

# The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education:

## Exemplary Programs and Approaches

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# The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education: Exemplary Programs and Approaches Introduction

SHARON M. MALLEY, EDITOR

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and its affiliate VSA, assembled a group of 50 national leaders in arts education and special education in July 2012. Having never had this opportunity before, they represented the education fields of visual art, music, dance, theater and special education. Working within their particular fields of education, they shared a common interest, thus, they were gathered to examine how the two general fields of arts education and special education *intersect* to provide services and supports for students with disabilities in kindergarten through twelfth grades. After two days of meeting, these exemplary educators, administrators, researchers, practitioners, parents, and students with disabilities, conceived a national agenda to ensure that students with disabilities participate in rich arts and arts education experiences.

The Kennedy Center, and its affiliate VSA, recognize that the arts play a vital role in the education of students with disabilities. The arts education programs of the Kennedy Center and VSA have become models for communities across the country. We know from research and practice that rich arts experiences in pre-K through 12th grade education, for all students, whether integrated in the core curriculum or taught as separate subject areas, can lead to increased academic, social and functional skill development and knowledge (Catterall, 2009; Deasy, 2002). For students with disabilities, knowledge and skill development gained through the arts can play a crucial role in their overall success (Hillier, Greher, Poto, & Dougherty, 2012; Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, 2008).

Forum participants agreed on several areas of need in addressing arts education for students with disabilities. Overall, a broad area of need centers on adding to the body of knowledge through research, demonstration and exemplary projects, and meaningful discussions, all of which requires better means of communication and information sharing among the various professionals involved in arts education and special education. A second broad area of need involves communication with stakeholders outside of the profession of arts/special education, requiring us to maintain a well-established first line of communication

among ourselves.

This publication adds to the body of knowledge developed and documented under the auspices of Education at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and its affiliate VSA. Authors of the papers attended the 2012 Forum, and share their expertise through philosophical discussions, descriptions of exemplary university preservice programs, instructional programs, and teaching strategies. Many of them share their stories of success in the classroom, from the conviction that all students of diverse abilities can be successful through the arts.

Juliann Dorff is an Associate Lecturer of Art Education in the School of Art at Kent State University (KSU). She believes that the most powerful tool to prepare future educators of students with special needs is through direct experiences. Her preservice program at KSU, in collaboration with an intervention specialist, provides art education university students with opportunities to plan lessons, design instructional strategies, teach students with disabilities, and self-evaluate performance. Students benefit from the program through increased arts opportunities in their classrooms, leading to enhanced skill development and self-worth. Her article, "The Importance of Collaboration in Art Classrooms for Success of Students with Special Needs" describes the program, with strategies for implementing a similar preservice program.

The second article, "Teaching Urban Students with Special Needs: What We Have Learned through the Art Partners Program," provides further evidence for preservice fieldwork as an important component of teacher education. Lucy Andrus, Professor of Art Education at Buffalo State College, describes her innovative program, Art Partners, designed to prepare teachers to work in urban settings with students with special needs. She emphasizes that university students preparing to teach might need to adjust preconceived attitudes and beliefs, that every person is capable of "artistic behavior," and that there is nothing "special" about a disability. The Art Partners preservice experiences enable university students to discover the power of arts engagement in addressing issues unique to students learning in urban settings. Andrus provides strategies on three levels: (1) for starting a similar program at a university, (2) for university professors teaching preservice teachers, and (3) for the preservice teachers themselves.

For many students with disabilities, being successful in an art classroom requires

adaptations of tools, media, and techniques. In her article, “The Adaptive Art Specialist: An Integral Part of a Student’s Access to Art,” Susan Loesl describes her work in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin public schools. She explains the role and qualifications of an adaptive art specialist, provides examples of adaptations, and offers strategies for adapting tools, media, and techniques for specific experiential and learning needs. She indicates that for *all* students to engage in appropriate, meaningful, and independent art making, an adaptive art specialist can provide the expertise in adaptations necessary for full access.

Alice Wexler, Director of Art Education at State University of New York at New Paltz, suggests that special educators and arts educators working with students with disabilities adopt the philosophical approach used by art centers for adults with disabilities. In her article, “Art, Developmental Disability, and Self-Representation,” she posits that because of their focus on equanimity between teaching guides and artists, centers such as Creative Growth of Oakland, California, exemplify a method of working with individuals with disabilities that moves away from the traditional medical model and socially constructed attitudes toward disabilities. She provides a historical context for her argument and challenges the teaching profession to embrace post-modern attitudes toward disability through the arts.

In “Dance Partners: A Model of Inclusive Arts Education,” Jenny Seham describes the community dance program that she has developed in partnership with schools. Seham serves as a master teaching artist and Director of Teacher Training for Special Populations at National Dance Institute (NDI). Seham uses three school partnerships with NDI to exemplify program development and teaching strategies. In each of the partnerships, students with disabilities pair with typically developing peers while engaged in classroom dance activities. The dance partners learn from and support each other through dance, with all students, regardless of abilities, engaging fully in the group process. Seham indicates that “we should all be prepared to deliver the education that each student deserves, insisting on standards of excellence . . . for each individual . . .”

Building self-determination skills while in school leads to chances for greater success in adulthood for students with disabilities, according to Mary Adamek and Alice-Ann Darrow. In their paper, “Music Participation as a Means to Facilitate Self-Determination and Transition to Community Life for Students with Disabilities,” they provide a rationale for music educators to intentionally promote self-determination as a vital component of their work with students

with disabilities. Adamek, Professor of Music Therapy at the University of Iowa, and Darrow, Professor of Music Education and Music Therapy at Florida State University, include strategies for developing characteristics and skills, that lead to increased abilities to set goals, solve problems and make decisions.

A recurring theme of the 2012 Kennedy Center forum on Arts Education and Special Education was the need for a repository of information on all topics related, including journal articles, books, descriptions of exemplary programs, and university syllabi. In "An Attack on the Tower of Babel: Creating a National Arts/Special Education Resource Center," Beverly Levett Gerber and Lynne Horoschak advocate for the development of an easily accessible compilation of resources. To support their case, they share stories of how their professional lives were impacted by the lack of centralized information, and how they have worked to address the dearth of information. Gerber, who is Professor Emeritus of Special Education at Southern Connecticut University, shares some of her experiences and accomplishments as a doctoral student and a university professor. Horoschak, Program Manager of the MA in Art Education with an Emphasis on Special Populations at Moore College of Art and Design, tells of her work with students with disabilities as an art teacher in the inner city, followed by her creation of the graduate program.

"It is nothing short of magic." Concluding this publication is one parent's testimony of the success achieved by her son with autism through music and drama programs. Sari Hornstein's essay, "Arts Education and Inclusion," provides powerful support for full and intentional inclusion of students with disabilities in arts education programs. Hornstein is a writer on issues related to special needs and educational policy and, as she states, she has experienced the transformative power of the arts. We believe that all students should have that experience as we continue our work to foster the combined fields of arts education and special education.

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# The Importance of Collaboration in Art Classrooms for Success of Students with Special Needs

JULIANN B. DORFF

This paper addresses one university's attempt to improve teacher preparation. Kent State University's (KSU) Art Education undergraduate program includes the opportunity to model collaborative behavior and to work with intervention specialists in the specialists' classrooms, prior to student teaching. The collaborative experience provides an opportunity for preservice art educators to plan instruction and teach art lessons to students with varying abilities.

Stuart Gerber and Janet Fedorenko wrote that art teachers are "inclusion pioneers" (2006, p. 161) who welcome all students into their classrooms. In order to be successful teaching all the students in class, Gerber and Fedorenko recommended a close collaboration between the art educator, intervention specialist, and planning and support staff. As stated by Guay (2006) "Art teachers who need information or assistance should seek out peers and special education teachers willing to share their expertise and visit each other's classrooms, gather for discussion and support, and learn from each other" (p. 11). Historically, this collaboration was difficult due to scheduling issues and the lack of pre-service preparation for teaching students with special needs. As noted by Gerber and Fedorenko, "The goal is to establish this practice [of collaborative partnerships] during the training phase of an educator's career" (2006, p. 163).

## **The Collaborative Experience**

"In art class, children are often praised for the uniqueness of their work, rather than its conformity to a predetermined standard or response" (Hurwitz & Day, 2012, p. 26). As Hurwitz and Day stated, the art room is the only place where uniqueness and individuality are celebrated. In order for all students to find the art learning environment welcoming, teachers must be confident in their ability to teach all children. A positive sense of teacher efficacy directly relates to student success in the classroom (Delacruz, 1997, p. 58). Exposure to and experience with special needs students helps develop teacher efficacy in preservice teachers (Pochedley & Dorff, 2008). Responding to the inclusion of students with special needs in general education classrooms, KSU's Art Education undergraduate program included

instruction on the teaching of students with special needs into a senior level course that incorporates a teaching experience.

Students review available literature on teaching art to students with special needs and are then assigned to a classroom. These classrooms include students with a variety of special needs. The majority of textbooks on art education offer only one chapter addressing the issues of teaching special populations (for example, *Children and Their Art*, Hurwitz & Day, 2012; *Emphasis Art*, Clements & Wachowiak, 2009). It is only since the National Art Education Association's 2006 publication of *Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs through Art*, (Gerber & Guay) and its 2010 sequel, *Understanding Students with Autism through Art* (Gerber & Kellman) that comprehensive texts have been available on the subject. These two books provide pre-service art educators with practical and specific guidance in planning and implementing instruction.

To facilitate the development of confidence in preservice art educators at KSU, a collaborative relationship was established with intervention specialists at a variety of area schools. Intervention specialists are educators trained in teaching students with special needs. Through a series of meetings between university faculty and the intervention specialists, self-contained special education classrooms are selected and a schedule is developed. During these discussions it is essential that the intervention specialist is open to having the preservice educators in their class and is prepared to provide guidance to these educators during their teaching tenure. Intervention specialists have welcomed the opportunity to have specialized art instruction for their students. Often, information about the collaboration must be sent to the families of the student participants for their approval and all preservice educators are required to complete background checks to provide the schools. Preservice educators are then assigned to each classroom in teams of two. They must plan, organize and teach art lessons to their assigned students. The teaching teams provide another opportunity for collaboration - each preservice educator needs to support and provide feedback to their partner.

### **The Roles of Each Participant in the Collaboration**

For any collaboration to be successful, it is essential that each participant's role and responsibilities are clearly outlined.

**Intervention specialist and support staff.** An initial meeting is established between the intervention specialist, support personnel, and the preservice art teachers. The intervention

specialist provides information regarding:

- The needs and accommodations required for each of his/her students,
- Suggestions for classroom set up and structure,
- Classroom management techniques,
- A demonstration of available assistive technology, and
- Adaptation suggestions.

*Details matter*, so the intervention specialist is asked to be very specific with instructions.

Information included during these initial meetings has included:

- Specifics regarding individual student rituals,
- Non-verbal students' responses to stress,
- Students' personal interests, activities,
- Family members that may become catalysts for student creation.

This is a good time to review the available adaptive technologies which assist students with communication and planning the school day, as well as the tools available for use, such as adaptive scissors and easels.

During the actual teaching the intervention specialist and support personnel offer guidance and suggestions. For example, if a student requires assistance holding and controlling a paintbrush and would benefit from hand over hand support, this technique is modeled. In one instance an intervention specialist stepped in to demonstrate how to calm a student who had become agitated. The studio lesson involved working with clay and this student had a tactile sensitivity. The intervention specialist stepped in and explained to the student that, after working with the clay, he would be able to wash his hands. Knowing that hand washing was a step in the process calmed the student and provided a centering calm for him to continue. Seeing firsthand the calm, measured approach of the intervention specialist in a potentially stressful situation is invaluable to a pre-service teacher. Modeled behavior reinforces "book learning." It puts theory into practice.

At the end of each lesson, time is spent debriefing with the intervention specialist and the pre-service teaching team. Suggestions are made to improve teaching practice and compliments are paid for successful teaching moments, an important reinforcement. The timing of this discussion is crucial. The experiences are fresh and accessible immediately after the teaching experience. With the passage of time details can be lost and subtle but

profoundly significant occurrences can be overlooked. This coaching is a truly vital component of the experience. Reflecting on her debriefing with the intervention specialist one preservice educator wrote:

In our review session with Mrs. P., we discussed strategies to help maintain the students' interest and provide recognizable structure to the lesson. She suggested using the symbol system, and work trays. She also suggested a visual timer and breaking activities to smaller sessions. I appreciate that she values our input and concerns (personal communication, 2006).

**University faculty.** The university faculty provides guidance for lesson planning, adaptation strategies and classroom engagement activities. They also provide observational feedback on the student teaching itself. During in-class sessions of the university course, students discuss concepts presented in the reading material. This classroom experience begins preparing them for the teaching experience. Discussions address adaptive tools and the creation of methods that allow students with special needs full participation in the art lessons.

Lesson plans are prepared with a focus on an engaging "big idea" that is presented through artworks selected by the preservice educator. Big ideas are broad, important human issues of personal interest that push student art making beyond simple technical skills and media manipulation and towards the creation of works of personal meaning and significance (Walker, 2001).

During the teaching experience, a faculty member observes the preservice art educators and record notes highlighting the events of the teaching day. Again, these notes are reviewed immediately after the lesson, while the experience is still clear in the minds of all participants. A copy of the observation notes is provided to the preservice educator to keep for reference. In addition, the faculty observer will demonstrate techniques to guide the preservice educator. In one reflection report a pre-service educator noted,

I received a lot of help from Mrs. Dorff. I watched her work with the students and learned a lot about how to work with Carol. This particular student needs hand over hand assistance. I tried to tell her verbally how to roll out the clay, but she learns better when you actually take her hands and place them on the roller and show her the amount of pressure she needs to roll out the slab of clay (personal communication, 2006).

Upon return to the university classroom, the teaching experience is discussed with the entire pre-service class. Each preservice teacher focuses on a unique or troubling event that occurred. These events are discussed and possible solutions are shared so the entire class can benefit. This also provides an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to share the work their students have created.

**Preservice educator.** The preservice educator should be prepared with a well-rehearsed, organized and engaging art lesson, a willingness to reflect on his/her teaching, and a desire to receive feedback from the intervention specialist and university faculty. Preservice educators are encouraged to create lessons based on information retrieved from their initial meeting. This includes knowledge of the arrangement of the classroom and available resources such as sinks, floor covering and natural light.

Art lessons are created around the works of contemporary artists and the preservice educators are encouraged to select works with identifiable subject matter rather than non-objective (abstract) imagery (Yenawine, 2002). This provides the opportunity for the students to relate to the stories presented in the works of art. The lesson plans contain objectives based on the Ohio Department of Education's Visual Arts Standards along with a detailed script which includes all planned procedures and activities.

Adaptations for each student are outlined and a complete list of materials is compiled. When planning for instruction preservice educators are encouraged to develop playful and relevant strategies that engage students in a variety of sensory ways. Examples of this are the outlining of artwork reproductions with glue so a student can see the image with his/her fingers, adding scents to paint, making simple puzzles from artwork reproductions highlighting key visual components, and the use of role play or games.

When the planning is completed the preservice art educator executes the plan and teaches it to his/her students. The preservice teacher must be prepared to "think on his/her feet" and respond to events in the classroom by adjusting instruction accordingly. In addition, preservice educators are required to reflect on their experiences in writing. By identifying two or three key events and focusing on even the smallest details of what occurred, they are able to analyze events and highlight what can be done to improve students' learning as well as their personal teaching practice.

As preservice educators work in teams of two, one takes on the lead responsibility for

teaching each week, while the other takes on a supporting role. The supporting teacher also reflects on the teaching day, and provides the lead teacher with observations of the day's events. A sample observation follows.

Anne [the preservice educator] was very calm, and spoke in a soft voice in short sentences repeating them often. She also used wait time and scanned the students for some indication of understanding. This allowed the students time to process and most responded by repeating a key word, for example 'grandpa'. Anne also wrote several key words on the board and used gestures. When she touched her heart to indicate love, one of the students did the same. Anne also had a copy of her artist's image for each student allowing them to study it up close. She shared photos of her family with the students to convey the concept of beloved older people in her life. They seemed to enjoy looking at the photos. As she worked she wrote affirmations on the paper covering the table (personal communication, 2006).

### **Benefits for Preservice Art Educators**

As stated above, the goal of this program is for preservice art educators to establish a process of collaboration which will enrich their careers. Since the inception of the program specific benefits have been identified.

**The power of professional dialogue.** By working closely with intervention specialists and support staff, preservice educators gain confidence in their ability to discuss myriad teaching issues with professionals. As college students, preservice educators have little opportunity to see the adults in their lives as peers. This relationship presents them with the opportunity to have their ideas validated by professionals in the field. Working directly with the intervention specialist, preservice art educators are provided immediate feedback for ways to improve their instruction. For the intervention specialist new ideas presented by the preservice art teachers invigorate even the more experienced educators. Often, ideas for engaging activities are a product of the discussion between the pre-service educator and the intervention specialist. The experience improves the teaching practice of all participants.

**The importance of environment.** The preservice art educators design their teaching environment to meet the needs of the targeted students. By directly meeting the needs of those students, their teaching is effective and meaningful. They learn to use clear signage to highlight planned activities, to use adaptive technology to enhance learning, and to create an

organized, uncluttered space that supports student learning. Organizing space for a variety of classroom activities increases the potential for students to become more active participants in their own learning (Guay, 2006).

**Importance of well-organized lesson plans, adaptive tools, and personal flexibility.**

One of the most valuable lessons that the preservice teachers learn is the necessity of being well organized with their plans. They learn to develop instructional tools that will be effective in teaching their lessons. They learn to take the time to cut out aspects of the artwork to help the students focus on the key elements of the piece. Preservice teachers learn to create visual schedules for each day's lesson, and they learn to incorporate variations in the instruction to meet the needs of each student. All are essential strategies.

Adaptive tools are sometimes available from the intervention specialist and sometimes are created by the preservice educators themselves. While traditional tools such as adaptive scissors are often available in the classroom, the pre-service educator may need to make handles for paintbrushes or create alternative tools for painting such as paint rollers.

An art lesson is often divided into smaller segments for greater success. For some students, participation in art class is possible because the preservice teachers have recognized the need for some students to take a break. They understand the desire and motivation of the students to return and finish their pieces. It is also essential to retain good humor when situations in the classroom, or with an individual student, make all these extra efforts ineffective.

**Benefits to the Students**

The introduction of art to the curriculum as taught by the preservice educators, provides several tangible benefits. Feedback provided by the intervention specialists focuses on the following results.

**Independent decision-making.** Students regularly make independent decisions related to their choice of color, media, and the content of their work when creating personal stories. Some of the infamous myths identifying individuals with autism as lacking individuality, and being unable to make eye contact and show emotion, are dispelled. Each student participates in his/her art experience and creates with freedom, enthusiasm, and individuality.

**Extended attention span and social skills development.** The ability of the students to remain attentive during art class is extended beyond what occurs during other activities. Appropriate social skills and positive behavior were displayed throughout each lesson. If the

focus of the lesson or creation process is lost, the support of the visual tools and media greatly assist the off-task student to return to his/her creation. The tools can provide a concrete prompt to return to the task.

**Demonstrated personal communication connecting artwork creation to personal experiences.** The students clearly communicate through their art. Work is unique and individual. Life experiences specific to each student are represented in their works of art. Memories, vacations, family relationships and interests provide the fodder for personal stories created in images.

During one lesson, students were given a questionnaire to take home regarding recent family travels. One student's parents returned the form with information about their trip to New York City. The pre-service teacher used this as the focal point in the lesson. Inspired by her memories of this trip the student included a precise drawing of the Broadway theater her family attended. She also included at least five other sites in NYC the family had visited. This artwork still hangs in the classroom and on occasion the student will admire her work and initiate conversation about her trip with her family.

In another instance personal communication was pushed beyond what had occurred before. A pre-service educator asked her students to select their favorite animal using the sign for "favorite." One student, who traditionally only responded by repeating the words spoken to him, answered, "Bear!" The pre-service educator located an image of a bear and the student proceeded to create a clay sculpture of a bear.

**New opportunity for family and community connections.** Parents enthusiastically endorse the program as they indicate how happy their children are on the morning before coming to school because it is Art Day. This affirmation is continued as they attend the public display of the students' work organized and presented by the pre-service teachers. Extended family and the community attend the art shows. The art class influence extends into the home as well. Inspired by her daughter's artwork, a mother painted and decorated her daughter's room using four of her daughter's paintings as the focal point.

