

Creative arts, imagination and expression

An important way of being, sharing and feeling?

Artistic achievements

Increasingly, we are recognising the creative talents of children and adults with Down syndrome and providing opportunities for them to develop their skills in dance, drama, music, painting and all forms of creative art. However, we still have a long way to go in providing quality opportunities to enable those who wish to fully develop their talents.

Low expectations, limited resources

Too often, art, music and drama activities are seen as just a way to provide some recreation for people with learning disabilities. The opportunity is there to have fun – and that is a very important outcome – but there may not be a real expectation that some individuals will display considerable talent. Classes may not always be run by fully qualified teachers. Equipment and materials may not be of the quality that would be on offer to students without intellectual disabilities. In other words, assumptions are made that if individuals have learning disabilities which have held back their ‘intellectual’ and ‘academic’ progress, then they will also be limited in their creative and expressive abilities. In fact, the opposite may be true for many.

Separate talents

The dramatic, musical and artistic talents of a number of individuals with learning disabilities, including some with Down syndrome, already testify to the lack of any necessary link between ‘IQ’ and artistic abilities. In many countries, local artists with Down syndrome have been recognised for their painting abilities and sold their work. Others are known for their abilities in dance and drama – but at present only a small number are receiving such recognition. Even fewer are being treated as equals in their profession with artists who do not have a learning disability. We still have a way to go to change attitudes, break down false assumptions and raise expectations so that

students with learning disabilities have equal access to quality teaching and to employment or to commercial success with their work.

Another way to communicate

Creative expression through the arts may be especially important for children and adults with Down syndrome for several reasons. Firstly, most will have major difficulties in expressing themselves through spoken language – through talking or writing. There are exceptions, of course, and some young people write poetry and can express themselves verbally on stage. However, many cannot share their feelings through words but can do so most eloquently through dance and movement or through painting. Creative arts then, may be an important ‘voice’ for many.

Expressing feelings

Secondly, most individuals with Down syndrome are empathic – that is – they feel deeply and feel what others are feeling. However, they may not be able to share their feelings by talking about them but they may be excellent at expressing feeling in dance and drama. I have a vivid memory of watching a dance group performing a few years ago while at a conference abroad. The dancers were adults with Down syndrome plus professional dancers who taught them and worked with them. All the adults’ technical skills as dancers were impressive – the teachers came from a classical dance background as I remember – certainly some of the dance included classical ballet sequences and steps. The thing that most impressed and moved me however, was the emotional expression conveyed by the dancers as they moved and their relationship with the music and its mood. A number of the group were adult men with Down syndrome – a generation who would not have had great opportunities for education and from whom little was usually expected. They were like most adults with Down syndrome of their age – some a little overweight and most without employment. It was the unusual beliefs of their teachers – the



ability to see beyond the usual expectations and to give them the chance to learn and succeed that had transformed their lives.

More opportunities

This article is a plea to everyone who teaches children or works or lives with adults with Down syndrome to think about giving them a range of opportunities for creative expression. We should start young when we can and give our children a chance to explore their creative talents but it is equally important to offer the opportunities to adults. As many readers know, creative arts are a great way to relax and to meet people, even when we are not particularly skilled. A new book on *Drama and the Arts for adults with Down syndrome* has just been published in the *Down Syndrome Issues and Information* series (see p.102). It contains a wealth of ideas and examples from around the world which we hope will inspire some new opportunities in our communities.

As the authors of the book put it “We are all uniquely different people and the creative arts allow us to express this individuality”.^[1: p.3]

Editor

1. Warren, B., Richard, R.J. and Brimbal, J. (2005). *Drama and the arts for adults with Down syndrome – Benefits, options and resources*. The Down Syndrome Educational Trust, Portsmouth, UK.