministry of Education (MOE) enacted the Compulsory Education Act (CEA) for all children born after 1996. The act was revised in 2019 to extend the CEA to children with moderate to severe disabilities born after 1 January 2012.

Between 2003–2012, the education for children with disabilities and their families were served by many Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWO) under the National Council of Social Services (NCSS), a wing of the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). MOE and NCSS have a deeper stake in all SPED schools and one example is the co-development of the framework: *The 21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes*, in 2011.

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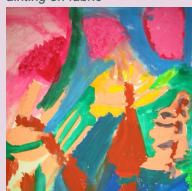
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Uncommon language

Between 2001-2008, I conducted workshops at two organisations who served persons with disabilities (PWD) above the age of 21. I had two very different experiences. At Organisation A, a daycentre for adults with mix-abilities, I struggled to capture attention and engagement. The projects had to be simple by way of content and the skill focused on was filling in a space/shape like a colouring book. The adults preferred colour pencils and markers as they repeatedly chose the medium. I learnt from their coaches that many did not attend school hence English was not their first language, so I often relied on demonstration or modelling with little success. Many pieces created relied on repetitive body movement of colouring with little connection to theme or topic.

Figure 1
Painting on fabric



Note. Artwork of *Trees* by an adult with intellectual disabilities. © Ranae, 2003

Interest and family support

At Organisation B, an arts centre, the interaction and artmaking were fluid amongst the adults whose ages were close to Organisation A. They were able to create pieces with connections towards a topic and create a simple composition from a blank surface as shown in Figure 1. One reason was that these adults were enrolled by their caregivers because their child displayed an interest in visual arts. Another reason was that many in the group attended school up to lower primary or continued their education in a Sped school up to the age of 18.

Comfortable with table task and group work

Organisation C began in 2013 for adults with Down Syndrome, I was able to use simple step-by-step guides for the learners to show them methods to paint on canvas. We relied on the use of alphabets and numbers to form the skeleton of a composition. I tried to mirror work systems used in Sped Schools. Through this familiar approach and the use of group work, seen in Figure 2, we were able to remove some struggles for the adults as they learn to complete a piece of canvas on their own. All in all, we were able to practice and move on to different projects done on canvas experimenting with different techniques and tools.

Figure 2
Work in progress: Rainbow Hearts



Note. Group project by adults with Down Syndrome of painted hearts on canvas. © Ranae 2011

Strong clean up routine and work system

Organisation D is a centre for young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder that began in 2017. All learners had the skill set to read instructions, the understanding of boundaries within a composition and colour mixing. They were able to ask for help when unsure. Painting and cleaning habits were on point, and this allowed the time to be used for artmaking. In the beginning, most individuals in the group were fearful to make decisions and preferred to copy an existing piece or follow my lead especially when the project was perceived as demanding. Many were reluctant to create and preferred to wait for my assistance and assurance before they painted. It took a while to shift the mindset and after three years, a small group was able to move on to make their own decisions.

Figure 3
Floral and Fauna
by Noah TK, 2021



Note. Artwork commissioned by the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation. Artwork (Acrylic on Canvas) was extended into a series of merchandise crafted by Art:Dis Singapore. Permission granted by artist: www.instagram.com/noah_tan_artjourney/?igsh=NXJ2MHpucXpya2Fz

Conclusion: The artist who painted Figure 3 is from organisation B. He and his cohort were aged between 22 to 37 years old in 2023. This meant that the majority experienced in part or whole of the revised CEA outcomes. This cohort has a good mix of art skills and non art skills outlined in the 2011, *21st Century Competencies and Student Outcomes* as they embarked into adulthood. Art making is a combination of art skills like the use of medium and application of technique, as well as transferable non art skills such as understanding options, decision making and expressing its reasons, and the use of a computer for research. Many have been found to be accepting of change (or mistakes) and to be open enough to try a different art making approach at least once. The artwork in Figure 3 is one example of how dedication of supportive parents & loved ones, relevant infrastructure of schools and community-based settings champion an individual and in turn allowed for the person to be independent and an advocate for their own art learning.