## **Conclusion**

The job of a preservice art educator is to continue to work toward mastery. Essential in their growth and development is the support of experienced professionals to provide guidance and an environment to practice their teaching. Through this collaboration of intervention

specialists, university faculty and the pre-service educators, these teachers-in-training are given the opportunity to develop their skills in teaching all students. While all teachers are very busy and have many demands on their time, intervention specialists eagerly accepted the invitation to participate in this program. Key to any collaboration is willing participants and the intervention specialists' enthusiasm to work with the pre-service educators and share their knowledge and classrooms. This collaboration has made a profound impact on a generation of art teachers.

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# Teaching Urban Students with Special Learning Needs: What We Have Learned through the Art Partners Program

LUCY ANDRUS

The Art Partners program is a preservice fieldwork project involving collaboration between Buffalo State College (BSC) art education/art therapy students and their instructor, and students and teachers in Buffalo city schools. Art Partners specifically targets inner city classrooms serving students with an array of special learning needs in intellectual, physical, emotional, cultural, and social areas of development. Most of the students have been identified as needing special education and the majority is considered 'at-risk' due to stressful living circumstances that may seriously compromise their school and social success. In this paper, the term *special learning needs* refers to any student with unique learning characteristics and requirements that necessitate instructional and curricular adaptations in order to maximize access to learning and assure student success.

## Description of the Art Partners Program

BSC students enrolled in an art education methods course on teaching students with special learning needs may elect to fulfill their fieldwork requirement through the Art Partners program. Each semester throughout the academic year, teams of students (referred to as "student teachers") in collaboration with their course instructor/program founder (author) plan and facilitate weekly art experiences for children and teens at the participating organizations. For example, one team has implemented the Art Partners program for a high school special education class, while another worked with elementary school children attending an inner city school. Art Partners has recently expanded to include service to a group of elementary and middle school students attending an after school program. In addressing the need for a field-based approach to teacher education, the student teacher teams are accompanied by their instructor/program coordinator who, as an active member of each team, serves as model teacher, co-researcher, and mentor, providing on-the-spot guidance.

With input from the general and special education teachers participating in Art Partners, student teachers and their instructor collaborate to develop a curriculum of thematic units of study with sequential lessons designed to promote art and general/special education goals and objectives. Integrated activities in art history, art criticism, aesthetics and art making, otherwise

referred to collectively as “art experience”, are designed to support learning in many areas of the students’ educational experiences, including cognitive development, language arts, social studies, emotional intelligence, and socialization skills.

Following each session with students, the student teachers and their instructor meet to assess outcomes, identify problems, propose solutions, and plan curriculum. This meeting also provides student teachers with a chance to express their immediate personal responses to working with students, an opportunity not often available on campus. At the end of the school year, the Art Partners program culminates in a special event, including an exhibition of participants’ artwork with an opening reception attended by the students, their family and friends, school personnel, members of Buffalo State College and members of the community at large. A major purpose of these events is to increase public awareness and appreciation for the remarkable abilities of urban students with special learning needs and the importance of supporting inclusive arts programming for all students.

The Art Partners program has served students in self-contained and inclusive classrooms since 1994, and was initiated in response to identified educational and social needs in our urban community, particularly for students classified with disabilities and those considered at risk. It operates under the assumption that *all* children can learn, and that *all* children can find personal meaning in art experience. We believe that it is our job as educators to make this process available and accessible to each student through our own culturally responsive and intelligently crafted pedagogy. An equally important premise upon which the program was founded is the idea of *art as prevention*. Regular participation in meaningful art experiences fosters the development of positive self-concepts and socialization skills in children (Sutherland, Waldman, & Collins, 2010; Coholic, Eys, & Loughheed, 2012). Thus, children at risk and those with special learning needs can grow with greater confidence and purpose, equipped to withstand negative pressures and make better personal decisions when confronted with tough choices.

The philosophical underpinnings and goals of the program are:

- To promote greater collaboration among higher education and the community, college faculty and students, and teachers and students in urban settings serving a diverse student population.
- To provide more in-depth, hands-on training in inner city schools for art teacher candi

dates, encouraging them to seek employment in city schools upon graduation.

- To provide culturally competent art experiences for students with special learning needs who live in economically depressed neighborhoods of Buffalo, especially for those who might otherwise receive little or no art education.
- To further validate the power of the arts to provide students who have disabilities with an alternative means to comprehend and respond to learning concepts, allowing them to better demonstrate and develop their competence and potential.
- To promote teaching scholarship and support research opportunities where together, faculty, students and classroom teachers can investigate problems and develop new strategies for improving education in our urban schools serving students with diverse learning needs.
- To support the mission of Buffalo State College through an art education program that promotes equity and diversity and brings people together in partnership to meet the needs of all our community's children and teens.

This paper will share what we have learned through the Art Partners program by discussing: roles and responsibilities of teacher training programs in assuring the provision of early field experience in urban schools; philosophical foundations in addressing the unique needs of underserved urban students with special learning needs; specific teaching strategies that proved effective; and new insights for training preservice teachers in the field.

Discussion begins with higher education's role in producing the kinds of professionals needed to assure the provision of equity and access to art for all students through instruction and curricula that maintain the same high standards expected in any art education program.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of Teacher Training Programs**

#### **Collaboration between Higher Education and Urban Schools**

Colleges and universities cannot adequately answer the demands of schools for more culturally competent educators who are able to work with a diverse student body in urban schools without a deeper understanding of the student population. Such an understanding must come from greater involvement between higher education and the urban community, especially in our teacher training programs. Training a teaching force prepared to meet the needs of all learners, particularly those with special learning needs in urban settings, necessitates changes in teacher education and teacher support that moves beyond current

practice.

In an exit survey of their student teachers, Edwards, Carr and Seigel (2006) found that preservice students required a more in-depth experience in order to more competently meet the needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities. Other preservice program administrators and research faculty reiterate this finding in their analyses of teacher preparation efforts, connecting art teachers' discomfort in working with students who have special learning needs to a lack of adequate preservice training in these areas of pedagogical competency (Bain & Hasio, 2011; Keifer-Boyd & Kraft, 2003). A similar need is echoed by those preparing America's mostly white middle-class teaching force to work effectively with urban students who are culturally, linguistically and economically diverse (Tidwell & Thompson, 2009; Delpit, 2002; Andrus, 2001; Sleeter, 2001). Inclusion advocate Mara Sapon-Shavin takes the discussion to another level, proposing that we eliminate boundaries between general education and special education, "replacing such programs with inclusive teacher education models that value diversity" (2001, p. 38).

Furthermore, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2008) has clearly defined standards for teacher education, not the least of which is requiring college and universities to prepare teacher candidates who understand and can effectively adapt instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners, including linguistically and culturally diverse students and students with exceptionalities. NCATE requires intensive fieldwork and a close relationship between higher education and public schools in order to achieve these aims, making collaborative efforts paramount.

These goals will not be achieved without more direct involvement by college faculty and students in the schools, long before the culminating student teaching assignment. Villa and Thousand (2003) indicated that teacher education candidates must learn to become collaborative team members and develop the necessary skills that will enable them to work with colleagues to develop diversified learning opportunities for students who range in interests, learning styles, and intelligences. Furthermore, these researchers found in a study of 600 educators, that collaboration "emerged as the only variable that predicted positive attitudes toward inclusion on the part of general and special educators" (p. 22).

Programs like Art Partners address the need to learn collaboration skills by bringing college students and faculty into the everyday, real world of teachers and students with special

learning needs in urban schools; partnerships necessary for improving 21st century education in meeting the intellectual, social and emotional needs of all students. This can occur on both personal and professional levels, from face to face interactions with students, teachers and parents, to the establishment of urban classrooms serving diverse learners. These classrooms become living laboratories where college students, faculty, and school teachers can collaborate in action research efforts to analyze behaviors and various classroom situations, identify problems, and propose and implement solutions.

### **Emphasizing the Development of Teachers' Cultural Competence**

Closely aligned with the goal of collaboration for improving preservice training is to produce teachers who are willing and able to work successfully with an increasingly diverse student population. Nationally, some forty-four percent of students in elementary and secondary schools today are students of color while our teaching force remains predominately white (Center for Public Education, 2007). Other forms of diversity in our schools include students who: are children of immigrants, are biracial and multiracial, live in poverty, and who identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual (Center for Public Education, 2007). In addition, the inclusion movement has resulted in another major shift in the current school population where three out of four students identified with disabilities spend part or all of their day in general education classes, learning alongside their peers without disabilities (National Education Association, 2012).

These demographics are reflected in Buffalo where the Art Partners program takes place. Most of the student teacher volunteers in the Art Partners program are from middle class, suburban and/or rural backgrounds and have had little experience with diversity. We found that factors perpetuating the dearth of culturally competent teachers were the following: 1) Teacher candidates lack significant awareness, understanding, and personal experience with individuals who learn differently; 2) The majority of teacher graduates opt out of urban schools right from the start as they begin to search for employment; 3) Many teachers who do find employment in city schools have not been adequately equipped to deal with the needs of urban students with special learning needs; and 4) Analogous to urban flight, the prevalence of 'teacher flight' (author's term) reflects national studies indicating that of all new teachers in urban schools leave within their first few years of teaching.

If we hope to stem the tide of teacher flight and meet the growing demand for

culturally competent teachers, then higher education must enact more rigorous and purposeful measures to improve preservice training. We can start by providing more and earlier hands-on field work experiences, such as Art Partners, that include opportunities for teacher candidates to succeed in working with the diverse range of learners attending urban schools.

### **Assessing Student Teachers' Pre and Post-Program Attitudes and Beliefs**

In Art Partners, we begin by uncovering biases and myths that may exist under the surface of our college students' stated acceptance of others. To gain greater insight into students' attitudes and ideas about urban school children with special learning needs, and better equip faculty to address issues that might surface, students complete pre- and post-program questionnaires. Since art is another language for the students, they also create a visual statement that communicates their expectations and feelings about field work assignments before they begin in Art Partners.

These written and visual expressions provide an important and revealing glimpse into students' attitudes, beliefs and confidence levels. Comments on pre-program questionnaires usually reveal that despite their stated acceptance of others, students often feel overwhelmed and sometimes intimidated by what they know from the media or may have observed from a distance about urban schools and urban students' behaviors and attitudes. Many expressed initial *apprehensiveness* and feelings of *inadequacy* about teaching urban students, indicating feelings of *anxiety* about working with students who are culturally different from them. They conveyed similar emotions regarding students with disabilities, most often citing the fear that they will *not be able to communicate effectively* with them.

I'm afraid because of the stereotypes of inner city schools. Stereotypes like kids who have no respect for teachers or adults, acting out, street educated students who may be at risk of dropping out, gang problems, and poverty.

For me, it was like entering a foreign country. The location and population of an urban school was completely alien to me. I felt I'd stick out, that my appearance, language and experience offered no hope of assimilation. I thought the students would sense my fear and apprehension and take offense to it. Why should a twenty-five year old woman be afraid of a seven year old? Logically, it didn't make sense but I was terrified nonetheless.

I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing to kids with disabilities and that they won't understand me. How will I reach them? What if I can't understand them?

I'm concerned that students with disabilities can't make art like the others kids. How do I create lessons that are not too hard, yet not too easy?

Supporting the firm belief that nothing challenges biases and stereotypes faster and more effectively than personal experience, students' post-program images and surveys reveal significant changes in their attitudes and confidence. Virtually all students rated themselves as feeling *more comfortable* about working with urban students who have special learning needs or are culturally different, with many commenting that they had great *misconceptions* prior to their participation in Art Partners. Their reflective comments and visual images bear this out.

Fear of the unknown is worse than the unknown itself. Once the mystery of the urban school dissipated, so did the fear. All these children I saw as "foreigners" had names and faces and smiles for me. I found myself anxious to return to see them every week.

I discovered that children do not have an agenda to become "bad" people. All children want love and attention from a sincere, caring, competent adult.

I was amazed at how competent kids with disabilities are in art! I learned that has to do with good teaching and a good attitude by the teacher.

These students [with disabilities] are just as capable as any other student. They're all just kids!

I think all teachers should have this type of experience. I was able to see the commonalities we all have.

I learned that a lot of them are just like me when I was a young child. We are all the same inside and we should be able to learn the same information. It is the method of teaching that may inspire students to learn in various ways.

When asked about the overall value of the Art Partners program to their preparation as art teachers, students were unanimous in their positive ratings and in their comments.

This was the greatest prep course I could have taken. It involved working in a group, team teaching, lesson planning, an urban setting, children with special needs... everything!

I feel so much more prepared for student teaching, and now I know I can be successful in an inner city school and with kids who have special needs.

Children give back as much as you put in. If expectations of achievement and behavior are set high early, and the teacher works equally hard to help the kids get there, success and learning are inevitable for any student.

In post-program survey comments as well as artwork discussion, many students described their participation in the Art Partners program as *life-changing*, underscoring the need to provide personal experience with diverse students living and learning in urban settings as early as possible for our teachers in training.

### **Understanding Underserved Urban Schools and Students**

Throughout their fieldwork in the Art Partners program, student teachers, alongside their faculty instructor, increase their awareness of the social, economic and political factors relevant to urban schools, while developing their understanding of students from diverse cultural backgrounds who possess a range of learning styles and abilities. One of the first things student teachers discover is that their students with disability classifications defy stereotypical notions implied by various special education labels. Many are surprised at the competence of the students. Experiences in Art Partners and the opportunity to observe model teaching by their instructor enables student teachers to quickly learn that student success, especially for those with special learning needs, is highly dependent on the quality of teachers' pedagogy and curriculum and how well teachers create access to learning for all of their students.

In helping teacher candidates to understand and embrace inclusive practice, it is essential to explore their initial notions of special education, helping them to reframe their view of diversity. Sapon-Shevin (2001) pointed out that discussions of multiculturalism and diversity are often separate from those about inclusion of students with disabilities, and she

noted that this division is reflected in the way teachers are prepared. She feels that this division hampers our ability to think critically about the ways in which issues of diversity are connected, and how they can be addressed in an integrated manner. Sapon-Shevin suggested that if we “conceptualize disability as a social construct”, then we can link the disability agenda to the larger diversity mandate, allowing us “to value multiple identities and communities”, and see diversity not as a problem in the classroom but more as a “natural, inevitable and desirable state” (p.35). She believes that if we can look at all differences within this more inclusive framework, we can better understand and implement more effective and collaborative approaches to teaching our diverse student body, enriching educational experience for teachers and students alike as we come to understand that learning ability is another form of difference among us.

Another crucial issue student teachers in Art Partners examine is the disproportionately high numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students, particularly students of color, who are placed in special education (Harry & Klingner, 2007). Research indicates that a child’s race and ethnicity significantly influence the probability that he or she will be misidentified as needing special education (National Education Association, 2012). Such disproportionality has immediate as well as long term effects, not the least of which are contributing to racial separation and further widening of the achievement gap (Tempes, 2003). Misidentified African American students in particular, many of whom live and learn in urban communities, most often receive classifications of learning disabled and emotional or behavioral disorder. (Blanchett, 2006; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Critics say that these two categories are often “catchalls for difficult students”, a phenomenon not uncommon to urban schools (Zernike, 2001). Carl Hayden, former New York State Regents Chancellor, stated that for a long time, teachers have referred such students to special education not because they were disabled, but because they were difficult (Zernike, 2001).

It is suggested that far too often, such difficult behaviors may be the result of attitudes and practices by teachers who do not understand their students’ culturally particular behaviors and learning styles (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Alexander, 1989). Consequently, many educators are *mis-teaching*, *mis-interpreting* and *mis-evaluating* their students with cultural backgrounds different from their own. In the process, they may fail to see their students’ competencies, and fail to recognize and use the culturally particular knowledge and skills that

these students bring with them from home and community. It is no surprise when these young people find little connection with school and educational experience, and sadly, disengage from learning, often becoming the so-called “difficult kids” in special education.

These might be the students to whom Kohl referred when he described “not-learning” (1991). He said that students’ refusal to learn is linked to their sense that teachers, schools and society compromise their dignity and self-worth. He stated “not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to his or her personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity” (p. 35). He explained that if a student agrees to learn from a stranger who does not respect these assets, the student will experience a serious loss of self, making the only reasonable alternative to reject the stranger’s world and not-learn. In Art Partners, we discuss that this is what might be occurring when teachers fail to understand and respect their students’ cultural backgrounds, which is often the case when backgrounds of teachers and students differ.

Preservice fieldwork programs like Art Partners can provide important opportunities for future teachers to know, understand, and respect urban students with special learning needs, the culture in which they live, what they bring to the classroom, and how these factors can affect school experience. These issues can be explored on campus with other preservice students, helping them to develop their social consciousness and become proactive advocates for educational equity. As emerging professionals, these future teachers can then serve as role models for their own students, teaching them to value diversity and engaging them in the work of creating more inclusive institutions where all children can learn.

### **Philosophical Foundations**

#### **Art as Prevention**

Anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake (1992) has taught us to appreciate art making as a human biological necessity that helps people to survive better than they would without such experience in their lives. We know that across time and cultures, humans’ use of art for emotional and psychological health and mastery predates recorded history. Today, the profession of art therapy bases assessment and treatment on these healing properties, and the art education profession is rooted in therapeutic ideas through the work of art education pioneer, Viktor Lowenfeld, who was one of the first art teachers to write about the therapeutic aspects of art education (1957). In more recent times, art educator Peter Smith (1993)

advocated for the development of a “therapeutic strand” of art education as he predicted an emerging underserved student body characterized by greater diversity.

Given this backdrop, it stands to reason that art experience might also be viewed as preventative, an idea that has particular relevance to the students served by the Art Partners program whose life circumstances make them more vulnerable to dropout and engagement in risky and potentially destructive activities. Since a majority of the students we have served to date have been mostly African American boys, it was essential for the Art Partners teaching team to understand something about the status of African American men in the United States. For decades, this population has been one of the most at-risk in the nation, experiencing higher rates of social and health problems, with a lower life expectancy than white men, white women and even African American women (Black Demographics.com, 2009).

While there has been steady progress in the status and success of African American men in this country during the past decade, there have also been devastating setbacks, particularly for the young and poor. In their series, “At the Corner of Progress and Peril” which examined the lives and experiences of African American men in the USA, the Washington Post reports the results of several studies showing that low school achievement is still “most acute among black boys, who are far more likely to be left back, assigned to special education, score poorly on standardized tests, be suspended from school or eventually drop out, than any other demographic group” (Fletcher 2006, p. 3). Kafele (2012) notes that while many African American male students do well and succeed in their lives, there are far too many who are negatively affected by the achievement gap, entering adulthood under or unemployed, and more likely to be incarcerated, and for longer periods than white or Hispanic youth from similar situations.

These disturbing findings compelled the Art Partners teaching team to consider the possible future fates of our students, especially given the fact that the crisis begins long before students might fall through the cracks or drop out of school (Kunjufu, 2005). We needed to examine the early school experiences of our students of color to understand when and why things might begin to unravel, and how we might use art experience in a proactive and preventative manner.

Nathan McCall’s (1993) autobiographical accounts proved insightful and provided an additional impetus for developing the preventative aspect of Art Partners when the program

first began. McCall, now a successful author who was able to work his way out of a street life that included drugs, arrest for armed robbery, and finally prison, attempted to explain the “carnage” among young African American males, and why so many of them drop out of school and opt for life on the streets, where, as he describes, “the playing field is level and the rules don't change” (1993, p. 48). Looking back at his youthful experiences and those of his friends, he describes how, despite whatever advantages may have been available, these and the hard work of his parents were not enough to shield him from the full brunt of racism encountered on a daily basis. In a chilling statement, as he described the effects of this constant assault on one’s psyche and sense of self-worth, McCall provided a critical glimpse into the minds of many young African Americans whose hearts have hardened and whose optimism is lost. He said, “When your life in your own mind holds little value, it becomes frighteningly easy to take another’s” (1993, p. 49). Such perception underscores the need for teachers and schools to recognize the connection between the educational experience they provide and how much this experience contributes to the formation of a self-image, for better or worse.

Grounded in the idea of art being preventative, the Art Partners program addresses the low self-esteem and alienation described by McCall (1993) through an art education curriculum that emphasizes the development of competence, mastery and a positive self-concept. The curriculum is based on the assumption that these characteristics play a vital role in the prevention of a variety of potential problems to which urban children and teens with special learning needs may be especially vulnerable. Art experience offers an opportunity to explore and express personal ideas and potential, demonstrate unimagined and untapped strengths, and exercise control over self, media and process. Such an experience may be essential for youth who rarely experience feelings of being in control, whether dealing with the challenges of a learning difference, an environmental deprivation, or attempting to negotiate and manage in a world that may often appear hostile and chaotic.

