

Ana Carmen Franco Nogueira

**APPROACHING THE IMAGINARY AND
SYMBOLICAL UNIVERSE OF THE VISUALLY
IMPAIRED THROUGH ARTS AND DRAWINGS**

São Paulo
2007

Author

Ana Carmen Franco Nogueira

Rua Arthur Soter Lopes da Silva, 88 Bl1, apto 24

São Paulo, SP, Brazil

Zip Code 05367-140

Phone: 55 11 37142385

Mobile: 55 11 99178097

E-mail: ac.nogueira@terra.com.br

On behalf of the following association, which supports the visually impaired community, especially by offering specialized work:

Projeto Acesso - Centro Brasileiro de Apoio Pedagógico Especializado ao Deficiente Visual.

Rua Salles Guerra, 147 - V. Romana - Cep 05048-030 - SP - SP – Brazil
- Tel/ Fax 55 11-3803-9487

Education and Professional Life:

Arts (Major at FAAP college). São Paulo, Brazil, 1981.

Specialization in special Education (majoring on the Visually Impaired).

UNICID college, São Paulo, Brazil, 2004.

Participation in Teaching Arts and Inclusive Education (extension course). Educational Program for People with Special Needs. Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (museum), 2004.

Specialized in Art Therapy. UNIFIEO (college), Osasco, SP, Brazil, 2007.

Art Classes to the Visually Impaired at Projeto Acesso. since 2004)

ABSTRACT

This paper will analyze the importance of arts and drawing for the visually impaired as a means of inclusion and of communication with society.

Here we depicted our art-therapeutical work developed with visually impaired children and adolescents attending Projeto Acesso in 2005 and 2006, based on research in different areas, including arts, Art therapy, Psychology, and Psycho-pedagogy, as well as on experiences from experts in visual handicaps.

Keywords: Art Therapy, Arts for the Blind, sensory Education.

INTRODUCTION

Can Arts, and especially drawings, stimulate the access to the imaginary and symbolical universe of the visually impaired, enabling them to communicate more effectively with society and achieve better understanding of the world outside and of their own selves?

Since July 2004 I have been working with the Visually Impaired at *Projeto Acesso*, a Brazilian association devoted to offering specialized pedagogical work to these people, located in the city of Sao Paulo. Although it still reaches not many people, I believe that art is transforming their lives, bridging the gap and creating new ways of understanding the world.

Having majored on educational arts, I specialized in Education for the Visually Impaired¹. I also took an extension course about Teaching Arts in Inclusive Education in the Educational Program for People with Special Needs offered by the museum Pinacoteca do Estado de Sao Paulo².

As our working journey progressed, I noticed that strengthening on the study of therapeutical art would be essential for my development, and in February 2006, I started my education as an Art therapist at college Centro Universitário FIEO in Osasco, São Paulo, Brazil.

¹ UNICID – Universidade Cidade de São Paulo. Post graduation Lato Sensu on **Educação Especial**: Aprofundamento na área da deficiência visual. 2004.

² Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo. Curso de extensão **Ensino da Arte na Educação Especial Inclusiva**. 2004.

THE WORK INSIDE THE STUDIO

On our practices inside the art studio, with blind students, we noticed that, although they did not have any access to drawings as a form of expression, idea or feeling, they had already used pencil and paper, but in a rudimentary way. So far, their bidimensional expressions were restricted to some doodles and circular forms that got lost on the page and weren't able to convey continuous ideas neither to the sighted nor to the handicapped observer. Their drawings were thoughtlessly made, regardless of the available space on the page. Their sketches started to accumulate one on top of the other until they became a compact mass.

Moreover, our students showed much difficulty in using pencils, which lead us to exhaustive research and much physical stress.

One of the students, who already had some ability in using it, started to share his knowledge with his classmates. At this point, we noticed the importance of learning with other people. For those who can see, holding a pencil is a rather common task. Visually impaired people, however, have few opportunities of doing so.

Regarding the process of learning with other people, we had another break-through in the group: to draw and "see" what you had just drawn. When drawing a line or a shape, each of them shared his-her discovery and demonstrated how the other students could do the same things he-she did.

After that, we thoroughly approached space exploration on paper, studying the relationship between space and expression, the knowledge of lines and their expressive capabilities.

By using simple and low-cost material such as rubber plaques to support the sheets of paper, drawing boards covered by nylon to foster the conscious use of blank space and graffiti pencils to draw, our job became rather feasible.

Lines played a fundamental role when dealing with the proper, thoughtful and rational use of blank space, and on how this could enable the development of new shapes inside the sheet of paper that was bordered by those lines.

“Seeing” something implies settling a place on the whole, a location in blank space, a position on the size scale, clarity and distance. For obvious reasons, we ignored clarity and worked on all the remaining ideas.

We showed them that any interference on paper would disturb stillness, mobilize space, and cause an action, a reaction.

We noticed that drawing shapes and deciding their location on the blank page were easier for those who already traveled in internal and external environments independently and autonomously.

Everyone, using their particular skills, was able to meaningfully express themselves in drawing, conveying ideas both to sighted and to visually impaired subjects.

We have confirmed that blind and sighted children, when given equal opportunities, are able to delineate meaningful and expressive drawings.

We have always supported the notion that patterns used by visually handicapped folks in this matter can be similar to those used by sighted children, since many haptical relations give tactile information similar to visual information. Kennedy³ believes that blind individuals having very little practice in drawing will initially depict things like young sighted children, but as time goes by, they will gradually become more skilled and will eventually develop extraordinarily.

