ArtAbility 2014: Evaluating the Program’s Overall Impact on Participants with ASD and Teen Mentors

Executive Summary

Purpose. The purpose of this report was to evaluate the overall impact of the 2014 ArtAbility program on participants with ASD and teen mentors. The ArtAbility program represents a collaboration among the Glen Echo Park Partnership, Imagination Stage, Ivymount School and Programs, and the Puppet Company; and was made possible by a TeamUp grant from the Jim and Carol Trawick Foundation. ArtAbility, now in its second year, was designed to serve middle school students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), by providing them with a wide range of artistic opportunities (including puppetry, drama, music, movement, and the visual arts). An equally important component of the project was using hands-on arts participation to develop vital life-long learning skills such as collaboration/cooperation, communication and social interaction, flexibility, self-advocacy, emotion regulation, and creative problem solving.

Overview. In summary, outcomes for the ArtAbility program were very positive. Observational data, while inconsistent across focus participants, nevertheless provided evidence that by the end of the program, focus participants engaged in higher levels of verbal interaction. These data did not, however, support the notion that focus participants engaged in higher levels of non-verbal interaction, or in higher levels of peer-directed verbal interaction by the end of the program. In terms of teaching artist surveys/interviews, it appeared that the program resulted in greater overall levels of self-advocacy, communication/interaction, and empathy. Although some focus participants demonstrated greater growth than others, these patterns of growth were for the most part born out across participants. Online parent surveys, designed to measure generalization of ArtAbility learning to home and community contexts indicated significant growth in students’ spontaneous artistic expression, and modest growth in a few key areas, namely: communication/interaction, self-confidence, flexibility and empathy. The parent focus group confirmed many of these findings. Finally, the teen mentor surveys indicated that mentors learned a lot about ASD and how to support individuals with autism as a result of their ArtAbility mentoring experiences. Overall satisfaction with the program was high, with almost all parents reporting being “very satisfied.” Mentors were also satisfied with the training they received.

Participants. In 2014, ArtAbility served 20 Montgomery County middle school students with ASD. In addition to serving students with ASD, nine high school students were selected to participate in the ArtAbility program as teen mentors.

Data Collection and Analysis. Data were collected via observation of five randomly selected focus students, teaching artist surveys/interviews, a parent focus group, an online parent survey, and an online teen mentor survey.

Observations of Focus Participants. On average, the number of verbal interactions per hour almost doubled from 46.3 at baseline to 76.4 by the end of the program, although the average number of non-verbal interactions actually went down from 28.7 to 12.4. Nevertheless, a positive trend was maintained when calculating the average number of interactions overall which grew from 75 at baseline to 88.8 at the end of the program. The number of peer-directed interactions went up for one student, but down for three others.

Feedback from Teaching Artists. Teaching artists were asked to rate focus participants’ skills across a number of domains using a 5 point Likert-type scale, where 4 = excellent, 3 = good, 2 = average, 1 = poor, and 0 = very poor. Feedback from teaching artists indicated that focus participants demonstrated the most significant growth in self advocacy (increasing from an average of 2.2 to 3.2) and communication (increasing from an average of 2.4 to 3.4) (see Table 3). Focus participants demonstrated more modest growth in other areas such as empathy,
engagement, self-confidence, and creative process. They demonstrated the least growth in flexibility and emotion regulation. Typical comments included:

- “He was engaging in a deeper way by the end [of the program] in activities that weren’t necessarily his favorites.”
- “He improved in his willingness to try things that made him nervous, to try things that he wouldn’t be good at. In the beginning we were seeing more, ‘No, I don’t want to do that’ … at the end it was more, ‘How can you help me to accomplish this?’
- “I saw him reaching out to some adults at times, just for physical contact. I didn’t see that at all last year … He’d hug or lay in your lap, this was really new for him … his desire to be closer to us, to be more a part of the group and community that was being created.”
- “He and another boy had an incredibly close bond. They read books together, were constantly together. In the beginning, I saw him initiating with specific kids in small moments, but this developing a really deep connection was new to him and happened over the course of the program.”
- “At the beginning, there were activities he’d opt out of. Towards the end, he didn’t ever ask to opt out. He would ask for help, or extra time to think about it, but would always … do it. That ability to handle his nervousness definitely improved for him.”

**Parent Focus Group.** All five parents felt that the program met or exceeded their hopes and expectations. Parents mentioned how excited their children were about attending the program, and how much they enjoyed reconnecting with old friends, including favorite teachers and mentors. Parents had the most to say about the outcomes they observed as a result of their child’s participation in the ArtAbility program. Most commonly, parents mentioned increased spontaneous artistic expression (including drawing, photography, puppetry, and building), greater self-confidence/self-assurance, and improved social initiation.

**Online Parent Survey.** Out of 15 responding parents, 13 noticed an increase in their children’s spontaneous artistic expression after participating in the ArtAbility program. Parents were also asked whether they noticed generalization of a range of skills for which ArtAbility provided indirect support. Although there was no dramatic growth for any of these skills, parents reported noticing modest growth in the following areas: communication and interaction, self-confidence, flexibility, and empathy. Parents did not report any growth in self-advocacy or emotion regulation. Nor did parents report regression in any skill areas. Typical comments included:

- “We have noticed an increase in puppetry. He uses the puppet he made during ArtAbility, and is walking around with it on his hand, acting out skits.”
- “Our son’s largest area of growth this year was in engaging his peers. He wasn’t exactly the ‘alpha’ child, but I could see him playing more of a leadership role this year, with some of the new kids especially.”
- “Because the participants at ArtAbility have varying needs, it has really helped him see everyone has strengths and challenges. It has helped him see everyone with an open mind and acceptance.”
- “Being with children with more severe disabilities than him has definitely provided our son with perspective about his own condition, and improved his level of patience towards ‘unusual’ people.”
- “He seemed to walk taller [at the end of the program]. I think he really got a lot out of being a big fish in a little pond – he enjoyed being on stage.”
- “Our son feels like a rock star at ArtAbility. He loves everything about it.”

Parents rated their overall satisfaction with the ArtAbility program using a five point Likert-type scale. Satisfaction levels were incredibly high, with 12 parents reporting that they were “very satisfied,” and the remaining three that they were “satisfied.”

**Online Teen Mentor Surveys.** All six teen mentors reported that their perceptions of individuals with ASD, and their knowledge of autism had changed significantly since participating in ArtAbility. They also all reported an increase in skills for supporting students with ASD. Some of the things that they learned included how to help students self-regulate, communicate more effectively, and transition successfully from one activity to another. In terms of lessons learned, mentors reported learning patience and self-confidence. Two noted that their experiences as teen mentors had caused them to consider a career in special education. All six responding teen mentors reported that they received adequate training and support prior to the ArtAbility program.