When children’s internalized self-images are strong and healthy, they may be less vulnerable to feeling helpless and hopeless, and may therefore be less at risk for engaging in self-destructive behaviors, unlike McCall and his friends, many of whom ended up incarcerated or deceased before their mid-twenties. Meaningful art programs that empower students by engendering in them a sense of competence and pride through achievement while they are still young, may help them value themselves enough to make better choices and better decisions

when confronted with difficult situations as they mature.

### **Developing Self-Identities as ‘Makers and Consumers of Art’**

As they grow, all children are searching for a self-identity that includes a sense of competence and empowerment, and we are reminded that there can be a host of negative consequences if children lack positive and accessible ways to achieve this developmental necessity. We have seen students with disabilities relinquish control and withdraw in various ways, often sliding into what many call “learned helplessness.” This occurs when those around them underestimate their potential for achievement and fail to provide the kinds of worthy learning experiences that help nurture a self-identity of competence and self-esteem. Without the right kind of support from home and school, a special education label can negatively impact identity development and students’ sense of self.

It is natural for children whose emerging developmental needs are not being met to search for and find their own ways to achieve a sense of competence and empowerment. Left to chance, this search can have negative consequences for many low-income urban students, as McCall (1993) warned. These include life on the streets, which offers an immediate and accessible, albeit often violent alternative, particularly to those youth who are already disenfranchised from the mainstream of society. In a study of youth violence, Davis (1995, p. 202) discovered that some youth may commit violent acts “to compensate for something they feel is missing in their personal identity.” When asked for solutions, Kohl advised that what we must do is “offer to kids who are potential perpetrators of violence, a more attractive way of using their intelligence, energy, efforts, frustration and rage” (Scherer, 1998, p. 11).

An issue for many students of color, including African American boys from low-income urban neighborhoods, is the notion that learning is uncool, and an identity based on scholastic achievement is not compatible with their sense of masculinity and/or their cultural identity (Kunjufu, 2005). Many factors contribute to this perception, including the fact that African American and other non-white students often perceive school as a place where they cannot be themselves because their culture is not valued (Coffey, 2008). These students often develop a “tough guy” identity, even at very young ages as we have seen in Art Partners, where even girls attempt to feel powerful and respected by adopting such a role.

We have learned that through art experience, we can offer students a more positive identity from which they can experience a sense of power and competence. In Art Partners,

we purposefully offer students an alternative role as they learn to exercise their innate creativity and develop skills and insights that will serve them in all areas of life: that of *maker and consumer of art*. We have learned that art is an empowering, equalizing force that can offer children and teens a healthy way to feel capable and in control as they learn to respond to artworks, express opinions and make judgments about them, and manipulate media and materials to give expression to their inner visions and ideas. This is aesthetic experience that cannot be judged as right or wrong, and one that helps children see themselves as worthy, valuable and competent based on artistic achievement. Children need experiences that can help them to see themselves for who they are, apart from the expectations and stereotypes that can easily influence their self-perceptions.

In practical application of the theory of art as prevention, we have found it useful to make a deliberate and conscious attempt to help shape students' optimism, sense of competence, and positive sense of self. We start by projecting our own attitude that every student is a person of worth, capable of and expected to do something worthwhile and even difficult in the world, and that every child will be supported in doing so in Art Partners. Some students, who already view themselves as failures, are actually vexed at first to learn that we refuse to accept this definition of who they are! We begin our school year by informing our students that they are going to be makers and consumers of art, and that they will think like artmakers and behave like artmakers. We explain and have students adopt the Art Partners philosophy and code of behavior which embody the ideas that:

- We will think carefully about what we are doing.
- We will take risks and try new things.
- We will make mistakes for sure, but we will see these as paths to new learning.
- We will show our caring for self, others, what we do, and the tools and materials we use.
- We will not give up when something goes wrong. We will try again!
- We will learn to do something well. We will be competent!

Using sign as well as verbal language, these messages are repeated consistently throughout the year and in every relevant instance, as we help students begin internalizing these characteristics. We have witnessed great success with our students, including those with more severe learning disabilities, who begin to identify and describe themselves as "competent" art makers.

### **Understanding Diverse Ways of Knowing**

Through his research on applying ideas of Afrocentrism to solve problems confronting African-Americans, Stewart (1995) provided an example that supports the value of investigating diverse cultural ways of knowing. Stewart explained the Afrocentric belief, also shared by other non-Western cultures, that emotions and feelings are seen as valid affective ways of knowing because they are the most direct experience of reality. Since art is inherently an affective experience, from an Afrocentric point of view, art can be seen as a vital source of knowledge that serves “to structure truth”. Stewart pointed out the benefits of including this “native point of view rather than the imposition of euro-interpretations” in understanding African Americans (p. 245). We know that art as a means of self-expression and communication affords a voice for those who might otherwise be silenced. Awareness, respect, and acceptance of non-empirical sources of knowledge, such as that which is taught through the arts, enable us to more effectively meet the needs of a culturally diverse student population.

### **High Expectations for All**

We have learned, particularly with our students who have special education classifications, to avoid underestimating abilities since students will often rise, or sadly, sink, to the level of teacher expectations. And, we have witnessed how low teacher expectations can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Unfortunately, this has frequently been the case with students of color (Haycock, 2001) as well as with students who are differently abled in cognitive functioning. Too often, these students receive a curriculum that is watered-down rather than adapted to meet individual learning needs. Discussing the efficacy of differentiation in mixed-ability classes, Wehrman asserted that we ought to “raise the bar for everyone” (2000, p. 21) while Tomlinson and Javius reiterated the need for teachers to “teach up” to assure equitable access to learning for all students (2012, p. 28).

Our work with teens labeled “developmentally disabled”, for example, has shown us time and again that a combination of high expectations and adapted, differentiated instruction makes all the difference. In one particular instance among many, students were able to successfully engage in a unit requiring higher order thinking skills and, according to their teachers, even demonstrated carry-over of their new knowledge about symbolism in commercial art to other situations in their living skills-based program. Typically, such a unit would have automatically been excluded for these students since it required a considerable

degree of abstract thinking. Using a differentiated approach, however, and finding ways to relate every learning concept to the students' concrete, real life experience made learning and retention of learning possible. A parent of one student told us how she had witnessed an amazing and unexpected transference of knowledge and new behavior in her son that she believed were a direct result of his involvement in Art Partners. We learned that it is how you present conceptual material that creates greater access to knowledge and development of new skills for all students.

### **Strategies for Teaching Urban Students with Special Learning Needs**

Many experts agree that a differentiated approach to curriculum and instruction makes learning more accessible for a diverse student body, as we have witnessed in the Art Partners program (Scherer, 2007; Huebner, 2010). Differentiation can take many forms in the classroom, as content, process and product are designed to offer multiple levels of learning for students.

#### **Know the Children You Teach**

Students learn best when their school experiences reflect their personal interests and lived cultures (Hawley & Nieto, 2010). As student teachers complete formal needs assessments on our students, they also learn to gather as much information as possible on their students' out-of-school lives upon which they build upon throughout the semester. Whenever possible, this includes a visit to the community where our children and teens live. Acquiring knowledge of students' backgrounds and lived experiences is not only essential to teachers' cultural competence but also to differentiating instruction.

#### **Integrate Children's Funds of Knowledge into Curriculum**

We have learned that teachers need to go beyond understanding their students by applying this knowledge in crafting the content, processes and products that will reflect curriculum. Children from diverse social, cultural, familial and economic backgrounds possess different "funds of knowledge" which Rosebery, McIntyre, and Gonzalez described as the "various social and linguistic practices and the historically accumulated bodies of knowledge that are essential to student's homes and communities" (2001, p. 2). This includes skills and abilities that children already possess from home and community experience that they bring to school and that teachers need to know about and use in their teaching. In reviewing research on the educational disparity between middle-class, suburban children and poor, working-class children, Rosebery et. al. (2001) revealed that schools were failing the latter group by not

treating children's funds of knowledge in an equal manner. In Art Partners, we have learned to understand, respect and use these funds of knowledge as a means to shape curriculum and connect students' home lives to learning in school, thus maximizing opportunities for educational success.

### **Help Students Develop a Cultural Identity Through Art Experiences**

An integral aspect of a developing self-image is awareness and knowledge of the ethnic or cultural history and roots of one's identity. Knowing their cultural background is essential for students' healthy psychological development, and addressing this learning need through the arts is a natural. We were initially surprised to discover that the majority of students in Art Partners, regardless of race and ethnicity, had little knowledge of their cultural heritage or where their ancestors came from. We also realized that this lack of self-awareness can contribute to an underdeveloped self-concept and low self-esteem, particularly for students of color whose schooling often fails to include the authentic histories of their ancestors. In his program on motivating and empowering students, Kafele (2012) indicated the need to teach them the history of their ancestors, building on the past as a way to cultivate a sense of possibility for achievement in the future. In Art Partners, we learned to teach students about their ethnicities in culturally competent ways, including establishing partnerships with enthusiastic guest speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds. We were blessed to witness positive results as our students learned more about themselves and each other, developing greater appreciation and respect for differences while discovering commonalities.

### **Incorporate an Interdisciplinary Learning Through the Arts Approach**

Working in collaboration with host classroom teachers, the Art Partners student teachers learn how to develop interdisciplinary curricula that integrate general/special education goals and objectives into the Art Partners curriculum without sacrificing the aims of art education. We have discovered that goals in diverse disciplines can be reached concurrently without compromising the integrity of art experience. We have also witnessed that collaboration between art specialists and other discipline-specific educators not only enhances education but maximizes access to learning for all students. We have discovered that when students can make meaningful interdisciplinary connections, they are more likely to retain learning, especially for students with intellectual and other learning disabilities.

### **Incorporate More Kinesthetic and Multisensory Experiences**

Based on the belief that the arts offer another language for perceiving and responding to instructional material, a crucial aspect for ensuring success for our students with various learning differences was to find multiple, concrete ways for them to experience conceptual content as much as possible. We found that students could more easily understand concepts when we combined verbal/linguistic modes with more hands-on experiences utilizing one or more sensory functions. For example, an abstract concept might be presented verbally, visually, tactilely, kinesthetically, and even dramatically, while students could use any or all of these modes for responding and demonstrating their understanding of the concept. This method of teaching and learning, which builds on students' strengths and employs multiple intelligences and learning styles, helps to motivate even the most challenged or resistant student.

In one instance, our frustration with a group of nine and ten year olds' constant restlessness during lessons compelled us to look to our teaching methods. Referring to research (Breslin, 2000; Jensen, 2000) we devised ways to channel and utilize students' "hyper" energy through positive teaching strategies. We incorporated more kinesthetic experiences into lessons as we explored the essential question: *What are methods we can employ to help students use their own bodies and kinesthetic sense as conduits to cognition?* Such questions challenged our thinking and enhanced our own creativity as we devised answers. One example follows:

In a lesson about understanding spatial relationships and creating 3-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface in still life compositions, we added a kinesthetic component to help facilitate understanding by our elementary students. After viewing and discussing still life examples, we asked students to come to a cleared space as each was called by a still life object's name, and arrange themselves according to the teacher's spatial direction: "Teapot, find the middle ground, bananas and apples find the foreground, candlesticks in the middle ground go to the background", etc. Almost immediately, we had every child's attention, and students who would normally be tapping and otherwise fidgeting, were totally engaged when they were given this constructive way to use their energy to solve a learning problem.

In addition, the opportunity to use their bodies to concretely experience an abstract idea like spatial relationships helped students with cognitive and perceptual problems gain conceptual understanding. In subsequent lessons, we found that even older students with

developmental disabilities enjoyed and benefitted from a similar experience. Kinesthetic, multisensory ways of experiencing instruction make learning more stimulating and enjoyable for all, but may be particularly effective in addressing the special learning needs of diverse students.

### **Give Greater Attention to Developing Emotional Intelligence**

Many students in Art Partners initially exhibited low self-esteem in various ways, including expressions of “I can’t” and “I’m stupid”, and a level of disengagement that was sometimes frightening. We have also observed students’ negative behaviors toward each other, supporting Jenlink’s (1995) findings that such children behave toward others in ways that reflect their negative self-images. While often seeking hugs from teachers, some students would react most negatively to being touched, usually accidentally, by a peer. Their low self-esteem and undeveloped social skills were interfering with instruction and inhibiting the development of positive relationships with each other. We realized that in addition to an overall therapeutic and culturally competent approach to teaching, we needed to design specific art units with lessons targeting the development of emotional intelligence integral to satisfying interpersonal relationships. Our children were clearly lacking the steppingstones that lead to self-esteem, including self-awareness, competency, impulse control, social skills, and empathy for people and other living things. While it may seem daunting to teach children to care about others when they feel less than cared for themselves, sharing art experiences provides a rich opportunity for this quality to develop (Jeffers, 2009). As art therapist Shaun McNiff (1995) described, when people make art together, “barriers and boundaries between them begin to break down” (p.166), creating a greater sense of empathy and compassion, ingredients necessary to developing respect and appreciation for others.

Issues of low self-esteem and disengagement led us to examine ways we could take more preventative steps toward decreasing violence and aggression in our schools, and in our students. We learned that creating a classroom climate of community, with each student as a contributing, cared for, and responsible member of that community, was the place to begin, along with incorporating group art activities where success depended on everyone’s participation and input. These efforts paid off as we witnessed students’ positive progression in social-emotional learning and behavior.

## **Training Preservice Teachers in Urban Schools**

### **Pay Attention to the Subjective Response of Preservice Teachers**

Student teachers in the Art Partners program have often felt overwhelmed by the anger, acting out behaviors, and emotional neediness observed in many of their students. They have experienced strong emotional reactions to the various kinds of deprivation they have witnessed, and often report feeling “sad” and “concerned” about their students’ lives in and out of school. Being able to address these subjective responses with the faculty coordinator immediately after a session has been critical in shaping the ways in which these fledgling teachers manage their feelings, attitudes and interventions. This is especially important in cases when teachers’ backgrounds differ significantly from students’, and is akin to the mentoring process that researchers indicate accounts for lower attrition rates in new teachers (Holloway, 2001).

If preservice teachers’ subjective teaching experiences are ignored, especially experiences that include the unique challenges of working in economically depressed urban schools serving a diverse student population with special learning needs, then we run the risk of perpetuating myths and stereotypes that may, in fact, inadvertently contribute to ‘teacher flight’. In the Art Partners program, attention to student teachers’ subjective responses is an integral part of their fieldwork experience. Insights gained through verbal, written and visual reflections are shared with other teacher candidates on campus as students learn to support each other. Through this process, preservice teachers gain insight into the challenges of teaching and develop a beginning set of skills they can use as they enter the field.

### **Recognize the Need for More ‘Therapeutic’ Teachers in Urban Schools**

Although course work in areas such as counseling and group dynamics certainly strengthen the skills of today’s teachers, another kind of therapeutic approach reflects the dictionary definition of the term, which describes therapeutic as “having a beneficial effect on one’s mental state” (Woolf, 1976). Therapeutic teachers are those who understand their students more fully and who realize that it is not enough to be competent in the content and pedagogy of their discipline (Andrus, 2006). They understand that students bring their life experiences into the classroom in all kinds of ways that can affect learning, and that they need to respond appropriately to student needs in caring, sensitive and culturally competent ways.

One particular observation underscored for us the importance of cultivating a

'therapeutic eye'. We began to witness an increasing incidence of loss in children's lives for various reasons, including loss through divorce, loss of friends, loss of home, or loss of a loved one through death, often violent. For many children, we noticed that the grief surrounding these losses was not acknowledged, and their mourning incomplete to a greater degree than recognized by many of the adults in their lives. We came to understand that many of our students' parents and caregivers had all they could do to cope with life and had not always resolved losses for themselves. In our program, it was art expression that brought some of these unresolved feelings to surface, and that provided a window of insight for us.

At first, it surprised us to see several of the students in Art Partners with and without disability labels, and regardless of a particular lesson objective, regularly and unexpectedly create art objects that referred to or represented deceased loved ones. This included young children who made images of departed loved ones, and/or spoke about their loss for the first time. These compelling creations, coupled with knowledge of challenges with which these children coped, from school shootings to lack of adequate food and sleep, indicated to us that there may be a therapeutic imperative for art education today. We may need more teachers with training in therapeutic methods, as Smith (1993) had warned.

It appears that the unsettling and often violent culture of today's world may be affecting children and teens in ways we have not considered, and there may be a very real and particular need for children to experience healing and a sense of control over their lives as a result. It may be that teachers need to regularly provide educational opportunities for self-expression in helping students deal with the many stressors that are unique to their lives. As the Art Partners teaching team explored these issues, we began to deliberately devise learning experiences that offered such opportunities in positive, creative ways. One especially effective encounter occurred during a lesson on the Mexican holiday of El Dia de los Muertos, (Day of the Dead) as we worked together to create an ofrenda, or place of honoring deceased relative and friends. Very different from other practices surrounding death, Dia De Los Muertos is a celebratory recollection of the lives of departed loved ones. We began with a story depicting two sisters of Mexican American heritage explaining how their family celebrates Dia De Los Muertos. We knew the children would respond positively to this experience, but what we hadn't expected was seeing most of the adults in the room also raising their hands when asked who would like to remember a loved one by making something to place on the ofrenda!

This was a memorable healing as well as educational experience for everyone involved. The children seemed eager and appreciative to remember departed loved ones, including one boy who made several pictures of deceased relatives, including an uncle who died violently. The ofrenda was installed in the school's lyceum, with an invitation to anyone in the school community to place there a token of remembrance of a departed loved one. More items appeared on the ofrenda throughout the week and two more students added images of departed relatives they had created on their own.

We have also learned that being a therapeutic teacher means possessing an awareness of and a willingness to respond to our children's needs for feeling loved, included, and understood. When student teachers are told that *teaching is an act of love* at the beginning of the semester, they do not fully appreciate the reality of this fact until they begin working with their own students in Art Partners.

### **What We Learned About Teacher Faith and Perseverance**

In their preservice work through the Art Partners program, student teachers learned both practical as well as theoretical approaches to teaching underserved urban students with special learning needs. They also learned about themselves and how to cope productively with the inevitable frustrations and emotional tugs encountered in teaching students with special learning needs whose life experiences have been difficult.

As an aspect of being a therapeutic teacher, student teachers needed to develop ways to manage their personal feelings about their students in order to assure appropriate and effective responses in the classroom (analogous to the management of countertransference required by professional therapists). In order to do so productively, honest introspection and open discussion with their faculty coordinator/mentor was necessary, and a time and safe space was provided after each Art Partners session.

Two particularly troublesome issues that continued to arise during discussions were student teachers' perceptions that the children were not connecting with them, and thus the children were not receiving much benefit from their teachers' efforts. When asked what real evidence they had to support these perceptions, the student teachers stated examples like: *He doesn't like me; He seems to withdraw; She hardly ever responds to me one-on-one when I try to help her; He never smiles; I'm not sure they're getting much out of what we're providing.* Although some of the student teachers did have a few students in their smaller groups who

visibly and readily demonstrated their positive regard on a regular basis, almost all shared the latter sentiments.

To address these issues, student teachers first needed to recognize how their own needs could influence their interactions with students. They were guided to recognize when they were and were not truly focused on meeting the needs of their students. All teachers want their students to like them, and novices especially look to this kind of feedback from their students as a gauge of their own worthiness as teachers. Like most beginners, these teachers needed to learn that it is not necessary to foster friendship with students in order to achieve respect, and that children's negativity or apathy toward them was not personal.

As the student teachers attained a deeper understanding of their students' lives, they were able to see that children often develop unconscious defenses that make survival possible in a world where trusting others can be risky emotional business. The student teachers' expectations were out of sync with their children's ability to manage and cope. Once they began to re-frame their approaches by putting their students' needs first, the student teachers realized that it is not a reasonable expectation for some children to drop all of their defenses so quickly and warm up to a stranger, especially one who will only be with them temporarily.

Did these important new insights prevent the student teachers' very human responses to children who did not readily exhibit overt signs of positive regard? Of course not, but that is when we learned that part of what it means to be a therapeutic teacher, and especially a teacher of children with special learning needs, is having the kind of faith and the level of perseverance that helps one: 1) align expectations with reality; 2) persevere despite the lack of ready answers to troubling situations; 3) maintain a perspective by seeing and appreciating the smaller steps that indicate progress; and 4) believe that the very hard work is having an impact. Sometimes, student teachers do not internalize this until the end of the year when it is time to say good-bye to their students. In one memorable instance, the student teachers were shocked when many of the children, even the "tough guys", responded to their farewells with hugs, tears, and sadness. The student teachers learned that the act of love inherent in teaching is unconditional, and can have far-reaching positive influences on students that they might not witness.

### **Conclusion**

Through discussion of the Art Partners program, this paper has attempted to shed light

on the importance of providing preservice teachers with early field work in schools serving urban students with special learning needs who live and learn in economically depressed areas. Topics included responsibilities of teacher training programs in higher education, teaching approaches and strategies, and new insights for training preservice teachers in the field.

