
AUTISM AND IMPAIRED COMMUNICATION IN MOVIES

Smaranda Ștefanovici, Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureș

Abstract: Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how this person makes sense of the world around him. Focusing on the importance of treating autism as a difference, a disability, and not as a disorder, the present paper is a plea to autistic children to be listened to, accepted, and supported by the community. The paper presents two films about autistic children, Kids with Cameras and Miracle Run. The producers, Alex Rotaru and Gregg Champion, highlight the struggles of such autistic children to find their place in society. Dedicated teachers, the healing power of art, tolerance and acceptance are used as ingredients in this difficult journey of some autistic children towards communication and interaction with other people.

Keywords: autism, disorder, disability, impairment, healing art.

Introduction

As educators that work with students without significant disabilities, we have to know how to motivate our students to perform well in society; and to do that, we have to help them tap into their potential to be successful. Educating students with severe disabilities has more or less the same goal, their integration into society. Their inclusion can be a very slow process but special educators' role is to build up channels of communication that make their impairment less visible, and be regarded as a difference and not as a disorder that cannot be accepted and tolerated.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how this person makes sense of the world around him. Focusing on the importance of treating this disorder as a difference, a disability, and not as a disorder, educating kids with autism involves much more responsibility. The American educational system mainstream many children with autism into regular classrooms; it is also a fact that these autistic children follow parallel special education programs; Charleen Quella, a classroom aid for the *Douglass Developmental Disability Center* at Rutgers University, and an after-school teacher at *New Horizons in Autism* declares: "It is all about making the kids feel good about themselves; positive reinforcement for even the smallest accomplishment is necessary." (qtd. in McDevitt, Krista). Para-educators' role is thus to assist students with autism in integrated classes. Allowing the kids to be creative, especially in the art environment, is one of the most important aspects of teaching children with autism. While good educators utilize art in order to help autistic children or students overcome their limitations, they may be aware of the need to individualize each art class. They have a lot to learn, first, about teaching children with disabilities in general and with autism in particular and, second, about using art efficiently as a means to overcome impairment or communication gap.

Cinema is a way to evaluate the way autistic children are viewed in American society at large. American films approach themes connected to how the American society should

respond to people with autism; they also focus on the support networks autistic children need to develop to become confident and competent adults.

Films examine some factors that contribute to the success of art as a therapeutic tool with children with autism. Often children with autism learn visually. A developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, which affects a child's performance, autism, less in America and more in our country, is regarded as an oddity and hence the attitude towards autistic people is one of rejection and marginalization. They are merely reduced to their physical and mental impairment (Benshoff 359), i.e. to their damaged and weakened aptitudes to communicate and interact with other people. Many of them, however, due to the fact that they focus on details rather than on seeing things as a whole (Brill 17) demonstrate superiority in some particular areas such as mathematics, music, science, poetry, memorizing, chess, etc.

The films I have chosen to support my claims about art and autistic education are *Kids with Cameras* and *Miracle Run*. Focusing on the importance of treating this disorder as a difference, a disability, and not as a disorder, the present paper is a plea to autistic children to be accepted, respected, supported, included, and listened to, by the community. The producers Alex Rotaru and Gregg Champion highlight the struggles of such autistic children to find their place in society. Dedicated teachers, the healing power of art, tolerance and acceptance are used as ingredients in this difficult journey of some autistic children towards communication and interaction with other people.

Kids with Cameras (documentary, 2010) is an inspirational documentary, produced and directed by Alex Rotaru, about the challenges and triumphs of autistic children participating in the "Celluloid Heroes" movie camp in Los Angeles, hosted by the non-profit organization "Actors for Autism" and taught by the award-winning educator Brad Koepenick. The film won the Grand Prize for Best Feature Documentary at the Monaco Charity Festival, 2010. Actress Annie Potts provides the narration. A review sees the film as a statement to the power of art to heal, unite and build communication bridges. Brad Koepenick is presented as a special, gifted educator whose talent, job commitment and patience contribute to stirring the autistic kids' interest and help them overcome the communication difficulties by integrating art into the educational process. He takes seven kids with Asperger syndrome (a milder form of autism) on a constructive film camp. One of them is Casey Metcalfe, who apparently appears as a normal child, full of energy and with a talent for drawing. A handsome boy, eleven year-old, curly haired, known as a trouble-maker, he suffers from impaired communication. He has difficulties in looking into people's eyes and in making friends: "I try to convince them to say that I'm not as bad a person as they think I am (...) but they will not listen to me" (00:30-00:43). Unable to express his inner feelings, he withdraws in an imaginary world with imaginary characters, like Sam Jones, the superhero, his wives who all die in a horrible way. dr. Ivan Snitchel, the bad guy, etc.

Noah Niemeyer, same aged as Casey, also has problems in relating to people. He tends to be possessive with other kids and that shows in his way of playing with other kids.

All the seven kids recall past experiences when they were stigmatized by others as 'different'. The seventeen-year old Jon Corlander talks about such an experience: "If you're bullied as a kid, it's kind of like you're scarred for a life a little bit (...) 'cause it's a very

painful moment” (00:44-00:56). On the other hand, becoming an adult is also hard, as the nineteen-year-old Ben Anderson asserts: “I think it’s better ... or easier to stay kid than to grow up” (01:02-01:10). Ben, probably, has the most severe form of Asperger syndrome of all, noticeable in his clumsiness, nasal, robot-like voice, slow gestures and reactions. The producer Alex Rotaru introduces us to other autistic kids, like Monique Beltran, with severe dyslexia and reading difficulties and her brother, Dominique Beltran, about whom the doctors were pessimistic regarding his speaking skills and who was recommended to be institutionalized at the age of two. Even though eventually Dominique starts to verbalize, at the age of nine, his difficulties in expressing himself and in integrating socially as well as his developmental problems persist, thus at the age of seventeen, he acts, behaves, and thinks like a twelve-year-old boy.

