

Art Education: Who is educating whom?

By Beth Junor

The November 1997 issue of the specialist journal autism contained a paper entitled 'Native savant talent and acquired skill, on an attempt to evaluate the effect of professional art training on savant artistic ability'. This article is my response to that paper.

Autism is a lifelong disability, characterised by a triad of impairments (see Note 1): impairments of social interaction, impairments of language and communication, and impairments of imagination (this encompasses elaborate repetitive routines and a lack of flexibility of behaviour, rather than imagination in its commonest and widest sense).

Anyone wishing to understand what it is like to be a person with autism can refer to the written accounts of the adults with autism who have done the work of recording their experiences of the non-autistic world. One outstanding account is Donna Williams' *Autism - An Inside-Out Approach* (see Note 2). Rather than autism being like a jigsaw with one piece missing, Donna Williams tells us that, for her, it is more like 'one bucket with several different jigsaws in it, all jumbled together and all missing a few pieces each but with a few extra pieces that didn't belong to any of these jigsaws'.

Most people with autism also have some degree of cognitive impairment, or learning disability, but not all. It is worth quoting Lorna Wing at some length here:

Perhaps one in 10 individuals with autistic spectrum disorders have certain specific skills in which they excel, even in comparison with the normal population. Sometimes the people concerned are of more or less average ability in other areas but there are some individuals who have severe learning difficulties apart from their isolated skills.

The special abilities that have been reported include playing a musical instrument or even composing music; performing lengthy numerical calculations such as extracting square roots from huge numbers; identifying the days of the week on which any date fell or will fall in a wide span of years; reading fluently at a very young age though comprehension of the text is poor; memorizing huge quantities of facts about favourite subjects; assembling constructional toys or mechanical or electrical apparatus; working with computers. Some, like Stephen Wiltshire, have remarkable ability with regard to drawing. The skills depend upon visuo-spatial abilities and/or rote memory. For example, those who draw well remember and reproduce things they have seen. They may, like Nadia when she was young, be able to rotate mentally something they have seen and draw it from another point

of view. It is remarkable that the gifted artists with autistic disorders draw accurately in perspective from a very young age, unlike other young children who go through many stages before grasping the rules of perspective. Sometimes they will draw only in one medium. Nadia drew with a blue ball-point pen, or on steam on a window. With crayons, for example, her drawings were childish. These skills tend to become a focus for the repetitive routines. Thus the drawings are of the same subjects, the music is played repetitively, the calendar calculators want to be fed dates all the time.

Some of those with special skills at some time in childhood or adult life cease using them. The reason for this is unknown, nor is it clear whether the skills are lost or just no longer used. They are rarely taken up again despite any amount of encouragement. Nadia stopped her remarkable drawings when her speech developed but there is no general evidence that speech and visuo-spatial skills are incompatible. Stephen Wiltshire is able to speak as well as to draw (see Note 3).

Stephen Wiltshire, a very gifted intuitive artist, was born in 1974. His first book, ***Drawings***, was published when he was just 13 years old. In all his books, his special interest in buildings and cars shines through. Although it would appear that Stephen has a visual memory phenomenal in its rapid absorption and duration (he can draw a building he's briefly glimpsed at many years later), his drawings are *not* just photographic reproductions of what he sees. The American neurologist Oliver Sacks asked Stephen if he would draw his house for him, and recorded something of Stephen's method for us:

Stephen bestowed a brief, indifferent glance at my house - there hardly seemed to be any act of attention - glanced then at the rest of the road, the sea, then asked to come in.....Stephen started at one edge of the paper (I had a feeling he might have started anywhere at all), and steadily moved across it - as if transcribing some tenacious inner image or visualization. It was not quite like 'ordinary' drawing, but as if he had a camera lucida in his head which every so often he would pause over and consult.....Stephen drew my house very quickly.....the feel of the little house is beautifully got. It is very accurate in some ways, but takes all sorts of liberties in other ways - quite unlike a photograph.....Stephen sees all the details (and sometimes invents details) - but only puts in what serves the process of Art; his prodigious powers of perception and memory do not overwhelm him, but provide, rather, the spring board from which his creativity leaps (see Note 4).

This, then, is the gifted young artist who is the subject of the **autism** article (see Note 5). The authors, Linda Pring & Beate Hermelin with Michael Buhler & Iain Walker, refer to 'idiots savants' within the population of 'people with a mental handicap', [this term is still in common usage in the US] and at the outset state, 'most savants are autistic, a developmental disorder which is characterised by

interpersonal, language and cognitive impairments. Clearly there is a need to explain the association between autism and savant ability'.

The authors acknowledge that Margaret Hewson, Stephen's 'friend, guardian and agenthas played an important role in his mental and artistic development' and also that she 'has been decisive in providing him with the opportunity to begin professional art training'.

'The opportunity to begin professional art training' - this is the point at which I would like to put the process of training gifted intuitive artists in a wider context. Let's put this training process in an *ethical* context, in the context of issues of *communication and language*, and in the context of *art history*. These three contexts are inseparable.