We have seen how involvement in programs like Art Partners helps teachers in training to question preconceived ideas and fears about working in city schools, develop greater competence in teaching urban students with special learning needs, and increase understanding and appreciation for cultural differences. Consciousness was raised as our future teachers began to embrace the idea of seeking employment in urban schools and accept the responsibility for doing their part to ensure educational equity and excellence for all youth. In fact, all the new insights acquired through their preservice fieldwork, and *before* they teach professionally, have provided the student teachers with their own dose of 'preventative medicine'!

In their personal reflections, students who completed the Art Partners program have cited the importance of *being given the chance to experience the need for faith in the process and how to hang in there when things seem especially difficult*. They value the chance to have learned *how to do the work of establishing relationships with children who have been hurt, and who are reluctant to trust, and to realize they are just children!*

The Art Partners program has given preservice teachers an opportunity to engage in action research alongside their college professor and in collaboration with veteran classroom teachers. *We have had the chance to experiment, and take risks in a supportive and safe environment*. This kind of early experience can lay the groundwork for emerging professionals to take a scholarly approach to their own teaching through action research where relevant issues are identified, and solutions proposed, enacted and assessed in order to improve the educational experience for their students.

Finally, veteran teachers and those of us in teacher education must model and instill hope in student teachers and believe, ourselves, that change is possible in our quest to improve the quality of education for all children, including those with special learning needs. As Kohl indicated, "if you don't believe the world can be different from what it is now, you might as well quit" (Scherer, 2001). For those who have said that idealistic visions of change in education are not applicable in everyday situations with everyday teachers, Kohl replied

that “it’s no excuse to say it’s real hard to be a teacher in a real school. Then change the real schools”! He warned that to think typical teachers “can’t do creative things is to denigrate the brilliance in almost everybody” (p. 13). We must be sure to impart such messages to our future teachers as they accept the awesome responsibility of providing a quality education for every child.

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# The Adaptive Art Specialist: An Integral Part of a Student's Access to Art

SUSAN D. LOESL

How can someone paint a picture if he cannot hold a paintbrush? How can someone create in clay when she cannot touch it? How can someone draw when the drawing tools are inaccessible due to size or shape? For some students with disabilities, the ability to create as independently as possible is fostered by the work of an adaptive art specialist. For other students, an adaptive art specialist is able to creatively adapt traditional art methods so that students can participate in meaningful art making with their peers. Still, for others, the first opportunity to independently create a colorful mark that is not supported by another's hand with a drawing tool not chosen by someone else, happened because of the creative problem solving skills of an adaptive art specialist. The lives of students who have experienced adaptive art making have been changed in ways that others may not understand. As with most students, the experience of art making is very personal. And, like other student artists, their work may never hang in an art gallery or be on display in a coffee table book. The work that is created comes from the very essence of who they are. Two plus two does not have to equal four and painting outside of the lines is celebrated. Their independence in art making can be observed as broad strokes of color using a large paintbrush on a canvas, or as a meticulous line drawing, painstakingly drawn with the support of a colored pencil in a milk carton hand grip.

It is through the work of an adaptive art specialist that these doors to art making tools, media, and techniques are opened. This paper presents the rationale for an adaptive art specialist as part of the educational staff for students with disabilities. It also presents specific delivery options and strategies for self-contained and inclusive art room settings.

## **The Adaptive Art Specialist**

Many schools across the United States have limited access to art making. Budget cuts have caused school districts to cut many art and music specialists from elementary schools. Some have only minimally maintained art and music at the middle and high school levels. As a result, many art specialists lament that the skill levels of students are nowhere near where they were years ago. Today's students have difficulty with the expectations of basic, let alone rigorous, art programs. Some students only receive art experiences from their classroom

teachers (general and special education). These teachers usually have little or no art education background. They may not understand the developmental, social, and emotional milestones fostered in art making, from early childhood through high school. Classroom teachers may fail to recognize that when a young child connects his drawings of 3's and 7's as "ears" and "feet" these are the beginnings of recognizing and verbally articulating these symbols as numbers.

Symbols precede language, and symbol making can build on language skills. These well intentioned teachers offer their students basic art making experiences (often acquired from the Internet and book resources for non-art teachers). At times, the art created is viewed as "cute" or something to be sold at the school open house (e.g., a cut up magazine image, glued to the front of blank greeting card). These lessons differ from those offered by an adaptive art specialist.

In contrast, sequential and weekly art making tasks develop students' skills and control of tools, such as pencils for drawing, shading, and writing, and the proper angling of scissors for cutting. Students can gain and increase fine motor skills by manipulating materials such as clay into shapes. In traditional classrooms, these skills are not practiced enough or utilized in multiple ways for mastery and transfer to other life activities. In addition, students without much experience in art usually do not become consumers of the arts. They may lose some ability as problem solvers or feel they are not creative in other aspects of their lives.

Students with disabilities need access to art making experiences as much as or more than their peers. Students with physical disabilities need more and longer opportunities to move their hands and bodies and to increase their strength and independence. For students with social and emotional challenges, art making is often their refuge. Through art, students with cognitive challenges learn to concretely work through their understanding of abstract concepts. Art teachers and adaptive art specialists are trained to provide activities and experiences that help students be creative. They give students many opportunities to practice the physical and mental skills needed throughout their lives. An adaptive art specialist can help the art teacher develop skills to teach students with disabilities. He/she can also support general, and special education teachers in art making when an art teacher is not available.

### **Qualifications of Adaptive Art Specialist**

An adaptive art specialist's role is to help students with disabilities access their art making activities as independently as possible. This role involves adapting tools and media or

techniques for students in early childhood through high school. Some students with disabilities do not have adequate access to art making due to physical, cognitive, social, emotional or other challenges. Student access to art making is also limited by teachers who are not trained in art. These teachers need help to determine how to meet the students' unique needs in art making processes. An adaptive art specialist is an art teacher with additional certification to the standard K-12 art teacher license.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's website: [www.dpi.state.wi.us/](http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/), an adaptive art license includes a concentration in adaptive education, which includes course work in all of the following:

1. Psychology and nature of the exceptional child.
2. Modification of content, instructional strategies and learning environment for children with exceptional educational needs and other children with special needs in the regular education setting.
3. Practicum in adaptive education in the area of licensure.

This additional certification is 12-15 additional credits, and is offered as a K-12 certification. Other art education programs offer additional certification for specializing in art education for students with special needs through art therapy courses or other general adaptive courses. Art teachers interested in securing additional licensure should consult with their local university or their state's Department of Public Instruction for specific requirements.

The process of acquiring specialized certification in adaptive art education is neither mandatory nor equal in all 50 states. Many school districts seek applicants with additional adaptive certification, but it is not a requirement for employment. Adaptive art workshops and seminars are available through universities and organizations such as VSA ([www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/](http://www.kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/).) They are offered throughout the country for art teachers interested in additional training in adaptive art education.

There is a special issues focus group that is a part of the National Art Education Association (NAEA [www.arteducators.org](http://www.arteducators.org)), called Special Needs Art Educators (SNAE). Members of NAEA attending the annual convention can attend sessions and workshops related to students with disabilities presented by leaders in adaptive art. The SNAE group also has a website ([www.arteducators.org/community/committees-issues-groups/snae](http://www.arteducators.org/community/committees-issues-groups/snae)) and responds to teacher inquiries about various topics related to adaptive arts.

### **Differentiating the Adaptive Art Specialist, the Art Therapist, and Assistive Technology**

Adaptive art specialists are usually employed by a school district much like art teachers. At times, they are employed by individual schools in lieu of a traditional art teacher, if the school has a high population of students with special education needs in inclusive or self-contained classes. While they would have a regular teaching load, they might be more involved in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process than traditional art teachers.

Not to be confused with an art therapist, the adaptive art specialist is not in the art space to create therapeutic activities for students, although many people agree that engagement with art making is therapeutic on many levels. An art therapist has skills with materials and strategies for working with persons with a variety of challenges and could be a consultant to the adaptive art specialist as needed. The adaptive art specialist may also have art therapy credentials but that is not necessary to have an adaptive art teaching license. An art therapist working with a student would be written into the student's IEP as a "related service." In contrast *adaptive art* would be considered part of the student's academics and would not specifically be written in the IEP.

At times there is an overlap. If a student with a disability could only use a particular "adapted tool" (i.e., an adapted scissors or hand grips for art tools) and it was required as part of his access to the art curriculum, the tool may be written into the IEP as "*assistive technology*." The tools would then need to be available to the student in the art room, in addition to the special and general education classroom, if appropriate. The adapted tools might also be indicated on a student's IEP if the student is working with an Occupational Therapist (OT). The OT can help determine the appropriate tool for the student's particular physical need. Occasionally, OTs will provide their services to students while in the art room, as many fine and gross motor skills can be used while art making. Adaptive art tools should be standard equipment in the art room for all students to use, not just for the students with disabilities. As long as the tool is available when the specific students need it, it should not be kept in isolation from peers. It is important to remember that an adaptive art tool only becomes assistive technology when the student *requires* that particular tool to access his art making. Successful integration of adaptive tools into the art classroom for use by students with special needs is increased when the adaptive tools are available to all. Many art tools were not especially designed to be adaptive, but due to their features, are quite adaptive. They were

designed for ease of use, less weight for fatigue, and for comfort, thus making them better for everyone to use. The more the adaptive tools are a natural part of the art environment, the less they will seem to be ONLY for the students with special needs. If, per chance, there are unique features such as tiger striped blades on an adaptive scissors, it may well become the favored scissors in the group scissors bucket for all students.

There are times when the special education teacher may use adapted tools in the special education classroom. Pencil grips or securing paper to the work surface with masking tape can ease student's writing or drawing. Ideally, information about adaptations that could be used across the curriculum should be communicated with the art teacher or adaptive art specialist to smooth the transition between the classroom and the art room.

### **Modeling and Co-Teaching**

In some school districts adaptive art specialists are hired to serve the entire school district. They work with special education teachers and art specialists to help them acquire skills to work with students with disabilities in art. One training method is *model teaching*. The adaptive art specialist goes into the classroom and works with the class as a model for the teacher to observe. The adaptive art specialist provides the art activity and models ways to deliver the lesson. This strategy also allows the art or special education teachers to work with particular students of concern. Special education and art teachers have an opportunity to work with the students giving them the most challenges. They can focus on the individual students' needs rather than the entire group.

Another training method is *co-teaching*. In co-teaching, the art teacher leads the activity and the adaptive art teacher follows the art teacher's lead. The adaptive art teacher supports the art teacher's lesson plans with individual students to determine strategies later shared with the art teacher. The adaptive art specialist can work on skills such as drawing and cutting to determine if adaptive tools are needed, and which ones work most efficiently. Reviewing special education or art teachers' lesson plans is still another support provided by an adaptive art specialist. The plans can be adapted for students within the classroom and may include adapting a technique, adapting tools, or adapting media for that activity or for general use in similar tasks.

Some school districts or school district collaboratives hire adaptive art specialists to work with many smaller school districts or schools as a contact or resource person. The

adaptive art specialist can conduct workshops for numerous art teachers at one time. The specialist can also facilitate ongoing support for art teachers, provide online support to teachers through blogs and other resource websites, and assist in ordering adaptive tools for schools.

A school district in Wisconsin, the Milwaukee Public Schools, has an adaptive art lending library of art tools, such as adaptive scissors and hand grips, to fit any sized drawing tools. Art and special education teachers request these tools yearly, as the students need them, helping to reduce individual school's budgets for purchasing trial based products. Many schools eventually purchase their own adaptive art tools after "trialing" the many options from the lending library. Unfortunately, adaptive tools such as scissors are quite expensive, and purchasing them online without trialing them with the students may lead to many unused tools. What looks good on a website may not be practical when in a student's hands, especially if the tool is not advertised as "adapted." By having a district wide lending option, teachers can trial numerous tools and materials. The lending library helps teachers choose the appropriate tools for the student's unique needs, and develop their own adaptive tool resources.

Occasionally, the adaptive art specialist may have students who have very significant needs and will work with these students in addition to the student's regular art classes. These students may have physical, social, emotional, or cognitive needs best addressed in a smaller class experience first. Then these students can be better included with their regular education peers in particular activities. In these many ways, the adaptive art specialist can provide opportunities for art and special education teachers and their students to be successful in the art making process.

It would seem that art teachers should learn strategies to work with students with disabilities in their pre-service education. But, many undergraduate art teachers do not take or have the opportunity to take special education additional coursework as part of their pre-service work. They may consider it after few years of working with students who have special needs. Although most art education programs require an Exceptional Learner or Special Education overview course as part of their teacher preparedness, many do not offer courses specific to art for students with special needs or diverse learning styles.

The basic special education course is usually a class limited in scope to basic information about various disabilities (i.e., genetic, developmental, or environmental influences)

that preservice teachers might encounter. There is little time in these classes to address unique strategies for all the content areas, and not enough information for the preservice art education teacher to appropriately work with students with disabilities in the art room.

Some preservice art teachers gain basic insight and experience working with diverse students during their student teaching placements, but, again it is limited to the students in those experiences. Even then, the supervising art teacher may not possess the skills to appropriately teach all students. This again leaves the pre-service teacher underprepared for all the students he or she may encounter. Ideally, all art teacher preparation programs should have a diverse learner or adaptive art component specific to students with disabilities.

The art specialist is a teacher who engages with ALL of the students in the school building, similar to music or physical education teachers. Other teachers are educated to teach a grade level and content areas for elementary grades, or middle and high school. Until about 10 years ago, special education teachers could choose the area of specialization in working with students with special needs. Now, there are more cross categorical licenses where special education teachers learn about relatively similar disabilities and specific strategies for those students. But, even these teachers are usually limited by the age levels of the students and their range of disabilities.

### **Too Many Students, Too Few Art Specialists**

In spite of all these training shortcomings, art specialists are expected to teach art to all students in their buildings, no matter the grade level or disability. This can be an overwhelming challenge! Some elementary school art teachers teach in schools of 300 to 1100 students, with up to 28 different classes of students a week, and still see each student one time per week. In contrast, at the elementary level, classroom teachers may have the same 28-36 students in their classrooms every day, which may or may not include students with disabilities. Middle and high school art teachers have 6-7 classes a day of up to 40 students, but will see the same students every day for a semester. For special education teachers, the middle and high school numbers may be even less, with classes of 4-15 students depending upon the severity of the student's disabilities.

Some schools include students with significant challenges with their similarly aged peers ONLY in arts classes. This arrangement impacts the art teacher's ability to adequately teach either group. In these situations, regular education peers are at times requested to assist

students who need additional help. However, these “peer helpers” may not be able to fully engage in their own art making experiences. Other times, students with significant needs may be included in the art class, with the caveat from the special education teacher, that they are just there to “be” with their regular education peers. The expectation for them to “actually create art” is very low. This puts an incredible burden on an art teacher who knows that, in the right environment, students added to “socialize” would be able to create art as well.

At least, in situations such as this, teacher assistants/paraprofessionals usually come with the students to the art room. But, the assistants often are not trained in art making. They may not know how to work with art materials and their students in the way the art teacher is instructing other students. When assistants do not know the expectations of the art teacher, the students may not be able to engage with the art activity. As mentioned earlier, communication is vital to the success of the art program when other staff members help students access and complete the designated tasks.

The sheer numbers of students that art teachers see and must try to accommodate can be very challenging for teachers. When an art teacher is assigned to a school the expectation is that he will be able to teach art to anyone that enters the classroom. He is expected to know the unique needs of all of the students, have knowledge and access to adaptive tools, media and techniques that will engage each student at his or her own level, AND be able to offer a quality art education program to students considered “regular,” including gifted and talented students. These expectations are difficult to meet for any art teacher, especially those with minimal training working with students with disabilities.

Many art specialists have learned to accommodate their lessons for their students. It has not always been easy for them. Many have told this author of their concerns that art activities might not be challenging enough for their students with disabilities. They are not sure that materials are appropriate for their cognitive levels. They also wonder whether they should be doing something different to support their student’s art making experiences. Some continue to be frustrated when their school districts do not support attending workshops or national conventions that offer insights and strategies for students with special needs. School districts need to consider the needs of all of their students. One way is to support ongoing learning by their staff. Another way is to hire staff better prepared for diverse populations in art.

## Accessing and Contributing to Students' IEP's

Students with disabilities have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that is created by the team of teachers and specialists working with the student. Basic student IEP information can usually be quickly accessed via the student's online records. The IEP is usually accessible to classroom teachers, but often is not accessible to the art teacher (unless a request is made to the special education teachers). Many art teachers are not aware of their ability to access the student's IEPs. This information may not have been part of their preservice training. An adaptive art specialist can help facilitate access for the art teachers to the student's IEPs and interpret how IEP goals can affect the student's participation in the art classroom.

It is also important to note that, although it is infrequent that an art specialist attends an IEP meeting, his or her input may provide insight into the student. This is especially true if a student is in a self-contained class and the art elective is his or her only general education class. Time and time again, students with disabilities have been able to meet art classroom expectations, equal or better than their peers without adaptations, regardless of their disabilities. This may be due in part to the nature of art making where the expectations of producing art encourage creative problem solving and alternative solutions to the same problem. Despite physical, social, emotional or cognitive issues many students with disabilities, if given the opportunities and support, can create art that cannot be singled out as "adaptive." To fully create a snapshot of a student, the IEP team should consult with the art teacher or adaptive art specialist to determine the skills students demonstrate in the art setting that may not be demonstrated in other classes. For some students, the art class is the only reason they come to school, as they do not feel successful in their other academic classes. Art making is a way for them to express themselves in unique ways. They gain much needed positive attention and recognition.

As schools demand more literacy infused into all of the students' academics, art teachers are at a disadvantage regarding special education *reading* strategies. An adaptive art specialist may be able to implement the special education teacher's strategies for reading into the reading opportunities in the art classroom. The IEP must not be overlooked as a source of information for all teachers who work with the student. In fact, the special education teacher should include the art teacher's unique perspective on the student when developing the IEP.

### **Communication with Students, Paraprofessionals, and other Professionals**

Conflict can result when a paraprofessional, assistant, or educational aide comes with the class to the art room. The expectation of the art teacher is that those persons who accompany the individual student or group of students will assist the art teacher in developing appropriate activities for them. This expectation is based on the paraprofessional's DAILY engagement with the students. He or she understands the student's triggers, preferences, needed support equipment, and other support strategies. Strategies should be shared among all who work with the students so they can be implemented in other classrooms. Sharing strategies helps students in their transitions between classrooms and different teachers.

This is not often the case. Without good communication among the adults, the art teacher is left to determine supports for the students. This not only wastes art experience time, it reinvents the wheel for a student who already has a good support structure in place. Communication among professionals is critical to the success of any lesson or activity, but more so when there are students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

In academic classes, some adaptations might be minimal and require less preparation. In the art class, specialized adaptive equipment or materials for student access and manipulation must be prepared ahead of time. Not only must the art teacher prepare an art lesson for general education students, she must plan multiple adaptations that may be needed for students with special needs. It is important that good communication strategies be used to ensure that class time is not wasted and students have access to their art making.

### **Communication Devices**

Communication between the art teacher and student may take many forms, from verbal to nonverbal. When students have communication challenges, they may need support to communicate (i.e., VOCAs, or voice output communication aides). These tools can be very basic with "YES"/"NO" options, or can be many layered, with different communication options for aspects of the student's entire day (i.e., "riding the bus" and "going to art class"). The use and level of communication is determined by the IEP team in collaboration with the speech and language pathologist and is added to the student's IEP. Unfortunately, many who use VOCAs don't bring them to the art room as some teachers and parents feel that these expensive devices might become dirty with paint or other art materials. Realistically, the art materials can usually be washed off the tool, or the device can be protected and still remain

functional.

Other students use picture communication strategies such as *communication boards* with images and words designed for the particular class and activities. Pictures, with or without words, may include basic communication needs such as “Please,” “Thank you,” “I need to use the restroom,” and other phrases for the student to initiate communication or to respond. If a student does not have a way to respond to or initiate communication in the art room, his or her experience is significantly altered.

Students and staff need to be encouraged to bring the student’s VOCA (with a plastic cover to protect it if needed) or prepare an alternative means to communicate with peers and teachers. Ideally, the communication device should be programmed for all classes. The speech and language pathologist or special education teacher can train the art educator to use the device with the student. But, there may be little time available to train the art teacher and he or she must rely on the student’s ability to communicate with the device. This is fine if the student is proficient using the device. It can be frustrating when there is a means to communicate, but no way to use it.

