

Dog Days

Karen Rosenburg

Fridays are a special day in my artroom. It is the day my dog, Pax, comes to school with me. Thanks to the presence of this five-year-old chocolate lab, I have witnessed amazing transformations in student artwork, behavior, and inclusion, specifically in students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Pax is my son's autism service dog. He is trained to help my son go places that are overwhelming for him, though he does not need to bring Pax to school. Pax went through two years of training with a special needs service provider before he came to our family.

Soon after receiving Pax, I started a Master's in Art Education with an Emphasis in Special Populations at Moore College of Art & Design.

For my thesis, I decided to study the effect Pax had on the art classroom, specifically on students with ASD.

In My Artroom

I studied the work of two students with ASD and noticed some significant changes after Pax began coming to class. The first student, MP, has some cognitive and fine motor impair-

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ment. He would randomly pick colors and make marks on paper, sometimes not even looking at what he was doing. His marks were repetitive and always



Pax-inspired artwork from student MP.

in the same place. It was difficult to get him engaged with creating art.

My second student, TG, has some cognitive impairment. TG adores art and has filled several sketchbooks, but all of his drawings are the same. His work consisted of cartoon characters that were copied from animated TV shows. His sketchbooks were full of characters that were so crowded on the page that everything overlapped and the characters were transparent and labeled with their name or something they might have said. Both students were in the same class and would sit together. They didn't try to interact with the students around them.

Student MP

Once Pax attended school with me on a daily basis, there was a big change in both students' behavior and work.

I discovered that MP adores dogs and loved having Pax in the classroom. Pax became a big motivator for MP. He went from being uninterested in art to actively participating every day. Pax would lie down next to his chair every class. If MP decided he was not going to participate, I would tell him that Pax couldn't sit with him and I would have Pax stay behind my desk. MP did not like this and would quickly get back on task.

MP also used Pax as his subject matter. I created dog-shaped stencils and taped them to paper. MP used colored pencil to go over the stencils. When he was finished, I would remove the stencil and he would see Pax's shape, which he enjoyed. He used this method several times with many types of media, each time saying, "That's Paxy Dog!" and "I did that!" when finished.

Student TG

TG was able to participate in a life drawing lesson where Pax was the model. Pax would lie in the middle of the classroom while students surrounded him with paper and drawing boards. TG said this made him feel like a "real artist." He took his time and drew many pictures of Pax that were accurate representations. For the first time, he was drawing from life and creating something that was uniquely his.

After the project was over, he asked if he could paint a picture. I gave him an easel, a palette, a smock, and a canvas to work on and told him that this is how artists paint. He was thrilled. He

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started by painting a checkered background in many colors. He then added patterns on top of each square. When the background was dry, he painted a self-portrait in green paint over the background. When I asked him why he chose green, he told me, "Because green makes me feel brave!" This was a completely original piece and the first time he was able to reflect on his choices.

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Conclusion

Both MP and TG improved socially as well. Classmates would give them positive feedback on the work they were doing and start conversations about dogs and pets, which led to conversations about their families and, eventually, their art. They learned the names of all the students in the class. They became more social every day. Pax was able to bridge the communication gap between MP and TG and the rest of the students. He aided in successful inclusion where students with special needs are made to feel a part of the class instead of just physically being in the room, so every Friday will continue to be Dog Day in the artroom! 🐾

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to find and draw before the end of the day. Parents need to participate if a student wants to find them all. Students can race ahead with their parents or meander with me for a while. Most families do a combination of the two. When they run into me, they often show me their drawings and ask if they can see mine. It's a fun, low-key approach.

The following year, I added a thirty-minute sketching lesson to the beginning of each event. Families who want to come early can meet for a few minutes to learn how to identify the simple shapes that make up animals and how to sketch those shapes quickly until they create a satisfying drawing. Through trial and error, our art events get better each year. They are now a selling point for our art program. The headmaster mentions them during every school tour. Because of their success, I was invited this year to pitch my other ideas for community art projects. My next ambition? An in-school art fair! 🐾

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