In an *ethical* context the question would be, 'What would make it right - or wrong - to send an intuitive artist to art college?' Ethics, of course, would not look at whether this is right or wrong, this being a matter of opinion, but at *what* would make it right, or what would make it wrong. Are there any guiding principles that should be applied in each case?

Surely the informed consent (see Note 6) of the artist would be a primary consideration. It would clearly be quite wrong to send an intuitive artist to art college against his will, and just as wrong, I would argue, without his informed consent. And where learning disabilities and/or autism are concerned, this always leads us to the issue of *communication*. It is now well established that people with learning disabilities and/or autism often respond to questions in ways they perceive as being pleasing to the questioner (see Note 7). Much work has been done recently (some of the best of it in Scotland) (see Note 8) in the area of presenting choices to people with learning disabilities in ways that are non-directive. I wonder how the option of professional art training was presented to Stephen Wiltshire. Was an independent communication specialist, preferably one with expertise in the field of autism consulted? Or, better yet, present and participating in the presentation of the options available?

Then there is the consideration of *art history*, particularly knowledge of the body of art work known variously as 'Outsider Art', 'Art Brut', or, as here in Scotland, 'Art Extraordinary'. This knowledge should be presented as part of the process of obtaining informed consent (see Note 9). It may be argued that it would be mistaken to take a gifted intuitive artist away from the community and history of artists to which he naturally belongs, and encourage movement to another community (here, mainstream) which is in all other respects alien to him. Such a proposed move should certainly be explicitly explained. Some people would debate whether Stephen Wiltshire's art fits the criteria of one or more of the above categories, but whichever category his art would end up in, in the wee hours of the morning, it is certain that he belongs to a very long tradition of

untrained artists whose work, *untouched by notions of tone, conventional perspective, shading, etc., is valued by society*. He had, after all, produced several books, sold his work, and travelled extensively in connection with his art before going to art college.

Stephen Wiltshire did go to art college, where 'his teachers felt from the start that they could help Stephen to refine his input analysis of visual information and to provide him with the formal and technical ability to realise his artistic intentions'. The illustrations of this refinement in the *autism* article show how much Stephen moved away from the unique, individualistic line drawings to a style incorporating shading and traditional perspective that can be produced by any art student.

In a society where outsider artists and their work are respected and valued, the thought of offering 'the opportunity to begin professional art training' would not even be contemplated for long. I feel that we are at risk of losing much, if we impose conventional views of 'good drawing', 'good painting', 'good sculpting' onto the untrained work of clearly highly gifted intuitive artists.

If an intuitive artist such as Stephen Wiltshire could ask me, 'Would you like the opportunity to see the world through my eyes, just for one day?' I would leap at the chance. I like to think that his art is communication, and that this is the offer it presents. The opportunities for learning lie with us.

I believe that, where outsider artists are concerned, it is best to 'leave well enough alone'. Their work should be valued for its uniqueness, and for the very precious insights into minds organised in ways different from our own it affords. I look at the work of these very gifted artists and not only marvel at what is sometimes an island of ability and motivation, but try to see that art as offering an insight into how the artist perceives the world; their work is communication, a bridge between our two worlds. It is not for us to say, 'build a better bridge!' ~ rather, we should learn how to tread across the existing bridges more lightly.

NOTES

1. see Lorna Wing, *The Autistic Spectrum* (London: Constable, 1996)
2. Donna Williams is herself a painter, sculptor and composer.
3. Lorna Wing, *ibid*, pp. 55-56 I like the way in which Lorna Wing refers to 'gifted artists with autistic disorders' with these people described as gifted artists first, and as people with autistic disorders second.

4. Oliver Sacks' Foreword, pp. 6-7, to *Cities*, Stephen Wiltshire (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1989)

5. *autism*, Vol. 1 Number 2 1997, SAGE Publications in association with The National Autistic Society, pp. 199-214

6. Grisso (1986) described three things needed for informed consent: the person must be **knowing**, i.e. understand the facts relevant to the decision to be made. Secondly the person must be **intelligent**, i.e. have the ability to weigh the risks and benefits of the proposed procedure and of any alternative procedure. Also, the person's decision must be **voluntary**, defined as free from coercion or other forms of undue influence.

7. Darley and Fazio (1980) and Jussim (1986). Jussim's work seems particularly applicable here; interactions are coloured by beliefs which are derived from stereotypes about a group to which the other individual belongs. The target person tends to react to the differential treatment in ways that confirm the initial beliefs.

8. for example, *TALKING MATS A Low-tech Framework to help People with Severe Communication Difficulties Express their Views*, developed by Joan Murphy, University of Stirling.

References and Further Reading

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Morris, Niederbuhl and Mahr (1993). 'Determining the Capability of Individuals With Mental Retardation to Give Informed Consent', *American Journal on Mental Retardation*, Vol. 98, No.2, 263-272.

Murphy, Joan, *Talking Mats - A Low-tech Framework to help People with Severe Communication Difficulties Express their Views*. To order copies of the package

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Pring & Hermelin with Buhler & Walker (1997), (see Note 1) 'Native savant talent and acquired skill', *autism*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 199-214.

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