An adaptive art specialist is trained to use the communication equipment and can be the bridge between special education and art teachers. Some practice is needed for the art specialist to be able to integrate the VOCA or other communication strategy into the art activities. Once all become comfortable using communication devices they become second nature for the student, peers, and staff.

### **Visual Strategies**

When working with students identified with autism (autism spectrum disorders - ASD), *visual strategies* are often used in the classroom and the art room. For example, a visual schedule communicates the sequence of upcoming activities or events through the use of objects, photographs, icons, words, or a combination of tangible supports (Hume, 2007). In the art room, a visual schedule of individual activities during the overall art activity can help the student to attend to individual tasks (e.g., “Group listen,” “Get supplies,” “Draw,” “Share,” “Cleanup”). The entire activity or task sequence may be listed on a poster board with Velcro™ (vertically or horizontally) using icons/images with words below the images. Each part of the task is placed on a board, often with Velcro™, so that the student can more independently see the sequence of events in the art classroom for that day. As students complete a task in the

sequence, it can be removed from the board and the next task is the focus for the student.

Students with autism have a number of strengths, including visual-spatial skills and sustained attention (Quill, 1997). Visual strategies can help students who have difficulty with language comprehension understand what is expected of them in the activity (Stokes, 2004). In the art room, these visual supports can help students who get distracted and off task. Referring to the visual schedule of the class, they can self-direct back to the appropriate activity without teacher intervention. These visual strategies can extend into art making procedures, techniques, and labeling of materials in the art room. When students feel they can independently make choices, they are empowered to take more risks when the opportunities arise.

### **Resources and Adaptations of Materials**

Art teachers look EVERYWHERE for information about how to adapt art making for students with disabilities. When they do manage to find a paper, a book or a website online, quite a bit of information is lacking. There are now two great book resources, published through the NAEA, that are collaboratively written by art teachers and special education teachers. *Reaching and Teaching Art to Students with Special Needs* (Gerber & Guay, 2006) highlights specific categories of disabilities and unique issues of art with students with disabilities. The other book, *Understanding Students with Autism through Art* (Gerber & Kellman, 2010) focuses on successful strategies from art teachers who are leaders in the field of art making for students with autism. Both books are currently used across the nation as textbooks for adaptive art courses.

Some art teachers seek adaptive art training through colleges, universities, at conferences, or in workshops. They wish they could have had training so much earlier. They need ongoing support as the needs of their students change with the increasing numbers of students with disabilities in inclusive and self-contained art classes. Anecdotally, art teachers who have conducted internet searches discover that the field of art therapy has addressed persons with disabilities in art making for many years. Some art teachers even feel that art therapists should work with students with disabilities and that these techniques are best left to the art therapists.

This attitude is understandable, but there is room for both professions to work with students with disabilities. In fact, many early art therapists did work with children with

disabilities because children with significant challenges were not in the schools. They were in hospitals, treatment centers, orphanages or other facilities that segregated children with disabilities from their peers. Art therapist, Frances Anderson, in 1978, wrote *“Art for All the Children.”* The second edition (1994) continues to be the foundation for many approaches to adaptive art making for children. Anderson’s book demonstrates how to adapt art tools with simple materials (i.e., tape, a wooden dowel) as well as how to work with students with specific challenges. Her techniques are still relevant today and have guided many art teachers and art therapists for years.

Another book by Anderson, *Art-Centered Education and Therapy for Children with Disabilities* (1994), provides information from both art education and art therapy perspectives. Judith Rubin, another art therapist, in *Child Art Therapy 25th Anniversary Edition*, (2005), describes strategies for working with students with disabilities from an art therapy and art education point of view. It embraces the philosophy that children can experience art on many levels and taps into the child’s various sensory modalities for engagement that is “complex, multilayered and persistent”. . *Exceptional Children, Exceptional Art*, a book by art therapist David Henley (1992), describes the child, using developmental theories, to help art teachers and art therapists determine the best ways to engage children with disabilities in art making. A number of adaptive art specialists are both art teachers and art therapists. They have gained insight and practical strategies from the fields of art education and art therapy.

### **Adapting Art Materials**

Some children interact with art materials to create their own ideas and to share them. Others are more engaged by the visual mark making capabilities of tools, from markers to paintbrushes. Still other students manipulate materials for their purely kinesthetic experience, such as pouring out glue onto a piece of paper. They seem to be mesmerized watching how white glue slowly oozes out of a glue bottle held above a piece of paper and grows on the paper into a white, creamy and sticky entity. This process thoroughly entralls them, to the exclusion of anything else around them. Getting the student to STOP letting ALL that glue out, to just use a dab or a glue stick can completely shut down the enjoyment of both the materials and the experience.

Another student with autism may be so tactile defensive that he can barely touch clay unless the clay is in a plastic bag and under a towel. But, through gentle support and small,

incremental steps, he may be able to gain enough confidence or interest, or trust, to touch the clay without the supports. That is his engagement with the art task of making a clay pot.

It has been said that a student, struggling in other academic classes, may be an outstanding art student. This is understandable. The student is able to conceptualize, problem solve, manipulate materials in new ways, and stay engaged in an art task longer than in tasks in other academic classes. It has also been said that students who have art classes tend to do better in their other academics. Creating art develops skills used in other classes, such as critical thinking, subtleties, and multiple perspectives (Eisner, 2004). Skills learned in art tasks can transfer to other aspects of the student's life as well.

In art making, the student is free to create new visions of his own reality, based on his interactions with materials, techniques, and tools. Yes, there are basic ways to work with materials, but if a student cannot use them in "traditional ways," alternative methods may help. The adaptive art specialist "marries" the fields of art education and art therapy into a hybrid profession to give opportunities that may never otherwise be envisioned or implemented.

Students with social, emotional or behavioral issues may work through some of their personal issues in art class. There is something inherent about the creative process within each of us that can help us become creative and productive members of society. At times, it is the student who discovers alternative ways to use art materials. The art room is the perfect environment to experiment and devise alternative ways to be creative - and does not need to be considered "adaptive." In fact, opportunities to observe creativity in its most basic and pure form are truly moments to savor.

### **Adapting Tools, Media, and Teaching Techniques**

When accommodating or modifying an art activity, there are three areas to consider. They are the tools, the media used, and the techniques needed to complete the activity. Students entering the art classroom bring varied skills, despite their apparent age and developmental level. Their skills may not be obvious. Sometimes, the *student's* own creativity, perseverance, and personal ability are all she needs to problem solve for herself.

An adaptation may be as simple as a pencil grip or an adapted refillable paint brush. The student may advocate for a particular tool or media accommodations that have worked well in the past. Many adaptations for tools are not necessarily marketed for students with disabilities. So, to some degree, the adaptations an art educator or adaptive art specialist

makes for students with disabilities can also be beneficial for students without disabilities. The key is to find the best ways for students to be as independent as possible, access their art making, while maintaining the essence of the art activity or the part of the process in which the student is engaged. Not all experiences necessarily become great works of art. For some students, the mere manipulating of art media freely, without hand over hand “intrusion,” is an art unto itself.

As mentioned previously, input from other professionals working with students can be provided to the art teacher through the IEP, but the IEP is focused on other academic skills such as reading and writing skills. The art teacher might not realize that IEP information can provide strategies for a variety of skills that the student might need in the art room. If a student has difficulty reading, an assignment to read a handout about an art piece, or to go online to read about an artist or art movement, may need to be adapted. Adaptations may include a digital or audio copy of the handout for the student to read on the computer or listen to on an MP3 player. When seeking information online, computer software that reads any text, including websites, can be accessed by that student to complete the assignment. Information about the student’s access to the tools (in this case, the reading assignment) can be shared between the art teacher and the student’s classroom teacher.

The art teacher can request to the IEP team that the occupational therapist (OT) evaluate the adaptive art tool needs of the students. An adaptive art specialist can also provide an onsite consultation with the art teacher and student to determine regular and adaptive tools the student may need during the school year. These include cutting tools, drawing tools, gluing tools, and painting tools. Some adaptations can be generalized to any drawing tool, such as a milk carton handgrip or a built up handle using pipe insulation. Others may be specifically built into the tool, such as an oversized handled marker or large finger loops on a pair of scissors.

**Scissors.** There are so many varieties of scissors available. Not all are identified as “adapted,” but they can be adapted due to their various features. Choosing appropriate scissors involves initially observing the student’s hands to see how they grasp onto things. There is literally a scissors or cutting tool for every hand, but there are a number of basic considerations:

- What is the student’s hand size?
- Can they repetitively open and close their fingers and thumb to make a scissors

function?

- How do they hold scissors in order to cut?
- Do they have use of both hands for holding the item to be cut and to use the scissors?
- Are they safe with scissors or easily distractible and could be considered unsafe?
- Do they prefer a kinesthetic experience when cutting (i.e., using an electric scissors with a button switch)?
- How large are their hands, and will their fingers fit into traditionally sized finger and thumb loops?

When these questions are answered, the task to find appropriate scissors becomes easier. At times, a number of scissors may need to be tried. Trialing different scissors will determine the most functional pair. There will still be students for whom the scissors cutting experience will need support. Loop behind loop scissors are “helper” scissors in which the student is assisted by another person to “feel” how to open and close the scissors. After practicing with a peer or an adult, students may graduate to another, more independent pair of scissors.

Cutting tools may completely eliminate the traditional “open close” function. A rolling blade or table top scissors allows the student to push the tool, using just one hand, on the table top to make a straight cut of the paper. A pair of scissors is an art tool that can lead to a greater sense of independence. The scissors tool can make lots of pieces of paper. Students can change something large into something very small. Scissors empower the student in ways that other tools cannot.

**Drawing tools.** A large variety of drawing tools can be used by students for specific art activities. Adaptations are needed when students have difficulty holding onto a drawing tool and using it for their art. A drawing tool is ineffective when it cannot be used to make a mark. This may be due to the angle of the student’s hand or limited grip strength. The tool may need to be angled or even weighted in order for the student to draw.

Other times, the work surface may need to be raised to be closer to the student for the student to be able to draw. A slant board or large, 3”, 3-ring binder laid on its side can be used to accomplish this. The 30 degree angle works well for many students. It is actually a less fatiguing angle for all students when writing than working flat on the desk or table surface. There are also commercially made adapted table top easels if the slant board is not angled or

high enough for the student to work.

Drawing tools usually need to be adapted for students with physical challenges. A student who cannot adequately grasp a colored pencil, crayon, or watercolor paint brush will need accommodations. For example, the handle of the tool may need to be enlarged with foam pipe insulation, a milk carton handle cut from a milk container with a drawing tool pushed into the hole in the handle, or by using a Universal Cuff™. A Universal Cuff™ is an adapted hand grip with a piece of Velcro™ and a small pocket that is securely put on the student's hand. When the drawing tool is placed in the pocket, it does not need to be held by the grasp of the student's hand. If the student becomes distracted while wearing the Universal Cuff™, the student can get back to drawing without dropping the tool. It becomes a physical reminder, or prompt, to stay on task.

There are a wide variety of drawing tools that are either designed to be adaptable for many purposes, or due to their shape, weight, or other unique features, are already considered to be adapted. Some crayons, colored pencils and markers are shaped like triangles so that the art tools do not roll away. Their shape helps facilitate a more appropriate drawing/writing grip. Another drawing tool is a Tri-Write™ crayon. It is shaped like a pyramid to accommodate a basic palmer grasp for persons unable to hold a traditional drawing tool. The Tri-Write™ crayon is very useful for students with unique grasps. Often, a drawing tool configured to meet a student's unique needs, can create independence the student never had before.

**Painting tools.** Some brushes have large, built-up handles or a soft gel cushion at the place where one's fingers touch the feral of the brush. There are also painting tools that are not even painting tools (i.e., a liquid dishwashing sponge tool). They can hold paint instead of liquid soap and offer students a larger tool with which to paint. In fact, any tool used in the art making process for painting, drawing, linoleum cut printing or even weaving, may need to be lengthened, shortened, or have the handles built up for grasp issues or ease of use. Once basic tool adaptations are set, most art activities can be accessed by students with any area of challenge.

Unfortunately, a great number of art classrooms have minimal adapted tools available for their students. The most important adaptive tool for art teachers to have is the adapted scissors. Many art classrooms are inclusive. Students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms are often hesitant to use adaptive tools that indicate they have special education needs to their

peers. In order to more easily integrate adaptive tools into the general/inclusive education setting, adapted or alternative materials should be available to all students. Buckets of scissors, paintbrushes with adaptive hand grips and a variety of drawing materials should be included with the traditional media and tools for art making and made accessible to all students.

Students who need the tools should not have to ask for them. Other students may choose to use the tools, and at the same time, help those who need or *require* them become less self-conscious about using them. The novelty of the adapted materials and tools quickly wears off for students who do not require the tools, so there rarely is a wait to use the particular tools.

As previously indicated, the use of the adaptive art tools *required* for students with disabilities should be included in the student's IEP. However, it is not necessary for tools to be written into the IEP for students to use them. What is important is that students who need the tools have them accessible for all of their art making. An adaptive art specialist can help the art teacher identify adaptive tools for the inclusive arts classroom, based on the IEP's.

It is the school's responsibility to purchase adaptive art tools for students requiring them. Tools can be purchased from the school's general budget, the arts budget, or the special education budget. This is a decision made by the principal or school district. Ideally, any adaptive tools that a student requires for art making should be included in the student's IEP. As the student transitions between grade levels and schools, teachers have information about adaptive tools that work well for the student. This helps teachers have the necessary tools available to make a seamless transition. It is also helpful when the student is able to be a self-advocate and can tell his new art teacher about the special adaptive tools he needs in the art classroom.

**Media.** There are times when traditional art media become inappropriate for certain students. For example, traditional clay is an art medium used by all grade levels and students. Although it is non-toxic, eating clay is not appropriate and can cause some intestinal issues. When students are oral (they like to taste or eat various art materials), alternative media may be a solution so they can engage in similar art making experiences with their peers. A basic salt, flour and water dough, also known as Baker's Clay, is safe and non-toxic. It can be modeled like other clays and can be as textured, as traditional clay with lots of grog, by adding various amounts and grinds of salt. Other alternative clay media include recipes that use cornstarch or

Jell-O™.

Some ceramic glazes used to finish clay pieces are also considered to be toxic. An alternative way of finishing the clay could be to paint it with watercolors and seal it with a fixative such as gloss medium or spray varnish. But, the spray varnish and some gloss mediums are also considered to be toxic. Those processes should be handled by the classroom or art teacher.

A few students may try to drink paint if it is put into a container that looks like a cup. Using a *flat lid* from margarine or ice cream helps students differentiate what is paint and what is to drink. Another strategy for students who eat or drink art supplies (especially paint), is to use alternative materials such as Jell-O™, pudding, or sweetened condensed milk. A box of Jell-O™ with sugar with just enough cold water added to it creates a “shiny paint”. It becomes a very transparent and high gloss paint that looks a lot like watercolors, but there are no concerns about the student drinking it.

A finger paint activity can also cause some concern. Some students like to lick their fingers after they have moved the paint around the surface of the table or on the paper. If the teacher uses pudding, which comes in various colors or can be colored with food colors, there is less concern if the students lick their fingers. But, since art teachers do not want students to equate art materials with eating materials, teachers should be clear to call the materials art materials and not food materials, calling Jell-O™ paint “Shiny Paint,” or calling the pudding paint “Thick Paint.” That way, the use of the words “Jell-O™” or “pudding” does not enter into the art activity to confuse a child. Jell-O™ and pudding paint usually have scents that regular paints often do not. This can aid in student engagement, especially for students who have sensory issues. For these students, scents can also be added to regular tempera paint. At times, heating or putting ice cubes into the paint can provide still another, different sensory experience.

Some students on the autism spectrum can be highly sensitive to the sensory aspects of art tools and materials, either positively or negatively. The adaptive art specialist may need to increase the use of sensory materials in the activity to engage these students in multiple sensory levels. Or they may need to back off from some sensory experiences that can over-stimulate them. For example, when using Mr. Sketch™ scented markers, the adaptive art teacher needs to be aware of how students may be affected by the scents produced by these

markers. Not every student finds these kinds of sensory materials motivational or enjoyable. Use of scents, for students with visual impairments, can be a way to make choices independently about their markers, crayons, or colored pencils. But, for students with sensory overload, it might be a better decision not to use Mr. Sketch™ markers or other scented products. These students can become highly agitated or overly sensitive to the art activity. This information can be discussed with the special education teacher to better understand the sensory needs of students with autism or for students that are sensitive to scents.

Another adapted medium is an oversized watercolor palette from Crayola™. This four color palette not only minimizes the choices available for the students (only red, blue, yellow and green), it also has a much larger target for the students to be able to connect their brush to the paint. For printing, instead of using traditional linoleum for linoleum printing, Soft Kut™ is a soft eraser- like consistency material that is a lot easier to cut with linoleum tools than traditional linoleum. Because it is softer, students have had more success, without cutting themselves, and the results are very similar to traditional linoleum materials. Tools that are considered adapted for accessing traditional linoleum materials are the *pull type* cutting tools. The student pulls the tool TOWARDS them instead of pushing it away. This process minimizes the potential cutting of the student's hand while holding down the material. Many teachers already use the "Soft Kut™" material, but are not aware of the pull type linoleum blades. Some of the linoleum handles also have loops in them instead of the bulbous handle. The loops help both the student's accuracy and stability when working with the materials.

Adapting traditional art techniques helps students with disabilities approximate and/or replicate the same processes and activity as their peers. When art teachers plan an activity for their students, they need to identify which parts, materials, and tools of the art making activity are the most important for student learning. For example, when working with a child who has difficulty cutting and the task is to create a collage of mixed materials, the adaptive art specialist needs to decide whether to work on cutting skills or deciding which materials will go into the collage. If the goal of the activity is to work on cutting skills, then the student should have both the appropriate tools and time to practice cutting a variety of materials and choices for his collage.

The adaptive art specialist and art teacher often have a number of adaptation possibilities within each art activity, or to be considered during the entire school year's art

activities. If the student has difficulty using cutting tools, it may slow the process down so much that the collage building is the least important part. If the activity focuses on the child's ability to make decisions, manipulate the materials, and place them independently in a collage, then the cutting aspect can be removed from the entire process. The adaptive art specialist might even pre-cut and prepare materials so the focus is on choice making, material manipulation, and placement in the collage piece. At still another time, the activity may focus more on cutting skills. Later, when the student's skills are more developed, the activity may be able to integrate both the cutting and the finished piece together.

Another example of altering traditional techniques in art making is when using papier-mâché. Some students with sensory challenges find it difficult to touch materials that appear to be uncomfortable to touch. Those materials often appear to be soft, squishy, wet, or otherwise different. Traditionally, when using papier-mâché, an art teacher demonstrates by taking a piece of newspaper, dipping it into the art paste and using fingers, pulls the excess paste off of the newspaper and applies it to the shape to be papier-mâchéd. But, for students with sensory issues, the expectation of touching the papier-mâché paste with their fingers may completely shut down their engagement in the art activity. An alternative way to do this is to use a paint brush to paint the art paste onto the shape to be papier-mâchéd, then press the dry newspaper piece onto the shape. Students paint the paste on top of that -- without having to directly touch the paste with their fingers (unless they want to and many times they eventually will touch it). The result is the same, the object gets papier-mâchéd, but the process has been adapted for the needs of the student.

Frequently, art activities are designed for students to create from their imagination or mind's eye, without the use of any visual support. Students with cognitive challenges may be very concrete in their approach to their art projects. They may not be able to create from their mind's eye and may need the additional support of visual images or a sample of the expected outcome. This does not in any way undermine or cause the student to copy. It empowers the student to see how an image is created from one's mind's eye and is transferred to a created image. When students are able to understand an abstract concept in a concrete way with a sample, they can process the experience on their own level and be more independent.

### **Conclusion**

The adaptive art specialist is an often overlooked professional who can provide needed

supports for schools and their students. When a school has a high population of students with special needs, many art teachers may not be appropriately trained to work with the challenges students with disabilities present in the art class. The adaptive art specialist has that training. As indicated by the examples above, an adaptive art specialist can offer meaningful, independent, and appropriate art making experiences for ALL students. Adaptive art specialists can help students with disabilities reach their full potential in art making, today and for the rest of their lives.

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# Art, Developmental Disability and Self-Representation

ALICE WEXLER

Since the 1970s, teachers have broadened the scope of their classrooms, replacing traditional curricula-centered teaching practices with student-centered learning. Teachers implementing methodologies, such as the theory of Multiple Intelligences and differentiated learning, have initiated new strategies in education. Ideological and practical changes are meant to accommodate children with a variety of abilities. In their search to find supportive resources that sustain and enhance these approaches, educators might look to other fields and models outside their domain that serve children, adolescents and young adults with disabilities.

