Animated Learning: Understanding Autism from the Perspective of Animation

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The use of animation in special needs education for children with autism has in recent years been a topic of interest for scholars, educators and individuals with autism alike. In this paper we explore the potential benefits of engaging children with autism in the production of their own animation films based on the results from a pilot project in a school for autistic children in Denmark in which two children of 12 and 13 years were given the opportunity to make short animation films. With only minimal support from a professional animator and a special needs educationalist, the children produced a number of short animation films, taking charge of the development of storyline and characters as well as the practical production of the films. Throughout the project, a significant development took place in both children and as well in their films. The films produced towards the end of the project demonstrating a new level of empathy and understanding of emotions, social interaction and human movement. The children were tested both before and after the project with regards to reading ability/literacy, social skills and ability to see and express stories from images. For both children, significant improvements were observed. The study indicate that using animation and involving children in the process of creating animation films hold great potential for teaching children with autism how to cope with personality traits, emotions and social interaction, as well as develop their communication skills and literacy. At the same time, we argue that not only does animation hold great potential in educational practice – it also gives teachers a new and more inclusive perspective on autism and an alternative tool to understand and appreciate the skills and potentials of these children, which are easily overlooked in traditional teaching methods.