

The Special in Special Needs | Elise May

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Two weeks ago, magic happened. The warm-up was a book filled with animal sounds and repeated text. John (not his real name) loved making sounds. The main book involved animals with attitudes and was fun to act out. Afterwards, I allowed each participant to choose a simple, eight-page paperback about a farm animal. They had time to read it with their buddy (or have their buddy read it to them.) Then they had to share with the group. They could read the book aloud, act out the book, share a fact they learned or tell a story about that animal. When it was John's turn, I saw his fingers go to the words on the page and his mouth start to move. He started to read the book. He was very quiet and his articulation was difficult to understand but it was clear that he was reading the words aloud. It was also clear by the silence in the room that this moment was not going to be missed by anyone. You could hear a pin drop.

The first time I met John, he was brought into my Creative Readers program kicking and screaming, making a lot of incomprehensible noises. I thought back to the first time I walked into a self-contained classroom ready to do an interactive theater program. The classroom teacher said to me, "Don't expect too much." His tone stopped me dead in my tracks. For years, I have seen children with special needs thrive when they have a multi-sensory theatrical experience. But here was John, and I had eleven other participants with physical, intellectual or emotional challenges and their high school buddies waiting to start. How was I going to do this?

John was born at 24 weeks and suffers from ataxic cerebral palsy, which makes him non-verbal, as well as having significant developmental delays. Add ADHD to the mix and John, then age 8, could be challenging. I was told he used an iPad to communicate. Initially, though, I did not see a child who wanted to communicate; I saw a child who wanted his way and would kick, scream and thrash until he got it. After a rest, John resumed his screaming and was brought back to his parents waiting outside the room. It felt like an eternity, but John had only been in the class for five minutes!

To support John in becoming more a part of our group we (John's parents, SEPTA administrator, behaviorist and me) devised a plan to help John transition into this new social environment. We used a timed reward process to gently break John in to the format of the class. Each week, John would enter the room and try to leave but eventually his staying power lengthened. I quickly saw his initial distress about a foreign situation had changed into a game. That I could work with. I decided to incorporate theater games and warm ups which I could use to engage John. It seemed that he understood everything and that most of his frustration was based in his body's inability to perform the way he wanted it to. The effort it took on his part to try to communicate was exhausting, even with his iPad.

It became apparent that John really liked books. Multiple copies of our two book selections per session were always set up across the stage for easy access. John would go right for them, initially knocking them over. Then he started taking them and turning through the pages, book after book.



By the end of six sessions, John's initial difficulties seemed to turn into complacency and he could stay in the room for the full class hour. With the help of his amazing high school buddies, he would mimic, move and participate in the class enactment of the book. Occasionally, he would still vie for attention and head for the door. Rarely, he'd use his iPad to contribute vocally even though we would give him plenty of time to do so and his buddies were well instructed and able to help. I felt he must be so frustrated. I wanted our sessions to offer him an alternate way to communicate. His parents shared that he couldn't wait to come each week. I basically thought he tolerated us. And that is how it had been, every Saturday morning for the past two years. Until two weeks ago.

As we listened to John read aloud for the first time other children in the class who have vocal or physical behaviors seemed to settle and focus, perhaps knowing this was a breakout moment. John read the entire book out loud. Everyone applauded. It felt like time stopped. Maybe I'm just romanticizing it, but that is truly how it felt. It took over two years for John to have his magical moment in Creative Readers. I was so grateful to be witness to it. He is truly special.

We have all witnessed moments of discovery in our students. That special moment when something connects, a light illuminates and magic happens. Sometimes that moment occurs in a single session; sometimes its years in the making.

Afterword: Creative Readers is a truly collaborative program. It could not be done without support from Ann Marie Fitzpatrick (SEPTA,) Sheila Bluni (Behavior Support) and the Port Washington Public Library and our amazing high school volunteers.