Community art centers for individuals with disabilities have been employing non-traditional strategies for the past 40 years, and many might serve as exemplary instructional models for public education. Success lies in the staff's awareness of disability from the point of view of the disabled artists' visual representations. The art centers' categorical rejection of methodology that reflects the prevailing medical paradigm of disability within the discourses of genetics, biology and inheritance has also become an important conversation in higher education (Derby, 2011; Eisenhauer, 2007, 2008; Wexler 2009, 2011). The medical model designates a determinist viewpoint toward disability rather than situating it within a range of social variation. In contrast, Creative Growth Art Center (CGAC) in Oakland, California, and Grass Roots Art and Community Effort (GRACE) in Hardwick, Vermont, use methods of teaching that allow artists to develop their own iconography without restriction. What has emerged are the artists' own narratives and self-representations, bringing art and education closer to eroding the boundaries between normality and disability as these terms are defined by Western cultural standards (Wexler, 2011). They imply that social systems can be reoriented so that individuals with disabilities exist as active agents in a participatory environment, that "...only this body, this voice, can communicate in this time and place" (Swan, 2002, p. 294). In this paper, I argue that the medical model suggests that people with disabilities lead stagnant lives and should be cured. In contrast, community arts centers offer an alternative model that might influence unexamined expectations and assumptions about disability that drive special education practices.

Children, adolescents and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities

present a pedagogically challenging situation for art and special educators. Education practices often embody the medical model of disability and use such techniques as external rewards that do not honor the disabled individual's ways of knowing. Rather, special education services are charged with bringing children closer to the physicality, behavior, thinking, and reasoning of "normals" (e.g., walking is better than not walking, seeing is better than not seeing, hearing is better than not hearing, talking is better than not talking, etc.).

Many educators are not yet prepared to engage emotionally and empathetically with children with developmental disabilities. Only 40 years ago, before the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and later the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)), children with these disabilities would not have enjoyed the civil right of being educated in the classroom. Institutionalization would have been the only option for children considered "uneducable," the label used at the time. As a result, institutionalization has left its traces of an institutionalized identity on its former inhabitants by framing the individual in medical terms. For example, in the 1920s children with Down syndrome were "unable to speak." Until the 1970s they were "unable to read." But miraculously, today they can. What changed?

### **Roots of Bias**

Pedagogical ambivalence with severe physical and mental "abnormality" is a reflection of a historical fear of the incarcerated—the intentionally invisible Other—safely removed from the world. The division between normal and Other has roots in the collective unconscious, archetypes, myths, and legends. In order to judge the roles that myths play, particularly in literature, Fiedler (1996) writes,

We must understand what myths really are: namely, projections of certain unconscious impulses otherwise confessed only in our dreams, but which once raised to the level of full consciousness serves as grids of perception through which we screen so-called "reality." When these myths are embodied in literature, translated into words on a page or images on TV, they become part of our daily experience as "real" as any other. (p. 34)

Myths and legends are the language of emotion, sometimes mixing the "real" with fear and apprehension. Fiedler's reality lies between quotation marks, between conscious reality and the conflicted inner reality that responds to mythic representations of difference in literature and other art forms. The fear that we might appear freakish to someone else lies in our adolescent

unconscious only to rise up at the site of physical and mental deviation. Almost universally, activation of fear is preceded by gut-level physiological responses (Adams, 2001). But rather than reassuring us that we are normal, the Other reveals what Fiedler calls the *Secret Self*. Now that psychoanalysis has mined the depths of our unconscious, how might we "...coexist with others who are unlike us instead of engulfing or rejecting their differences. We need better ways of accommodating the broad swath of human variability..." (p. 9).

### **The Effects of Institutionalization**

From the 17th to the 19th century, institutionalization and removal from the community are described by Foucault (2009) as an encircling of the "insistent fearsome figure" (p. 5). Justifying the confinement of the "mad person," the catch-all for all that is menacing in the world, is dependent on the perceptions and causes of and reasons for mental illness, manifested with the metaphors and symbols of the time; an example of which might be madness perceived as deviance, lacking responsibility for the social good and, therefore, deserving of punishment. Like Fiedler, Foucault (2009) writes that the Other's symbolic placement of madness is turned inward "if we admit that what was once the visible fortress of social order is now the castle of our own consciousness" (p.11). The internalized "fearsome figure" conjured by madness within our consciousness is arguably mortality, death, forces darker than death, nothingness, or "the great solar madness of the world" (p. 28). If madness engulfs the world, then reasonableness (normality) cannot exist to oppose it, hence modernism's bifurcation.

The notion of normal becomes the standard by which abnormal is identified, encircled, and removed from "normal" society. The abnormal then becomes the depository of the normal's own alienation. The scientific age of the 19th and 20th centuries inherited the left-over morality and punishment, which "forms the bedrock of our 'scientific' knowledge of mental illness" (p. 106). All that was needed was the label "mental patient," and the proof of progress in the age of scientific positivism was sealed. "In the wake of deconstruction and psychoanalysis, we now seem capable of understanding such extreme corporeal alterity *only* as a necessary byproduct of the oppressive and exclusionary operations of the normal" (Adams, 2001, p. 9).

In 1972, after Geraldo Rivera's exposure of Willowbrook State School and Letchworth Village, the latter considered one of the premier American institutions (Trent, 1994), special schools and classrooms were also called into question.

At Willowbrook, Rivera told his viewers, one hundred percent of all residents contracted hepatitis within six months of entering the institution. Most of the severely disabled residents were naked or only partially clothed. Many too lay on dayroom floors in their own feces. (p. 258)

Looked upon as dehumanizing by parents and public officials, their practices generated new debates between conservatives and libertarians, and resulted in what we know as inclusion. In part, the movement toward a more equal and open education was promoted by sociologists who found that the label "mental retardation" had little to do with mental capacity. "Placed in special education programs, children behaved in ways that merely fulfilled the ascribed label" (p. 260).

### **Disability Studies: A New Postmodern Paradigm**

The passage of PL 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, revised in 2004 with the reauthorization of the 1998 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,, mandated that all children are to have a free and appropriate public education regardless of ability. Prior to 1975, children with developmental disabilities were considered "unable to learn." The goal then was to include children with disabilities in regular classrooms, which usually began in the art room. While the landmark law was a profound equalizer toward access to education, it also confined the discourse of disability to the medical model. As early as 1989 Douglas Blandy warned that special education would promote stereotypes about disabled people, "which propagates stigma....The implication of the medical model for schools is that disabled learners are positioned as helpless dependents requiring unusual services from non-disabled educators, paraprofessionals, and peers" (Derby, 2011, p. 96).

Disability studies -- initiated by people inside the label with discursive and narratological accounts of being disabled -- is indebted to the activists of the 1970s who were instrumental in the passage of the landmark public law 94-142. For example, the members of ADAPT (American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit) gathered a "hidden army of civil rights"<sup>1</sup> consisting of angry people with disabilities wanting nothing more than the equal right of access to public transportation, not charity or welfare that perpetuated the myth that disabled people are helpless and dependent. ADAPT focus then was on access to buses, buildings, public places and offices that would make them competitive in the employment market and so, financially and emotionally independent. In 1987, 66 percent of people with disabilities were

unemployed, with two-thirds of those capable of working (Shapiro, 1994). Later, with some successes in basic rights, the disability movement cast a wider net and addressed pervasive discrimination.

As recently as 1988, Lisa Carl rolled up in her wheelchair to a movie theater in Tacoma, Washington, and was turned away. This incident catapulted an army of activists comparable to the aftereffect of Rosa Park's refusal to sit in the back of a Birmingham bus. Carl's story was told in front of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) panel, which would extend the same protection that had been given minorities in the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Shapiro, 1994).

No other group of citizens was so insulated or so removed from the American mainstream....For the first time, people with disabilities were asking Americans to recognize that the biggest problem facing them was discrimination. They sought access and opportunity, not charity. (p. 106)

The civil disobedience of "The hidden army" of disabled activists eventually made possible the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). After a long battle, the ADA bill was signed into law by George H. Bush on July 26, 1990.

Even after the passage of ADA, the collective psyche remained the same, despite the new positive terminology, such as the language of people first before disability (e.g., individuals *labeled* as having autism or individuals *with* or *who have* a disability). But with ADA enacted, disability activism was free to move from political praxis to academia, problematizing the disabled as invisible in cultural studies that was until then dominated by issues of race and gender. Postmodern and cultural constructivist movements that challenged the unexamined assumptions about race and gender now opened the way for a formal discourse in disability as a discursive category, "previously the exclusive domain of the biological, medical, and rehabilitative professions..." (Jeffreys, 2002, p. 32). A new postmodern paradigm expanded the repertoire of models of physical difference as a cultural phenomenon rather than a biological condition, a nuanced subject of identity and representation in all cultural forms, both aesthetic and popular (Mitchell, 1997). In the following paragraphs I describe a community arts center that is committed to promoting the self-definition of individuals with developmental disabilities through works of art. The production of professional work calls into question public assumptions about the artistic and cognitive potential of individuals labeled as having autism.

### Alternative Sites of Learning

Creative Growth Art Center (CGAC) has been operating in Oakland, California for 40 years, which makes it the oldest arts center for individuals with developmental disabilities in the world. Several other arts centers such as Grass Roots Art and Community Effort (GRACE) in Hardwick, Vermont, operate with the same philosophy: to provide optimal opportunities for their artists, both artistically and professionally, in a social environment. Both centers uphold the tenet of “non-teaching.” Both facilitate learning and exploration through a variety of media. Because CGAC has been in existence longer, it has established a broad range of media, such as sculpture, printmaking, wood, ceramics, fiber arts, and rug making, with the recent addition of digital film and animation. Painting and drawing is the mainstay and has served as the entry point for new artists. CGAC opened in 1974 as a part-time program with six students under founders Elias Katz, a psychologist with training in developmental disabilities, and his partner, Florence Ludins-Katz, an artist and art teacher. They recognized the aesthetic value of the body of work made known in the world by German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn. His collection was the precursor of Art Brut, the term that artist Jean Dubuffet called his collection of art work in Lausanne, Switzerland. Prinzhorn began his collection as both an art historian and psychiatrist at the psychiatric clinic at the University of Heidelberg.

Although Prinzhorn’s project began for diagnostic purposes, as an art historian his interest in the art of his patients was more subjective than clinical. I conjecture that his collection was the start of an interest in the mentally ill and disabled from less of a clinical perspective and more as a spectator of pioneers in a mysterious art form. Roger Cardinal (1972) wrote *Outsider Art* as a study of Art Brut, and coined the term “Outsider Art” for the sake of his British readers (Cardinal, 2008). “Outsider Art” became the favored terminology although art historians and critics debate which artists fit into this label.

A central element in the definition of Outsider Art, and one particularly cherished by its first theorist Jean Dubuffet, himself a renegade artist, is that it diverges radically from our shared cultural expectation as to what art ought to look like and how it ought to be produced. Outsider Art represents a mode of independent art making which ignores tradition and academic criteria. Instead, it reflects a strong expressive impulse, running free of the communicative conventions to which we are accustomed. (p.2)

Far from a medical model version of the art of the developmentally disabled, the Katzs looked

upon their artists' works as meritorious and deserving of gallery presence. CGAC's current gallery was the first in the country to focus on the art of the disabled.<sup>2</sup>

### **Methods and Strategies**

CGAC is a "non-teaching institution" and teaching staff are called peer-teachers or facilitators to underline the equanimity between the teaching guides and artists. Peer-teacher Michael Hall describes his primary goal as bringing the artwork to the level that the artists want it to be. But while the program believes in a hands-off approach, some media involve more intervention than others. For example, artists in the wood program could not have *carte blanche* because of potentially dangerous tools.

Until about two years ago, half of CGAC's teaching staff consisted of art teachers from local public schools. This relationship was mutually beneficial because both agencies could provide richer services for adults and adolescents with disabilities. It also provided CGAC with more monies to service their artists since they didn't have to pay the peer-teachers' wages and benefits. With the economic downturn, the collaboration ceased to exist. Although a critical period for the art center, newly hired peer-teachers brought new media and talent to the program (J. DeStaebler, personal communication, July, 2012).

According to Studio Manager Jordan DeStaebler, the process of making art is not always comfortable, as most artists, disabled or not, will agree. The "sidelining" of the teaching staff provides room for disturbing emotions and thoughts to be worked out through materials. But not all materials for all artists will translate their demons into symbolization and metaphor. Availability of various materials provides opportunities for artists to produce work that reflects their psychic needs. A well-known example is Judith Scott<sup>3</sup> who seemed disengaged until she stumbled into the fiber arts "class," and went on to become an internationally recognized fiber artist.

"CGAC was not on my radar. I just needed a job," says Destaebler (Personal communication, July, 2012). Without previous contact with disabilities he was overwhelmed and anxious, but in time the barriers disappeared and were replaced by personal relationships. "In my time here I've been repeatedly and pleasantly amazed at how intelligence manifests itself in a myriad of ways when there are obstacles to someone unable to communicate verbally (J. Destaebler, personal communication, July, 2012)."

The staff privileges art over disability and finds the work of their artists to have the same merit as mainstream art. Similarly, Hall says he focuses on the person and not the disability, working around and through its limitations.

For example, Carl Hendrickson, who has severe cerebral palsy, who can't do the physical work that he wants to, but he is *determined* to do as much of it as he can. And he can't communicate; he's non-verbal, so you just find a way to work with him. And he comes up with brilliant solutions all the time. So it's working with the person, and then you run up against part of his disability that is a challenge for a moment and you find a way around it. (M. Hall, personal communication, July, 2012)

The egalitarian culture of CGAC promotes non-judgmental approaches. Permanent changes in the perspectives of the non-disabled are usually motivated by mutuality and friendship. In contrast, the inclusion and special classrooms of public schools often reinforce the inaccessibility, both physically and mentally, of the curriculum, events, and socialization for children with disabilities. The terms themselves, "special needs" and "special education," set up barriers to a shared education and socialization between children with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Derby, 2011). "Special" and other euphemisms prohibit students with disabilities from acknowledging their own *real* differences. Euphemisms prohibit the placement of *disability*--a term representing a large minority with strengths and weaknesses--on the same continuum as *ability*. The terminology conveys the "boosterism and do-gooder mentality endemic of the paternalistic agencies that control many disabled people's lives" (Linton, as cited in Derby, 2011, p. 103).

This is not to say that the biological and psychological scars of the disability disappear. Many of the first generation of artists came from institutions and were saddled with the "mentally ill" label before autism was diagnosed. As mentioned earlier, institutionalization had effects on personalities, but while some artists might be withdrawn, "their art can be incredibly expressive, indicative of an internal state of being that might not be apparent" (J. Destaebler, personal communication, July, 2012). Recognizing artwork as aesthetic in and of itself--not a device for diagnosis or normalization--is a critical difference between the practices of community arts centers and the artistic methodologies of special education and art therapy. Children who make art in self-contained classrooms and residential facilities are often considered without talent because they cannot render a recognizable human figure,

understand the difference between foreground and background or two-point perspective. Because of the restrictive national and state art standards that trickled down from the mainstream, students with disabilities are unable to find their own symbols and metaphors that are carriers of raw emotions and internal conflict. Assumptions are made about the lack of their internal life that precludes the making of personalized art. Special education constructs the very barriers and walls that are intended to be brought to the ground.

But precisely because all artists use art as language, we are clued into their internal lives. Probably because many of the artists at CGAC are not verbal, such as the well-known Dan Miller, George Wilson, Donald Mitchell, and Judith Scott, their work is complex, dedicated and often more intense than mainstream artists. Possibly they are more intense and revealing because they are not inhibited by “the stifling internal critic that is so lethal,” nor weighed down by art history or academic training (J. Staebler, personal communication, July, 2006).

Although they are considered Outsider Artists, they do not fit into the typical model of the lone artist making art in isolation. They are, however, untrained, most having never made art before coming to CGAC. Community is essential in their process, and they will often be influenced by each other, one of the benefits of the program, says Hall. Artists borrow from each other, develop their own work in a new direction, sometimes returning back again and continuing on to new iconography.

As I sit in my studio, usually alone and isolated, I sometimes think that maybe I’m the Outsider. I struggle to get to the place that people here get to freely. This is a great creative hotbed that can be applied to other sites, not just for people with disabilities. (M. Hall, personal communication, July 2012)

### **Implications and Conclusion**

I argue throughout this paper that behavioral strategies, when used alone, usually do not meet the cognitive potential of children with developmental disabilities that has been revealed through new communication technologies.<sup>4</sup> The model of sharing art, knowledge, mutuality and respect between the disabled individual and the teacher or mentor gives new meaning to the notions of normalcy.

In many instances children with developmental disabilities have revealed fully awake lives and high levels of cognition, notwithstanding bodily tics, compulsive rituals, and verbal perseveration. Our training as educators does not usually offer a broader notion of how arts

and education service children on the extreme end of the disability continuum. For example, pre-service teachers recently worked with students with developmental disabilities in a course called *Disability Studies in Art Education* at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Matthew, a young man with Down syndrome and autism is limited in his speech, writing, and art making. But he thrives on social interactions and sensual uses of materials. One day the student assigned to him announced, “This isn’t art making *or* teaching.” This student was *expecting* to be prepared to perform in a style of teaching that has been handed down since the beginning of public education (Wexler, 2011). Such expectations, depending on their context, suggest multiple meanings, biases, and assumptions. In his blog, Michael Berube (2008) examines the notions of Peter Singer, the controversial Princeton Professor of Bioethics, about what we *cannot* expect from children with Down syndrome:

The larger point of my argument with your claim is that we *cannot* (I use the term advisedly) know what to expect of children with Down syndrome. Early-intervention programs have made such dramatic differences in their lives over the past few decades that we simply *do not know* what the range of functioning looks like, and therefore do not rightly know what to expect...it’s not just a matter of contesting other people’s low expectations of your child, it’s a matter of recalibrating your own expectations time and time again—and not only for your own child, but for Down syndrome itself. (Berube, 2008).

Matthew, like many other individuals at this end of the spectrum, needs us in radically different ways, such as acknowledging his style of socialization with all its perceived inappropriateness. I suggest that educators and the general community have been trained to believe unquestionably in disability experts while ignoring the experiences of individuals *with* disabilities, their caretakers and mentors. I suggest that we, as educators, study the strategies, philosophies, and practices of artists and the community arts centers that have promoted quality of life for their participants. Sometimes their art work becomes the means of communication, expanding the social definition of communicative forms (Rexer, 2001). At other times the artists choose their own words (sometimes faltering) supported by their mentors. All forms of self-representation continue to unsettle prevailing assumptions.

### Endnotes

1. “A Hidden Army of Civil Rights” is the title of the fourth chapter in *No Pity* authored

by Joseph P. Shapiro.

2. The artists exhibit regularly at the CGAC gallery, but they also have shown *their* work internationally.
3. Judith Scott, who recently passed away, is known for her cocoon-like/nest-like structures. Considered by art historians and curators to be among the most important bodies of recent work.
4. Facilitated Communication is an example of communication technologies. The facilitator touches the arm, shoulder or wrist of the typist. Several people in the field reject the achievements made with this technology because they believe that the facilitator is influencing the client. However, people with autism explain that initiation of an action is one of their most frustrating problems. The desire to take action is in the mind but the mind cannot command the body to follow through. This is one of the reasons that people with autism do not do well when tested by external assessors without their assistants. There are also problems about the tests themselves, such as unfamiliarity with testing and lack of preparation, lack of confidence, and test anxiety (Biklen & Cardinal, 1997).

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# Dance Partners: A Model of Inclusive Arts Education for Children and Teens with Different Abilities

JENNY SEHAM

*Let us think of education as the means of developing our greatest abilities, because in each of us there is a private hope and dream which, fulfilled, can be translated into benefit for everyone and greater strength for our nation.*

*John F. Kennedy*

*You would be amazed at what the kids around here do. I would describe that as 'incredible.'*  
*Carolyn H., 12 year-old dance student with visual impairment*

The “kids around here” to whom Carolyn H. refers, are 6-19 year-old students at her school who are blind or with visual impairments. Many have neurological impairments and mobility limitations, several are on the autism spectrum and some are gifted and talented.

The “incredible” thing they do is dance. They are highly proficient, passionately committed to the art, focused in the classroom and joyful in their performance. Despite their capacity to participate, a lack of appropriate and accessible arts programming for children with disabilities previously excluded most of these students from any kind of dance activity or education. They are dancing now through a partnership between National Dance Institute (NDI) and the Lighthouse International Music School in New York City.

This paper describes current partnerships between National Dance Institute (NDI) and three different school settings in New York City as a context for presenting strategies to develop and teach successful inclusion dance education programming in your community. The three settings include students with a wide range of special needs.

