



# A Fishy Innovation From Hong Kong

Anuradha Naidu

I stood at the doorway and watched as the little group of kindergarteners filed into the art class. They were filled with anticipation. Roselyn, my young colleague, always set up her art session with a little takeaway for every type of learner. As I watched her work with the children I was filled with awe. Making your own choice, she said, was important. Every child is creative, and has his or her unique style. Children have different views, some want action and like to work in threes and fours. They are happiest in a group. Some want to gain mastery over the brush and prefer to work alone and a few want to be free to explore.

Roselyn was always willing to take a child with special needs in her Kindergarten class. She felt that teaching children to be kind and caring is the way to lay the foundation for life. Roselyn was a creative teacher and I loved collaborating with her. We always looked for solutions together and she would readily try out new strategies and give me feedback a couple of weeks later. Soon we understood each other well, and prepared in advance for new experiences that would include John. John was on the Autism Spectrum<sup>1</sup> and would sidle his way out of sessions when everybody else was singing, playing, or hanging out together happily.

The art class had begun. The emotional involvement was intense, especially since a fish<sup>2</sup> was the focus that day. John walked in, long after the others had settled in. He was unsure of what to make of the

painting session. Roselyn had bought a fresh pomfret from the Hong Kong wet market that morning. There was a faint fishy smell in the air that mingled with the odour of poster paint. Her plan was to bring the sea world alive, through this rather unusual painting project. Each child had the opportunity to paint the fish with colour and rub her art paper on it to capture the pattern of the scales. John watched hesitantly. I held my breath wondering how this session would turn out with a child with myriad sensory issues. Will he touch the paints and the fish? Will the smell upset him? Would he allow the teacher to assist him? Would he sit with the others as they waited for their turn? Was there going to be a huge meltdown given the unfamiliarity of the fishy situation?

My heart was beating hard. John and I had worked for many months, one to one, to overcome the fear of new textures and sounds. This was our big moment. Roselyn went on with her lesson. In clear, precise steps she demonstrated how to handle the fish, and the paints. She invited each child to come forward to take a turn. The children went about their creative work and settled in groups or individually to carry on painting their fish templates in monsoon grey and rainbow colours. There was stillness in the room. John looked on watchfully. When everyone had done, Roselyn looked at John and said:

<sup>1</sup> Autism is a neurological disorder which affects the social and emotional areas of the brain leading to challenges in communication, social relationships and imagination. It typically appears after first two to three years of age and is more common in boys. [http://www.thenationaltrust.co.in/nt/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=30&Itemid=130](http://www.thenationaltrust.co.in/nt/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=30&Itemid=130)

<sup>2</sup> Mainstream ideas for sensory play include water and sand tables, finger painting, playdoh, printing, bubbles and ice. Plastic Aprons and table cloths, and a washing machine installed at the Kindergarten, will make cleaning easy.

“Have a go!” To my utter delight, John ran forward to take it on! Yes, it was a big moment for us!

I have often asked myself what would be the best way to support a teacher in an inclusive Kindergarten classroom. Especially since I am an Early Interventionist, it always works to stay in the

shadows of the classroom and observe, emerging at the right moment to appreciate the efforts the teacher has made. The analysis comes later. Warmth and respect is the foundation for collaboration. Despite all the challenges, it works!



Pictures source:

<http://www.learning4kids.net/list-of-sensory-play-ideas/>

Until recently, **Anu** worked in Hong Kong as an Early Interventionist with children with special needs in the 0-6 age group, under the auspices of an early education centre sub-vented by the Hong Kong Government program serving the non-Chinese-speaking population. She trained as a special educator at Vidya Sagar, Chennai, 20 years ago and was introduced to the trans-disciplinary approach there. Her practice has evolved to reflect this as she constantly strives to weave together therapy, education, and alternative communication into a fun-filled process of learning for her students. She may be contacted at [anuradha.naidu@gmail.com](mailto:anuradha.naidu@gmail.com)