Despite their problems, these kids manage to bridge the communication gap and find ways to ‘verbalize’ their talents for poetry, acting, singing, painting, swimming, playing basketball, collecting magazines, building cities out of newspaper cutouts, aero-modeling with rockets and, why not, they manage that by filmmaking.

The success is due to the paraeducator Brad Koepenick. An actor, writer and producer, an award-winning educator as well, Brad is the subject of *Kids with Cameras*, which highlights his work with stop motion animation, improvisation and film making for students on the autistic spectrum. An actor who found his true passion in the classroom, he models his intensive film camp for children aged eleven to nineteen, who have autism spectrum disorders, around research principles showing that developing autistic children’s creativity significantly improves interaction skills. The moments of creating (films, poems, paintings, and music) are intertwined with moments from their private lives and interviews with parents about how they cope with this ‘disorder’. The acting classes favor team-work, communication and socialization, self and mutual respect, responsibility, etc. Brad is enthusiastic about the group: “there is more creativity (...) than you’ll see at any of the major boardrooms of the studios.” (04:08-04:14). His enthusiasm overflows whenever he speaks to the kids, plays with them tiny theater games or does funny physical exercises. A good conflict manager, he solves the antagonistic exchange of opinions between Casey and Noah by offering an acceptable solution to both of them.

Miracle Run (TV movie, 2004) was directed by Greg Champion. It was nominated for Primetime Emmy Award in 2005. Inspired by a true story, it has as main characters a single mother, Corrine Morgan-Thomas, and her autistic twin boys, Steven and Philip. While *Kids with Cameras* captures a period of a week from the life of seven autistic kids, *Miracle Run* follows the twins over several years, from childhood into adulthood.

The life of Corrine changes drastically when she finally finds out that her sons are autistic; her first reaction is shock at the terrible news. To get things worse, her husband leaves her when he is told about his kids’ diagnosis. She is determined to fight the social stigma and discrimination and to have her sons treated like any other child, so, initially, she does not tell Steven and Philip’s new school teachers about their problems. She refuses to give up on their potential, despite their oversensitivity to noises and unexpected situations, their lack of reaction when speaking to them, their problems of communicating. Family support, love and patience help her take slow, but rewarding steps forward, e.g. when Steven

writes his first word “pizza”. Often marginalized by peer colleagues, who label them as ‘weird’ or ‘retard’, confronting with feelings of fear and insecurity, in the end, their talents overcome their impairments. Steven turns out to be an excellent runner, while Philip is gifted in music, chess, etc.

While in *Kids with Cameras*, we have one educator, in *Miracle Run* we have three educators. The special educator Wayne is a learning therapist who teaches Steven and Philip language skills but also how to perceive the surrounding social environment and integrate into it; in other words, he prepares them for a normal activity in society. The high-school music teacher notices Philip’s talent for guitar playing and encourages his mother to enroll him in a program at a private music school for gifted kids. Last, but not least, Steven’s coach confides in Steven’s physical abilities and encourages him to enroll in the race, which he wins.

Besides educators, family role in autistic education is essential. Here as well, the mother takes an active role and gives all her support to her children and to the teachers who take care of her children’s special education. Moreover, she founds “The Miracle Run Foundation”, to provide advice and support to other autistic parents as well. The ‘miracle’ in the film and the foundation’s titles refer to confidence, non-compliance, huge efforts, family-school collaboration and many other. From her first unpleasant visit with the boys to the supermarket, when her boys began screaming, causing others to stare at them, to their classmates who were puzzled by their strange behavior, over the course of several years, “the boys flourish verbally, socially, and academically” (viki.org) due to their learning therapist, their special physical education and music school teachers and a single mother’s devoted love and perseverance in getting her autistic kids an education and flourishing in a society that expected them to fail.

Music and poetry as forms of art in *Miracle Run* impacts on Philip and Steven’s communication and sensory processing. When diagnosed with autism, Philip could only repeat what he heard and Steven did not speak at all. Philip and his twin brother Steven are obsessed with an imaginary hero, Rocky, who, himself, is an example of strength and perseverance. Both Philip and Steven are gifted kids who need an opportunity to reveal their hidden talents. Philip loves music. Encouraged by his music teacher to take an entrance exam into a special music school, he plays the guitar over the phone in an endeavor to show his talent and be acknowledged for that. The examiners are impressed by his playing, without knowing till he comes to meet them that he is an autistic boy.

Steven falls in love with a school colleague, Jennifer, who is also desired by another colleague of his. Steven tells Philip about Jennifer and even decides to join the cross team to impress Jennifer. He wins the race and becomes an excellent runner. His gift for poetry is also proved when his mother finds a poem he has dedicated to Jennifer.

Conclusion

Presently, more than one child in one hundred has autism and a growing number are diagnosed each year. Both films offer insight into the potential of autistic children when their creative energies are unleashed. The link between good educators and the integration of art as a means of overcoming the communication difficulties of disabled learners can be significant even for educators, as we are, that work with students without significant disabilities.

Considering the little attention given by our educational system to the qualities of art for enhancing education, I think instructional films of the kind are good ways to evaluate, respond to and support the networks our students (disabled or not) need to integrate into present society and prepare them to overcome their 'limitations' by building up creative energies into them. Creativity improves social interaction skills. Cultivating acting abilities, creativity and love for art is to learn important lessons about social integration and self-discovery.

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