There are excellent arts organizations and schools across the country that can exponentially benefit from forming relationships based on mutually held educational goals. Among these goals is the teaching of skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and innovation, and facilitating creativity, increasingly considered necessary to prepare students for success in the 21st century and already imbedded in standards based arts education

(Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2010).

The Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 protects the rights of children with disabilities to receive education that will prepare them “for further education, employment and independent living.” (Federal Individuals with Disabilities Act, 2004 p.5). It further states, “special education and related services should be designed to meet the unique learning needs of eligible children with disabilities, preschool through age 21.” (p. 5). Accommodating diverse abilities should not lessen educational experiences for any student, yet schools and teachers frequently do not have the support, staffing, experience, or training necessary to adequately teach each student at his or her maximum learning capacity (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2011).

Partnerships and partner learning is the cornerstone for the construct of dance education presented here that is designed to teach excellence, support the arts educator or teaching artist, and enable all students, regardless of ability, to actively participate at their highest levels. To engage students in partner learning in an arts education classroom, the first partnership to establish is one between the school and the arts organization, teaching artist, or dance teacher.

### **Finding a Community Arts Partner**

Anyone in the community can initiate outreach to arts organizations. The brief History of Programming for the three schools described later in this paper credits a principal, a physical therapist, and a parent group as distinct initiators at each location.

Research the arts programs in your community. Although expertise in teaching dance to special populations is increasing, organizations that specialize in arts education for children with disabilities are still rare. Do not rule out an organization that does not advertise expertise. They may be in the process of integrating special needs training for their teachers, or have access to teaching artists who have independently gained experience and training appropriate for teaching your student population. Search outside of your community, if necessary, and look to organizations that provide residency teaching and teacher training.

### **Exemplary Arts partner: National Dance Institute (NDI)**

Founded 36 years ago, NDI currently serves close to 6,000 children in grades K-12 in 36 partner schools in the NYC metro area. The in-school program model encompasses every child in the grades served, including English language learners and children with special

needs. Staffing consists of a master teaching artist/choreographer, musician/composer, and an assistant teacher. In the public schools where most of NDI's programming occurs, twenty per cent of participating students have developmental or cognitive challenges that include wide-ranging autism spectrum disorders.

Since its very first class, in 1976, NDI has been developing and refining methodology to teach dance to children with different learning abilities. The unwavering expectation for each student is to participate at his or her highest possible level of effort and execution. The teacher models confidence, determination, and passionate commitment to the art of dancing, as much as he or she might model a specific step or body posture.

NDI dance teachers are professional artists. They come from different disciplines including contemporary, ballet, theater arts, and ballroom dance. The first common denominator among the teaching artists is a dedication in teaching and facilitating creativity and technique, with the same rigor and performance standards that define each individual as an artist. The second is a belief in their students' abilities to succeed.

During the 2002-2003 school year, Dr. Rob Horowitz, Associate Director of the Center for Arts Education Research at Teacher's College, Columbia University, conducted an external evaluation of NDI's in-school program. Horowitz' multi-method research design involved both quantitative and qualitative data collection through observation of classes and performances in three schools, structured and unstructured interviews with teaching artists, assistants, musicians, classroom teachers, in-school coordinators, and principals, and surveys of participants. The evaluation demonstrated student gains in various domains with 88% of teachers reporting that the program helped students work creatively, stay focused, and concentrate on difficult tasks, and 91% reporting that students showed self-discipline and perseverance in NDI dance classes (Horowitz, 2003, p. 2). In addition, Horowitz demonstrated a positive impact of the program on classroom teachers and school climate. His report on student learning includes the following assessment:

NDI engaged students in higher order thinking skills tied to cognitive, affective and kinesthetic domains of learning. Students learned complex dance patterns and sequences and then learned to re-arrange or reverse the patterns. Students learned that they needed to be fully engaged, physically and cognitively, in order to participate effectively in class (Horowitz, 2003, p.1).

The pedagogy, as in all dance education, requires students to master basic movements in order to progress to more complex dance patterns and sequences. The process of physical mastery combines repetition with an engagement in problem solving, imagination, and other 'higher order thinking skills' as students are asked to do the same step or sequence in different ways: Facing the other side of the room, facing each other, doing it faster, slower, as if they were in a swamp, in a windstorm or stepping on hot coals, closing their eyes, dancing in two teams, four teams, dancing alone, competing for fastest, slowest, highest, lowest. The teacher, observing the entire class, can see which students need extra help or modifications.

Peer partner learning serves as a dynamic and integral classroom component, especially where learning abilities vary widely. Guided by the lead and assistant teachers, partners learn together and confront and negotiate physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges.

### **Exemplary School Partners: Current Programs and History of Programming**

To illustrate successful teaching strategies with a wide range of students with special needs, examples are drawn from experiences at three NDI partner schools in New York City. These examples serve to represent specific student disabilities and learning needs. Each class receives one weekly dance period throughout the academic year. Classes are generally 45 to 55 minutes long, depending on each school's class period scheduling. The following is a brief description of the current programming and history at each of the three sites:

#### **1. Public Elementary School, PS 199**

**Current Program:** Fourth grade special education students with severe physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities partner with fourth grade general education peers. Typically learning partners volunteer to be part of a "Special Forces" inclusion dance class.

**Program History:** PS 199 introduced NDI programming to their general education curriculum in 1998. A physical therapist working in special education at PS 199 approached NDI founder, Jacques d'Amboise, proposing a class for her students, many of whom were wheelchair users. Programming was developed with multiple consultants and collaborators including dance teachers, special education teachers, a physical therapist, and a professional wheelchair-using dancer. After one year of teaching in a self-contained, special education classroom, the "Special Forces" model was launched with general education students dancing and learning together with their differently-

abled partners.

## 2. International Lighthouse Music School

**Current Program:** Students ages 6-19, who are blind, visually impaired, or losing their eyesight, partner with sighted students ages 14-19. Some of the visually impaired students are on the autism spectrum, others have mobility limitations, and others have neurological impairments. There are two classes organized primarily by ages, 6-11 and 12-19. Some exceptions are made collaboratively between the dance teacher and the music school to accommodate scheduling, ability, and special needs. Typically learning partners include graduates from NDI's advanced programming, Lighthouse teen volunteers, and other youth volunteers from affiliated dance and music programs.

**Program History:** NDI has a long partnership history with the International Lighthouse. Classes began in 1989 and were held weekly until 2004 when changes in state funding for the organization and restructuring at the Lighthouse made it untenable to continue the partnership. Parents of students attending the Lighthouse International Comprehensive Music Program for Young People (CMPYP), having no success in finding dance or movement education for their children, appealed to the Lighthouse to include dance classes in the music education curriculum. The CMPYP Executive Director reached out to NDI, a new Lighthouse partnership was formed, and programming began again in the fall of 2008.

## 3. Public Elementary School, PS 347

**Current Program:** PS 347 is the only public elementary school in New York City offering curriculum in American Sign Language (ASL) and English. Seventy-three percent of the students are from homes where ASL or Spanish is the first language and 70% have parents whose primary language is ASL (PS 347, 2012). Although statistics indicate that only about nine per cent of the students are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (PS 347), administrators estimate about 90% are Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs). Since the dance program began in 2009, there have been one to five students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing in each class. All students in the third, fourth, and fifth grades, participate in weekly dance classes and peer partnership learning is part of the dance curriculum. In addition, classroom teachers partner with Deaf students who arrive from foreign countries with neither English nor ASL language, so that students can remedially

learn and reinforce language skills while participating in dance.

**Program History:** The principal of PS 347 contacted NDI in December 2008. She was urgently seeking visual arts instruction for her students and found NDI's name on the New York Department of Education website. Although it was not the visual arts partnership she was seeking, after learning that NDI had previous experience teaching dance to Deaf students, this administrator decided to add dance to her plan to infuse arts education into the school curriculum. She found a visual arts partner elsewhere, and initiated NDI programming with a half-year residency in the spring of 2009. NDI's programming was expanded to the full year model in September 2009.

### **Whole Child Education and Arts Integration**

The mission statements of all participating partners described here reflect principles of whole child education compatible with the goals of maximizing the potential of each child through peer partnership learning and performing arts experience. Following is a mission statement from another NDI partner school that recently adopted a "Special Forces" model to serve the needs of their students with disabilities:

The mission of the Yung Wing School (PS 124) is to enable students to achieve their full potential as productive, caring, informed human beings by providing them with a rigorous, comprehensive education suited to their unique needs and abilities. To achieve this, we provide programs that address the intellectual, physical, emotional and social needs of all our students. Decisions affecting our students and our school are arrived at with the fullest participation of administrators, teachers, parents and students (Yung Wing School P.S. 124).

Finding the right arts and school partnership is a giant leap towards implementing a successful inclusion dance program. The next step is preparing the school, the arts organization, and all participating partners for the rigorous commitment and abundant rewards of collaborative arts learning.

### **Planning and Structuring the Inclusion Dance Class**

#### **Prepare the School and Arts Partners**

Begin the culture of partner learning in the planning stage and maintain those relationships throughout the teaching process. Bring as many team members to the table as possible: Classroom teachers, principals, assistant principals, occupational therapists, physical

therapists, speech therapists, paraprofessionals, parents, sign language interpreters, Braille music teachers, dance teachers, musicians, program administrators, and any other stakeholder who can contribute to a successful collaboration.

The dance teaching staff should become familiar with students' special mobility needs and the school's accommodation of those needs including wheelchair accessibility, sighted guide requirements, and any issues of concern for medically vulnerable participants. Learn from the experts, including the children themselves, about existing successful strategies to manage physical, cognitive, emotional and social challenges.

### **Train the Teaching Artist**

Teaching artists should receive training in teaching students with disabilities. Fortunately, expertise in this area is growing. Ideally, training can be found in your community. Alternatively, look into scholarships for travel and study, on-line training, and training opportunities in other communities that address the specific disabilities and learning needs of the student population you serve. One training opportunity deserving special mention because it might otherwise be over looked, is the Parkinson's Dance Training Institute affiliated with the Mark Morris Dance Company, based in Brooklyn, New York, and with workshops throughout the country. Although the work is with adults, training includes hands-on experience that gives teachers an idea of how to work as professional teaching artists, require a professional standard, and teach people with significant cognitive and mobility impairments.

Go to performances by dance companies that include dancers with disabilities. If that is not possible in your area, watch taped performances or videos on-line. Dance performances by mixed-ability companies offer inspiration to the teacher for conceptualizing the infinite dance capacities of his or her student. They also demonstrate creative partnering possibilities that can be transferred to or adapted for the classroom.

### **Prepare the Student Partners**

Prior to the first class, spend time with the typically learning students who have volunteered or are potential dance learning partners. Explain the structure of the dance program, disabilities of the participating partners, and the nature of a partner environment classroom. Although classroom teachers can identify and assign appropriate participants, the very act of making a decision to join ignites a powerful participant attitude. Ongoing programs have created environments in which it is a joyful privilege to participate. The creation of

this culture begins with the attitude of the participating arts and school partners. Graduates from these programs usually are the most enthusiastic and powerful representatives of the experience. It is useful to have peers talk to peers about what it is like to dance and learn with a differently abled partner.

If it is relevant to your student population, introduce partners to procedures for assisting wheelchair users or guiding blind and visually impaired students. All partners are clearly taught before the first class that this may be a different way of learning and that the focus is teamwork and partnership. Encourage them to ask their partner what he or she needs or how they can help. Some students find this easy to do, for others the teacher will need to model asking a child what they can do to assist. Encourage partners to bring questions, concerns, or ideas to the teacher and let them know that there will be time for discussion during or before and after classes. Orienting participants is important so that when the partners meet they can interact, talk, choreograph together, and dance.

### **Peer Partner Learning in the Dance Class**

Researchers Doug Fuchs, PhD and Lynn Fuchs, PhD of Vanderbilt University's Kennedy Center developed a system of peer partner learning for reading and math known as Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes & Simmons, 1997). They continue to contribute to the field of research in special education by expanding the student population ages of study and refining the empirical rigor with which they initiated their work (Fuchs, Fuchs & Burish, 2000, IES, 2012). PALS outlines strategies for reciprocal learning partnerships in which each peer partner in turn is either the teacher or the student with activities assigned by the teacher. In addition to positive outcomes on a variety of math and reading outcomes, benefits of PALS include:

- Increased opportunities for students to practice skills
- Expanded instructional resources in the classroom
- Increased access for students with disabilities to general education curriculum
- Promotion of positive and productive peer interaction
- Engagement in enjoyable activities (Institute of Education Sciences, 2012)

There is a growing interest in studying dance and what dance can teach us about learning (Grafton, 2009). Studies like the PALS research (Fuchs, Fuchs & Burish, 2000) provide evidence that support existing dance partner learning and encourage further programming and

evaluation.

The peer partner learning described in this paper occurs between same-aged students as well as mixed-age students, as in the case of some of the student partnering at the Lighthouse. In addition, reciprocal partnerships are formed between classroom teachers and dance teachers, as each supports the other's teaching and lesson plans.

At PS 347, "Ms. T," a Deaf classroom teacher, formed a dance partnership with "Henry," a Deaf third grade student, newly arrived in the United States, without language skills in either English or ASL. Henry entered the auditorium, where dance class was conducted, holding the classroom teacher's hand. He sat down in the front row of seats with the rest of his classmates but seemed scared and started to cry, curling himself into a ball and covering his face when his classroom teacher began moving away to allow the dance class to begin. She quickly sat back down next to him. The dance teacher immediately started a counting exercise, having students stomp four times with the right foot, then four times with the left. Ms. T tapped Henry's leg with one hand, following the physical movement of the other students, and showed him ASL signs with the other, repeating new words that went with the movement, "right leg, one, two, three, four, left leg, one, two, three, four." Henry watched her, watched his peers, and slowly started the class exercise. His expression changed from fear to delight as he connected the language to the movement, demonstrating understanding by signing and dancing as the sequence changed from four stomps to two stomps to one. Henry took his turn to perform the sequence by himself and received the enthusiastic applause of his peers.

The classroom teacher became a partner for this student's learning, and for the dance teacher in teaching. Unable to meaningfully communicate, Henry had been painfully isolated from the world. This shared active, dance learning experience connected him to others and to language, and Henry has been able to continue in dance class with a peer partner. Similarly, the speech teacher for a fourth grader at this school brings her student to dance class and uses the lessons to reinforce the language skills she is teaching.

### **Goals and Structure of the Dance Class**

**Goals and lesson planning.** The goals of each class are to give students an increased sense of body awareness and control, and the experience of success and accomplishment. As the year progresses, the class will increasingly connect the active experience of dancing with exploration of the curricular theme. Throughout the learning process, the teacher will guide

students to relate their learning experiences to their personal stories. The teacher creates a lesson plan utilizing the following structure.

### **Structure of the Class**

**Call to class.** Unify the class and set the tone with a call and response game. The teacher or musician claps, stomps, sings or otherwise beats out a rhythm and the class copies the action or sound, becoming an ensemble before class has even begun. The teacher can assess and model different abilities from this pre-class activity, stepping up to one student and doing this exercise according to the student's ability, vocalizing, for example, if students have disabilities that prevent them from clapping or stomping the rhythm.

At PS 347, with a student body that includes students who are deaf and hearing impaired, students engage in this activity from the front row of the auditorium before they take their places on stage. They use gesture and simple movement as the initial call and response. One game that third grade students enjoy is a "standing up" competition, in which they attempt to follow American Sign Language for "stand" and "sit" the fastest and be the first partner team to "win" the privilege of taking their place on stage.

**Entrance.** Students take their places, whether in the classroom, gym, or on the auditorium stage, to counts with a drum beat or music: "sixteen counts to get to your spot, jump on '15,' pose on '16.'" Possibilities for entrances are limitless, varying mood, music, imagery, or counts. For example, entering like a Zombie in 8 counts, entering low in 12 counts, entering as quietly as you can in 15 counts, entering like a hurricane in 11 counts. Making an entrance is a good way to set the tone and practice for performing but is not necessary for every class time or setting. At the Lighthouse, class begins in a different way. Sighted students guide their partners to place, and the teacher calls the class to attention with rhythm exercises. Entrances are practiced later in the class, after students have safely stowed canes, braillewriters, and other personal items, and have been re-oriented to the classroom space.

For all students, the entrance exercise is great for partner planning and interaction and can be used at any point in the class, especially when they are practicing choreography. Partners may be given counts and an image and asked to strategize how to move slithering like a snake, bouncing like popcorn, or marching in a Mardi Gras parade, for example, or choose their own image and number of counts.

**Introductions.** In the first class, use a game to introduce all of the participants to their

partners and the rest of the class. The teaching artist models patience, mutual respect and problem solving. The first problem to solve, often, is uneven number of participants or absent partners. This is an opportunity for the dance teacher to set a problem solving culture and have the participants figure out what to do, but in the initial classes, the teacher should facilitate this by putting three students together, having the assistant teacher or musician (if there is one) become a partner, or enlisting a participant observer, physical therapist, sign language interpreter, classroom teacher or other available partner, depending on the needs of the class. There are many ways to make introductions. The following are two examples:

1. **Dyads or triads to full class.** Partners get three minutes to learn each other's name, and 1-3 favorite things about the other person: favorite food, favorite music, movie. When time is up, each partner team introduces each other to the class. A nice variation of this is deciding on a movement based on the first letter of the partner's name: "This is Josie, and Josie likes to jump." Demonstrate the movement, with accommodated movement according to the partner's ability, and have the class respond: "Hi Josie" and jump.

2. **Full class circle.** With similar prompts, have each member introduce him or herself and say a favorite color, food (food is a favorite), etc. The next student repeats what the first one said, and adds on: "This is Bryan. His favorite color is blue and he likes pizza. I'm Sarah, my favorite color is purple and I like chicken noodle soup." This is a good opportunity to model accommodation of differences as well as expose ability and common interests. In a class introduction at the Lighthouse, for example, the teacher prompted students by saying the next name, when necessary, to assist those who could not rely on visual cues for recall. At the end of the exercise, a student with no vision perfectly recited the name, favorite color, and favorite music of each of the twenty participants, surprising many of the sighted partners, who had needed assistance with their recall.

**Warm-up and stretching.** It is important, with mixed ability classes, to establish a warm-up routine so that participants feel comfortable and utilize this time to practice challenging physical movements to the best of their abilities. Following the warm-up, and as the year progresses, all of the students are increasingly challenged with greater complexity of sequences and choreographic story. The warm-up becomes a grounding time. Partners assist partners with physical needs for balance or stretching, but this is also a time in which all students should experience a sense of independence, as each becomes familiar with the

routine and knows how he or she will express the movements. In the next section, one “first step” is described in detail to illustrate this idea.

**First step.** First steps in the NDI curriculum include the “front/home” sequence. The student begins in a standing position, arms at the sides of the body. He or she lifts the right knee high then places the foot on the floor a short distance in front of the body (“front”). That step is then reversed: Lift the knee high, and place the right foot back in its starting position, next to the left foot (“home”). This is then repeated with the left leg.

There are infinite ways to change this and other basic movements to accommodate different abilities. A student can move his or her wheelchair, chin, hand, or finger and still be fully engaged in learning direction, rhythm, sequencing, pattern recognition and pattern changes. He or she can move half as fast, or tap a rhythm, keeping pace with the class while expressing movement mastery in alternative ways that have been guided by the dance teacher. Essential to the learning process is that each student participates to the best of his or her ability. It is up to the teaching artist to assess and identify each student’s potentials and convey the highest expectations.

**Partner work.** Partner work occurs throughout the class as determined by the teacher. The teacher will initiate partner work for many reasons, generally teaching a step or a sequence to the whole class, then telling the class to work on something with their partner:

- **Partners work together to modify movement and accommodate different abilities.**
- **Partners work together so that learning can occur at different rates.** This is according to the needs of the individuals in the class.
- **Partners work together to adapt choreography within their partnership and express each partner’s ability.** One partner might have the capacity to clap or beat a simple rhythm, while the other doubles the rhythm and runs around his partner.
- **Partners work together to appreciate each other’s creativity and ability.** Dancers do mirroring exercises, with one partner taking the lead, and the other copying the movement, then switching the leader and follower.
- **Partners work together to create new choreography.** The teacher might give partners a prompt to play with known movements and change the sequence or pattern to create new movements, or play with a theme and create a dance. For example, one year’s curricular theme was the music and life of Stevie Wonder. Students at PS 199

participated in choreographing a dance about the Grammy Awards, with wheelchair using dancers and their partners arriving at the red carpet in a conga line of wheelchair stretch limos.

