

Reflections of Collegiate School by Katie Favell

Looking back over the 10 weeks that I attended Collegiate School as an Artist Educator, I noticed a pattern. Due to limited mobility I walk with a cane. The curiosity that the children I worked with had about the cane and why I used it was interesting. It led to all sorts of similar discussions about differences in people. What makes us unique and special also makes us different from others. We are all similar, but not quite the same. To see a 3 year old grapple with this concept was such a wonderful learning opportunity for both them and me. It was only recently that I became disabled, and talking with them helped me accept my disability more and share my experience with them.

It started with my first session with the preschool group. The children are just starting to be expressive and ask all the right questions to help foster understanding and growth. As I walked in holding my bag of supplies and my cane in the opposite hand, immediately I began attracting attention. Children came up to me and began trying to figure out who I was and what the stick in my hand was. A few of them even tried to touch it. I had to gently discourage them from touching it, as I didn't want to drop it. It is hard for me to retrieve from the ground and I didn't want them to think it was a play thing.

Sitting down at the table, the children began to gather around and get eager to participate with the art activity that I had brought. Still the interest remained as to what my cane was. I had several "what's that?" questions while pointing at my cane. I initially started off by saying, "that is my cane, I need it to walk." But more questions of "why?" began. My answer was "My legs don't work as well as yours, so I need this to help me." They accepted the answer and moved on to the activity.

As we began to wrap up the art, one girl went to my cane to try and touch it. I had to remind her "please don't touch it, it's not a toy. I need it to help me walk." An ECE overheard and said "it belongs to

teacher. Just like you don't touch my iPad, you don't touch her cane." This clearly got through to her and that was the end of the interaction.

Each visit to the pre-school classroom brought a round of fresh "what's that?" questions. Each time I began to answer the same way. "I need this to walk, my legs don't work as well as yours." A few had to be reminded that it was not a toy and not to touch it without permission.

Eventually my last lesson with them, I had an activity of creating snowflakes with the children. Again, the round of "what's that?" questions started. However this time, I paused. I began to ask my own questions. "Do you know why snowflakes are special?" A few children shook their heads no. "It's because each snowflake is different. No two are the exact same. My legs don't work as good as yours. I need this cane to walk. My eyes don't work as good as yours so I wear glasses." I paused to see what the children would say or do. A few were wrapped up in creating art, but a few were paying attention to what I was saying. One child said "My Dad wears glasses." I said "yes! That makes your Dad different than you. What makes you different?" The young boy pulled at his sweater and said "I have a grey shirt." "Yes!" I said, "that makes you different than me. I am wearing blue." Quickly more children chimed in and wanted to tell me how they were different too. One child said "I am wearing pink." Another said, "I have boots on!" I answered each one that yes, that made you different. "What about your hair?" I pointed to his brown hair. "I'm blonde. I have different hair colour." I really wanted the children to understand that differences were not just about what we are wearing but about things that we cannot change or are born with. "I have blonde hair too." Said a girl to my right. "So we are the same?" I asked. She nodded. "What about my eyes? I wear glasses, you don't. Are we still the same?" She paused and thought for a moment. "Yes." was the answer. I then brought her attention to the snowflakes we were making. I showed her my snowflake and said, "I made this snowflake. It started off just like yours, but I made it different. No snowflakes are exactly the same. Just like people, we are all different but the same underneath." Several children nodded and a few "yeah" came from them. I paused

myself and reflected on this lesson. I hope they understood that even though we are all different, the differences don't make us lesser.

Doing my daily documentation, I touched briefly upon this interaction. But it was in the hours and days that followed that I absorbed my lesson myself. Coming to terms with my disability has not been easy. I still forget that I have limitations on my movement and still see my cane as a reminder of my limitations. Trying to teach the children that my cane doesn't make me any less capable, or different in a bad way. It is just something I use to help me walk, just like I use glasses. And that makes me unique, just like the little boy's brown hair and grey shirt.

Accessability and inclusion is a huge part of what makes Arts for All special. Art is for everyone. Including someone who may use a cane, or glasses, or a wheelchair, or prosthetics, or even their fingertips to help them "see". I am a firm believer in the motto, 'You can't be, what you can't see.' Showing the children, someone who has a disability being an educator, artist, and person, means that when they meet another individual with a visible disability they may have a better understanding of what that means. It means they are different, but no less capable than themselves.

