



How we came to be: a note from the founder

In 2013, I was sleeping over at my sister's house after having spent the day playing with her youngest daughter- my beautiful niece, Lauren. In the middle of the night, I woke up and found myself thinking about the work I had been doing that week, both as both a speech-language pathologist at a private clinic, and as a drama teacher at the National Institute Of Dramatic Art (NIDA's) open program. I loved my speech therapy work but found myself feeling at a loss when parents asked me to work specifically on social skills, simply because the context for doing so didn't feel ideal. How does one adult teach one child how to form meaningful relationships with other children in the limited confines of a speech clinic? Is it by talking about social interactions, or circling images of smiley vs. sad faces? No... my drama students were the ones learning these skills, without even knowing it! I woke up in the middle of the night with an image: a drama class where neurotypical students from my NIDA classes could play and connect with the children from my speech clinic. I thought about how unexposed the children in my drama class were to a more diverse range of people, and about how many of the children from my speech clinic would probably love drama and benefit greatly from it! I was moved by this vision and began brainstorming activities that would be fun and successful for both groups of children.

How would I need to adjust the drama classes I was teaching in order for them to work for a more diverse group of students? First of all, class sizes would need to be smaller so that each student could get the attention they needed. Secondly, the pace would need to consider every student's ability to follow instructions, and there would need to be space to explore different ways of guiding activities. Play and positive reinforcement would need to be a focus, and changing perspectives around the universal expectations of what a student should and shouldn't be able to do, in the time frame and instructional style that is most common, would need to be challenged. For example, a simple instruction such as "o.k everybody, put your bags away, take your shoes off, and come and sit in a circle", would possibly only need to be said once for a class with only neurotypical students. It's not that neurodiverse students wouldn't be able to do all those things, they may just need the three-part instruction broken down, repeated more than once, or maybe they need the option of being able to stand near the circle rather than sitting as a direct part of it. I wanted to create a drama class where all students felt successful, and so these considerations were important.

Another factor I considered was the importance of process rather than product-based work. Often, when workshops are solely focused on the creation of a final performance, this creates a lot of pressure for both teachers and students, and learning opportunities can be lost along the way. The process of playing a simple drama game can be an extremely rich learning opportunity, if the time is taken to approach it as such. I will share an example from a recent workshop, that I hope will demonstrate my thoughts on this approach. In the game *Captain's Coming*, where students follow directions as though they are sailors on a ship: running from one side of the room to the other, 'scrubbing the deck', 'climbing the rigging' etc., one of our students fell over (without hurting themselves). The other children were so

involved in the game that they either didn't notice this fall, or if they did, didn't tend to him at all. I saw this as a great opportunity to talk about 'what a good friend would do', which is vocabulary that we often use during class.

I started by acknowledging what the child who had fallen over felt, when no one had checked in with him around how he was feeling- to which he responded, 'sad'. So I asked the others, 'what would a good friend do if their friend had fallen over and was feeling sad?' We proceeded to problem solve as a team what a good choice here would be, and decided that going to them and asking if they are o.k would be a good move. As simple as this seems, there was a conscious choice made to spend the time talking about feelings, friendships and engaging in group problem solving- which sprung from a response to something that actually happened in the room (the child falling over). This is a good example of our organic approach to building social skills. We respond to what's happening in the room and meet our students where they're at, with the arts as our framework for exploration. To me, drama is an exploration of humanity- and so, what better framework could there be for navigating these lessons but in a drama class?!

In 2013, after writing down some ideas about what a great lesson plan could look like, I drifted back to sleep with an excited smile on my face, knowing that I was now dedicated to turning this midnight spark of mind and heart into a reality. I was now determined to create a program for neurodiverse students that taught self-awareness and social skills through drama. With the support of those closest to me, that spark lit a fire, which became Purple Carrots Studio. Since then I have incorporated my learning from further education in creative arts therapy and child centered play therapy into the program, and will forevermore be open to allowing the program to develop organically and authentically.



Silvina D'Alessandro, Founder & Director

