

## *And sometimes we levitate into this ridiculous cosmic entity*

Istvan Csata interviews Sacha Armel and Stefan Neville at Māpura Studios

### Introduction

This interview conducted in June 2016 with Sacha Armel and Stefan Neville from Māpura Studios contributed to a ten-week research project I conducted during my arts therapy studies at Whitecliffe College. Māpura is an art space in Auckland, New Zealand which provides arts therapy and arts tuition for all ages with a special focus on autism and other special needs. To collect data, I visited the studios once a week with a group of six teenage students who had profound multiple disabilities (PMLD) and studied at an Auckland-based special school. All the clients were preverbal learners, used wheelchairs, and had complex medical needs. The aim of my research was to better understand how clients' quality of life can be enhanced through regular art interventions. For my inquiry, I used the concept of five well-being domains (physical, material, social, emotional well-being and development and activity), proposed by Felce, Perry, Maes and Vlaskamp (Felce, Perry, Maes, Vlaskamp as cited by Male, 2015, p.16). The two-hour sessions were led by Sacha and Stefan and supported by three teacher aides and me. The clients had plenty of freedom for self-expression within a tailor-made and repeated structure.

*Istvan Csata: So the reason I wanted to grab an opportunity to interview you is because I'm working on an assignment to have a look at how art in general, and of course art therapy, can contribute to the students' quality of life. For this, I'm using a specific questionnaire that is edited around domains and sub-domains, based on what people have researched about quality of life. But before that I really have to ask, could you say a bit about yourself? What are your credentials from your own perspective? How do you regard this group of students that you work with? How do you see yourself?*

**Stefan Neville:** At the top of the list I'm a musician and I have been since I was 16. I've been creating and performing and recording music. And I'm 41 now, so that's a long time. One of the things that come with being the sort of musician I am is that you don't make a living from it, so I always had to keep myself afloat with odd jobs and things. And one of those part-time jobs I started doing was support work for the IHC [Society of Intellectually Handicapped Children] about five or six years ago. I sort of took to it, and especially took to it in being able to do creative things with people there. And through that job I became a qualified community support worker. I did lots of training. There are all these certificates, and various things – none of which are popping into my head right now.

*IC: And you cannot really pinpoint after these training courses and years what you are? Or are you saying you are a musician who works with these special people?*

**SN:** Yeah. I was doing all that in my old job, but I was also driving people around and doing toileting, all those things – personal care. And I used to bring people here to what was then Spark, and peep in the window and fantasize about working here [laughs]. And I came and volunteered and seemed to fit in.

**Sacha Armel:** And they went, "Hold on, you do music? Oh really? Great!"

**SN:** "Come and do this!"

*IC: What about you Sacha?*

**SA:** I have a fine arts background, teaching art in high schools to make money. I think I did a year of psychotherapy. I did a couple of years of psychodrama. I did a couple of years of stuff with Suzanne, who was our director in arts therapy, which was dance and [visual] art and has got that kind of transpersonal focus. And then... this is a hundred years ago [laughter] when I was 20, 23, about then, I started working here and teaching art. I think it's the culture of this place that makes you [begin to?] fall in love with the people here. I think I fell in love with the people here and the way that they made art, and their different perceptions, and it allowed me to kind of be someone different, to think differently and use those sensing and more intuitive kind of functions. You know, someone comes up to you and goes, "What do you need? Oh I can see your eyes are lighting up. Okay, we'll do this – this colour choice or that..." That's the thing.

So it's been really cool working here. I'm not an art therapist, but I've worked with art therapists and alongside art therapists, and I think that through the

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