Furthermore, we had the opportunity to be a part of the awakening of the message to these students: the joy of being able to express themselves and to be understood. Once they are drawn, pictures are engraved on paper, and they will never vanish.

Their immense happiness showed when they noticed they could convey ideas not verbally. Their drawings really existed, and everyone could understand them.

“I could never imagine I would be able to draw faces, people, bodies...”

“Can you really identify what I have drawn?”

We have also worked with low-vision students who have a degenerative ocular disease that may make them blind. However, although they can not see

³ KENNEDY, John M. **Drawings from Gaia, a blind girl**. Perception, 2003, v. 32, p. 321-340.

the world on the whole, they still have some residual sight that can be used to a great extent.

When we began our work, these children were completely unmotivated, not self-reliant, with low self-esteem and disturbed relationships, because of the gradual vision loss, the lack of possibilities and high-cost eye treatment.

Our work was based on the Monart method, from Mona Brookes⁴.

The Monart method uses the '*alphabet of shapes*' which consists of five basic shape elements. Any element that is drawn can simply be analyzed on terms of how those five elements of shape were combined. That way, we can demonstrate how to see those shapes, but the person may interpret each detail as he/she pleases. Hence, we can make real representations, and each drawing will be creatively different.

We did many exercises using all those possible matches, which helped our students understand that two people can work with the same instructions and will obtain completely different results. It gave them courage to enjoy differences and learn that drawing does not necessarily mean depicting something exactly the way it is, like photography. They learned the value of their own work and became confident, independent and creative.

After working in our studio, those pupils became more interested and better observers of the world. Their school development was fostered, and they are much happier and less aggressive now.

For the group of blind children, as well as for those with low vision, we tried to create a peaceful environment. Before every drawing session, we used to make body consciousness exercises, so we were able to become more attentive and pleased on our drawing sessions. Identifying their daily tensions and relaxing their minds, body and eyes were very important initial steps. By always listening to instrumental classical music, and adding all the previous cares, those children were able to reach a better state of mind, tranquility and concentration.

⁴ BROOKES, Mona. **Drawing with children**: a creative method for adult beginners, too. New York, Tarcher Penguin, 1996.

CONCLUSION

Our experiences on the studio have proved our previous beliefs are correct. Art has the ability to stimulate better communication with society and with the world we live in, enabling sighted people to better understand the universe of the visually impaired, allowing them to interact more effectively and actively.

When we give them the opportunity to practice and understand art, we enrich their world and offer them better spatial organization, and consequently, improve their learning process, favoring their socialization within the sighted world.

Art has given our group the opportunity to elaborate our inward lives, re-signify our knowledge and build new forms of communication with the sighted world, as well as have a better understanding of the visual world.

Our studio sessions became an enriching two-way path. Both the sighted and the visually impaired worked hand in hand, sharing their own experiences, thinking about themselves and researching. Drawing and artistic practicing bridged the gap of social limitations and that process helped us exchange ideas, images, world visions and knowledge of ourselves and of other people.

We are convinced that art therapists should privilege the construction of the self within the world, as an acting member of society and nature. With this in mind, we developed studio sessions were the opportunity to overcome challenges creatively was permanent, developing on those children better learning strategies on every level of life.

When our children discovered their creative capabilities, they became surprised with their hidden capacities. The concrete experience of the artistic practicing, of giving “wings” to their inward imagination, of putting one Idea

forward, offered to these individuals the possibility to symbolically represent something that was really precious to them. That way, our sessions became an expressive, challenging environment, allowing profound personal assessment processes to occur.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

ALESSANDRINI, Cristina Dias. **Oficina criativa e psicopedagogia**. São Paulo, Casa do Psicólogo, 1996.

ARNHEIM, Rudolf. **Arte e percepção visual: uma psicologia da visão criadora**. Nova Edição. São Paulo, EDUSP. 1980.

BROOKES, Mona. **Drawing with children: a creative method for adult beginners, too**. New York, Tarcher Penguin, 1996.

CIORNAI, Selma (org). **Percursos em arteterapia: arteterapia gestáltica, arte me psicoterapia, supervisão em arteterapia**. São Paulo. Summus, 2004.

KENNEDY, John M. **Drawing and the blind: pictures to touch**. Yale Universitypress New Haven and London: 1993.

_____. **Drawings from Gaia, a blind girl**. Perception, 2003, volume 32.

_____. **Lo tangible y lo visible en los dibujos que realizan las personas ciegas**. Integración, 2005, volumen 44.

LOWENFELD, Berthold. **Our blind children: growing and learning with them**. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1956.

OSTROWER, Fayga. Materialidade e imaginação criativa. In: **Criatividade e Processos de Criação**. Petrópolis,. Vozes, 1989.

_____. **Universos da Arte**. Rio de Janeiro, Campus –, 1983.

SOLER, Miquel-Albert. **Didáctica multissensorial de las ciencias: un nuevo método para alumnos ciegos, deficientes visuales, y también sin problema de visión**. Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica, 1999.

STERN, Arno. **Comprensión del arte infantil**. Buenos Aires, Kapelusz, 1962.

URRUTIGARAY, Maria Cristina. **Arteterapia: a transformação pessoal pelas imagens**. 3ª edição. Rio de Janeiro. Wak, 2006.