**Across the Floor/Runs and Leaps.** A signature NDI choreographic strategy, and one that can be adapted for any class, is the “runs and leaps” aka “runs and jumps” entrance. Students line up and each in his or her turn runs across the stage, executes a leap or jump center stage, runs to place, and dances in place until all students have entered and are dancing in place. Four beats (generally) are played as the signal that all are in place, and the opening dance begins.

This requires practice and becomes part of the class structure, generally closer to performance time, but sometimes earlier in the year. Students who know the routine request it frequently. Students who need assistance make the run across the stage with a partner.

While movement across the floor, or traversing from one side of the class or stage to the other, is certainly an option, it is not routinely part of the NDI general education class structure, for practical reasons of space and classroom management. Many students with mobility challenges, however, rarely have an opportunity to move freely and safely. At the Lighthouse, for example, running, galloping, and even cartwheeling and somersaulting across the floor, is an aspect of the class structure, with partners providing the safety necessary for exuberant and unencumbered movement.

**Show Gratitude and Reverence.** In many cultures, dancers perform a ritual demonstration of appreciation to the teacher and musician at the end of class. A “reverence,” for example, is the last routine in a ballet class in which the ballet dancers thank and acknowledge the teacher and the pianist. Reverence usually includes bows, curtsies and ports de bras (graceful arm movements) and is a way of celebrating ballet’s traditions of elegance and respect. The NDI class ends with a lively call and response “thank you and good-bye” thanking the dancers, the teachers, the musicians, the partners and other participants, for being in class and working together.

### **Structure of the Year**

The year begins by introducing students to the building blocks of dance: How to focus on the teacher, on their partner, on the music, on their effort, how to count rhythmically, control one’s body, respond to stage directions and execute basic steps.

Equipped with fundamentals, students are challenged with increasingly difficult combinations at a variety of tempos. Students then learn how threads of choreography weave together to create a story that they perform for the entire school community and family members in a mid-year assembly and year-end performance. Each year's curricular theme imbeds the dance teaching in contexts of history, culture, science, music, art and other subjects. The 2012-2013 theme for example, is the music, history, and culture of New Orleans.

### **Strategies for Teaching an Inclusion Dance Class**

#### **Create Routine and Consistency**

Use carefully crafted lesson plans, coupled with a daily routine. Prepare the students by introducing the lesson : "(1)Warm-up, (2) learn new choreography, (3) practice learned choreography, (4) work with your partner on story and choreography, (5) do the across-the-floor dance, and (6) say 'thank-you,'" might cover the basics for an NDI class, with specifics as to what dance sequences they will be practicing.

Use every tool available to support the class. Write the day's lesson on the board, using clear language or symbols for each activity e.g. a figure kicking his leg up for the "warm-up". Students on the autism spectrum experience a high level of stress and anxiety when something new is introduced and benefit tremendously from visual cues. Train the partner to refer to the written chart, or come up with additional symbols that will aid focus. The routine of the dance class, music, movement, and visual learning inherent to dance ultimately have a mood regulating effect, but it is best to plan for success and remove obstacles to learning at the outset. The following story exemplifies the use of routine and consistency:

"Joseph" came to his first dance class early. He was experiencing anxiety about the start of this new class and negotiated with his aide to bring him to the room. His aide knew that introducing Joseph to something new would be important to his ability to behave appropriately in class, and intended merely to show him the classroom. Joseph burst through the door, however, and ran around the room several times, before he could be stopped and led outside. This happened again the next week, but the dance teacher found an alcove next to the room, where Joseph could wait, and let him know exactly how many minutes before class began. Joseph registered this on his watch, and waited. This became Joseph's pre-class routine for several months. Eventually, on his own, Joseph established a new routine, depositing his backpack in the classroom several hours before his class, announcing "First!" (as he was

unequivocally the first to arrive), and then going about his daily schedule until dance class actually began. In the dance class, Joseph had a specific place to go and the same partner every week.

**Teach partners to be mindful about absences.** Brian, a dance student on the autism spectrum, informs the teacher when he will be absent, sometimes weeks in advance, with meticulous detail. He has trained his partner to do the same and has inspired other students to follow their example.

Often partners make arrangements for coverage among friends in the class who step in for each other. Their arrangements are generally thoughtful and helpful and the teacher can monitor this for appropriateness.

**Be mindful of student places in class.** Since dance is usually conducted in an open space, without the structure of desks and chairs, maintaining consistency of space and placement is important. Teach partners who guide their partner to places, to take responsibility for placement. Structure the open space by identifying where each student will stand when they are at their home base or starting position. Form student rows with team names and have the participants name their team using a category such as colors, foods, musical instruments, or something related to the theme, e.g.: "first row is the 'French Quarter,' second row, 'Mardi Gras,' third row 'crawfish,' and fourth row is 'the bayou.'"

### **Create and Nurture the Culture of Discovery and Learning: Every Participant is a Teacher**

"Ana," a non-verbal dance participant with little mobility was assisted by her physical therapist, who held and manipulated each of her hands so she could clap the rhythm of the music and dance steps. The physical therapist knew her diagnosis and special needs: Cerebral palsy, spastic athetosis, dependent on others for her daily living needs, requiring familiarity and great concentration to really understand her speech. One day, the musical accompanist noticed what no one else had, that this student was dancing with her eyes, blinking the complex rhythm with perfect timing.

"Samantha," another non-verbal dance participant, presented with significant muscle rigidity, deficits in movement initiation, and significant cognitive processing delays. Her partner, Emily, worked patiently with her, reveling when Samantha finally executed a "front home" step (described earlier), in half-time with the music, while the rest of the class was doing sequences of four and eight steps in different directions. Emily often found extra time to work with

Samantha, using the hallway as their classroom. One day, Emily asked if she and Samantha could demonstrate a step they had discovered. The two held hands and galloped across the classroom, surprising all that witnessed this explosion of movement ability and delight. Galloping became a routine movement exercise for Samantha and all of her classmates.

Joseph, whose story exemplified use of routine, liked to run from place to place. His running ability and interest shaped the class and running choreography was included in weekly exercises. Joseph learned to run to counts of the music. He worked with his partner on his character for the script of the show the students performed. The year's theme was science, and students had decided that they would write about the destruction of the earth from littering and toxic waste. Joseph became an Olympic runner who ran around the world warning people to escape Earth's destruction by joining a space mission in search of another planet.

Give each student the opportunity to demonstrate. Emphasize what they can do. Create opportunities in every class to observe, listen, and appreciate effort and accomplishment. Encourage and model applause, being mindful of potential noise sensitivity of some participants.

### **Incorporate Therapeutic Exercises into the Class Warm-Up and Choreography**

Incorporate classroom exercises and choreography that is therapeutic and addresses participant needs. Occupational therapists, physical therapists, and parents know about the therapy exercises and physical needs of the students. Consult and incorporate their knowledge and expertise to integrate stretching and massaging motions for muscle lengthening and stretching. When working with visually impaired students and their partners, include goals to improve balance, posture, spinal alignment, coordination, mobility, relaxation of tense neck and shoulder muscles, and address loss of spinal rotation and reciprocal arm swing.

These exercises serve the goals of the dance class and may also motivate children to engage more readily in strenuous exercise necessary for their physical health. In addition, physical improvements can lead to general confidence and competence overall.

Eight-year-old "Jessie," blind, in a wheelchair, with partial paralysis on her left side, is told repeatedly by the teacher to sit up straight, "like a dancer." Jessie lifts her head, stretches her torso, and giggles delightedly. Her parents had tried everything to get her to stop slumping over and improve her posture. "Now," they say, "we just tell her to go to 'dancer position.'" This is also the verbal signal that her sighted dance partner uses. Jessie engages in

an important spinal strengthening exercise without protest, shows improvement in strength and stamina, and proudly performs, sitting up straight and rhythmically moving with the rest of her dance class.

### **Incorporate Other Arts Activities to Highlight Student Strengths and Interests**

Welcome partners from the school community to introduce, teach, or enhance your work through other art forms, such as storytelling, theater, singing, and visual arts activities. Art teachers and music teachers as well as willing and talented parents can be wonderful, collaborative teaching partners.

### **Hold Students Accountable**

Have as high expectations for children with disabilities as you do for their typically developing peers, holding them accountable for their performance in class, with their partner, and on stage. If Ana can blink her eyes to the music and Jessie can maintain a strong postural alignment, it is the teaching artist's job to require that of them, clearly showing all participants that each must give their maximum effort. Set the bar high and give the partners the tools to achieve their goals. The expectation must be that all students, regardless of disability, engage in exceptional effort.

### **Share the Stage**

At the final performance held at the end of the school year, one dancer with spinal bifida pops a wheelie and spins around in the opening entrance, while his typically learning partner executes a grand jeté leap across the stage. A student with visual impairment cartwheels next to his partner, while others hold hands to dance across the stage. They take their on-stage places, and begin the show. Valuable social interactions occur backstage, as friendships are fortified through the shared exhilaration of accomplishment and performance.

### **Reverence: Final partnership Notes and Next Steps**

"Julio," a blind student with significant rigidity in his muscles and severe limitations in movement initiation and processing, was further locked away from learning and peer interaction due to a lack of English language proficiency. He had recently arrived in the United States, his family seeking services for his disabilities. His partner was determined to teach him, but made little progress in the first class. In the second class, when Julio was asked to clap the rhythm instead of doing the movement with his legs and feet, he demonstrated musical precision, and the ability to follow complex musical rhythms. Julio connected to his partner

later, as they discovered a mutual interest in singing, and Julio demonstrated a superior vocal talent. This discovery and their connection seemed the key to Julio's learning block, and he started progressing rapidly through the dance curriculum.

"David," a blind student with Asperger's syndrome, graduated from the Lighthouse dance program and is a freshman at an elite college where he wants to "shock" people by demonstrating that blind people can dance. David joined the Lighthouse class, initially as an alternative to his gym class, where his special needs were not accommodated. Already a gifted musician, David, at age 16, discovered a passion and talent for dance he had not previously known and is now looking for ways to study dance, along with his studies in neurobiology, at his college. He invited his sighted former partner, Meghan, to attend last year's senior prom with him. They enjoyed dancing together as friends at the event, but Meghan was dismayed at what she perceived as a lack of awareness of David's ability, intelligence, and special needs. Meghan enters college next year and intends to study special education with a focus on disability rights.

Researchers are finding ways to empirically study the benefits of dance participation and powerfully advocate for dance as an unassailable core subject in K-12 education (Blasing, Puttke, & Schack, 2010, Deasy, 2002, Grafton, 2009, Ruppert, 2006). We should all be prepared to deliver the education that each student deserves, insisting on standards of excellence in our teaching and for each individual according to his or her ability. To achieve and maintain this level of excellence, let us look to the creation of meaningful partnerships at the intersection of arts education and special education.

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## Resources

### Funding, Grants, Research and Educational Information

1. ArtsEdge, Kennedy Center Arts Education Network, <http://www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org>
2. American Dance Association, Division of American Alliance for Health, Physical Education and Dance, <http://www.aahperd.org>
3. Arts Education Partnership, <http://www.aep-arts.org>
3. The Dana Foundation, <http://www.dana.org/>
4. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts – Very Special Artists (VSA), <http://www.vsa.org>
5. National Arts and Disability Center, <http://www.semel.ucla.edu>
6. National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, <http://www.nasaa-arts.org>
7. See also, website for your state’s arts council, e.g.: New York State Council on the Arts, <http://www.nysca.org>
8. National Dance Education Organization (NDEO), <http://www.ndeo.org>
9. United States Department of Education (search for “arts” or topic of interest), <http://www.ed.gov>
10. See also, individual state departments of education and search for “arts education”

### Dance Companies, Performances, Classes and Teacher Training

1. Axis Dance Company, California, <http://www.axisdance.org>
2. Candoco Dance Company, London, UK, <http://www.candoco.co.uk>
3. Dancing Wheels Company and School, Ohio, <http://www.dancingwheels.org>
4. Full Radius Dance, Georgia, <http://www.fullradiusdance.org>
5. Gallaudet Dance Company, Washington, D.C.  
[http://www.gallaudet.edu/gallaudet\\_dance\\_company.html](http://www.gallaudet.edu/gallaudet_dance_company.html)
6. Heidi Latsky Dance Company, New York, <http://www.heidilatskydance.net/>
7. Infinity Dance, New York, <http://www.infinitydance.com/>

### Teacher Training

1. The Center for Arts Education, New York, <http://www.cae-nyc.org/>
2. Dance for PD, New York and national workshops (see website) <http://www.danceforparkinsons.org/>
3. Marquis Studios, New York, <http://www.marquisstudios.org/>
4. National Dance Institute, New York, <http://www.nationaldance.org>

# Music Participation as a Means to Facilitate Self-Determination and Transition to Community Life for Students with Disabilities

MARY ADAMEK AND ALICE-ANN DARROW

Much has been written about cultural democracy and the importance of music education for all students, even those with the most severe disabilities (Adamek & Darrow, 2010; Hammel & Hourigan, 2011; Jellison, 1999). All children who have the opportunity to participate in music have a better quality of life and a deeper understanding of the world around them (Dahan-Oliel, Shikako-Thomas, & Majnemer, 2012). For students with disabilities, however, music study must prepare them not only for a cultural life, but for a functional life as well. These students often face additional challenges as they prepare for lives as independent adults. In order for students with disabilities to assume responsibility and control for their lives, they will need to develop a skill set that includes goal setting, problem solving, and decision making. Students with disabilities who are self-determined are more likely to succeed as adults. Individuals who are self-determined are more likely to be: employed, living independently, happy with their lives, and less isolated (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). To attain these goals in adulthood, efforts to build self-determination skills need to be integrated into every area of a child's education (Wehman, 2013).

Promoting self-determination has been recognized as best practice in the education of adolescents with disabilities since the early 1990s, when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated increased student involvement in transition planning; however, it has been only during the past decade or so that research on self-determination theory (SDT) has been applied systematically to specific disciplines. "Basic research expanding and refining motivational SDT principles has continued at a vigorous pace, but the huge increase in the volume of published studies has been most apparent in the applied fields—in sport, education, and health care, for example" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, p. 182). With the exception of Jellison (1999) however, little has been written about the role music education can play in preparing students with disabilities for their lives as adults.

In her article, "Life Beyond the Jingle Stick: Real Music in a Real World," Jellison (1999) discusses the need to identify and to teach skills that will "enable students with disabilities

to function appropriately, successfully and as independently as possible in a variety of environments, now and in the future” (p. 15). Music curricula for these students should include activities that teach them about the arts, but that also have meaning and relevance to their lives. Fortunately for music educators, our subject matter is highly valued, and can serve as a motivator and reward for engaging in many activities that support one’s general well-being, self-determination and transition to community life. These activities are generally directed toward physical or cognitive functioning, and socialization. Music, because of its pervasiveness, universal appeal, and flexibility in terms of tempo, complexity, and genres, is particularly suited to accompany numerous physical, cognitive, and social activities. Music can be used to provide structure for physical and social activities, to provide emotional support, and to promote lifelong learning and engagement. It is the teacher’s task to structure music learning such that the cognitive and social skills required for self-determination and transition to community life are developed through continued engagement, practice, feedback and more practice.

#### **Issues Related to Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities**

Self-determination (SD) focuses on the degree to which individuals are self-motivated and able to independently determine their own future. Self-determination is “a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults” (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 2). A person is considered *autonomous* if he or she acts according to personal preferences, interests and/or abilities, and if he or she acts independently from external influence or interference. An individual’s behavior is *self-regulated* if the person makes appropriate decisions about which skills to use, or emotions to display in a situation; and if the person is capable of analyzing a task and formulating, enacting, and evaluating a plan of action. Individuals are considered *self-realized* if they set goals based on a thorough, and reasonably accurate, knowledge of themselves and their strengths and limitations. With these skills and attributes, individuals have the ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

## Challenges for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities face many challenges as they progress through elementary and high school experiences. A student with a disability may be disadvantaged in terms of achieving success with the academic and social demands of today's schools. In addition to the challenges related to disability, students may encounter additional difficulty related to violence in schools, high stakes testing, limited access to general education, and social acceptance and peer pressure. Positive and negative features of the current educational setting affect a student's experience throughout school years and beyond. It is important that students develop competence in skills that promote success in school as well as successful transition upon completion of their school years. Students who have opportunities to develop self-determination during their school years may improve their quality of life as they transition to adulthood (Wagner & Newman, 2012).

Self-determination can be a significant factor to enhance post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities. Self-determination is a combination of beliefs, attitudes and abilities that lead to a person to fully engage in life experiences and outcomes. Self-determined behaviors promote autonomy, self-regulation and self-realization, and they empower the individual to make things happen. Sample component elements of self-determined behavior include skills related to choice making, problem solving, setting and attaining goals, self-observation and evaluation, self-advocacy and leadership, self-instruction, and self-awareness (Wehman, 2013). Students with disabilities can develop these skills by having opportunities to express their preferences and interests, manage time, engage in team work and leadership experiences, solve problems with others, set goals and strategies to meet those goals, monitor achievements, and practice assertiveness (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

Music experiences can be motivating, flexible, and challenging while providing opportunities for students with disabilities to practice important life skills that will benefit them in educational, social and employment settings. In a recent music neuroscience article, Croom (2012) makes the argument that music engagement contributes to an individual's well-being by influencing positive emotions, engagement with others, achievement, and self-awareness. These elements are also foundational for the development of self-determination in students. Music educators experience these features of music engagement every day, however they may need additional knowledge to link these every day experiences to focus on self-determination.

Recent research provides a basis for understanding the value of helping students develop these skills in a variety of educational settings.

### **Selected Research Literature Related To Self-Determination**

Researchers have investigated various facets of self-determination for several years and the research continues today. Topics include assessment of self-determination, predictors of self-determination related to specific disabilities, the impact of self-determination on access to general education experiences, and influence of self-determined behaviors on transition outcomes and quality of life.

These findings provide a foundation for developing evidence-based interventions to promote self-determination in students with disabilities. Measures of self-determination include the Arc's Self-Determination Scale (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995) and the AIR Self-Determination Scale (Wolman, Campeau, Dubois, Mithaugh & Stolarski, 1994). These measures are used frequently in the research literature to compare and to document students' self-determination.

According to IDEA, students with disabilities should have access to the general curriculum to the greatest extent possible. Instruction that promotes self-determination and self-directed learning has been found to promote students' success in the general education curriculum. In addition, self-determination skills have been found to positively predict student engagement in the curriculum, and decrease competing behaviors (Lee, Wehmeyer, Palmer, Soukup, & Little, 2008; Wehman, 2013).

Student involvement is a key feature for developing a capacity of self-determination. However, the approach to student involvement and the amount of support needed may vary, depending on a student's level of functioning. Even students with severe intellectual disabilities can be supported in ways to maintain meaningful control in their lives. Supports need to be aligned with the individual's preferences, and those in supportive roles should assist in actively involving the student in goal setting and meaningful decision-making (Jones, 2012; Wagner & Newman, 2012; Washington, Hughes, & Cosgriff, 2012; Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003; Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1996; Whitney-Thomas & Moloney, 2001).

### **Structuring the Music Curriculum to Facilitate Self-Determination and Transition to Community Life**

The self-determination movement promotes students' and families' empowerment

and their decision-making rights regarding services impacting the future. Characteristics such as assertiveness, creativity, flexibility, and self-esteem, and skills such as problem solving and decision-making are developed throughout the student's education to promote self-determination as an adult (Gecas, 1989). These characteristics can be applied to the music curriculum for students with disabilities in various ways. Below are some of the music activities or classroom strategies that can support students in their development of these characteristics.

**Assertiveness.** Being assertive is an important communication skill. It involves being able to express one's self effectively and directly, while still respecting the opinions

Music participation to facilitate self-determination 7

of others (Moffet, Alexander, & Dummer (2006). Students with disabilities are often passive or content to agree or comply with others (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). Music educators can ask that students assert themselves into the music process by:

- Requesting students to express their desires to play a certain instrument, perform a certain piece, or to play in one group and not another.
- Requesting students to express their opinions about the music curriculum, about the styles of music to be included in the curriculum, about instruments and songs to be included in the curriculum.
- Requesting students to design the physical layout of the music room, to design the covers for music programs, and to design posters for special events—even if the designs are rudimentary.

Inherent in expressing desires or opinions, is the ability to articulate reasons for these desires or opinions. Asking students to articulate their reasons for preferring one style of music to another, or one song to another, is one way to promote critical or analytical thinking. Generally, there are no incorrect answers for expressing such opinions, but asking to students to defend their reasoning when faced with opposing opinions can facilitate higher order thinking.

**Creativity.** To be creative, one must be able to think in divergent or unusual ways, to take risks, and to explore alternatives (Torrance, 1993; Webster, 2002). Teachers can cultivate students' creativity by:

- Encouraging improvisation, even if it is always in the pentatonic modality on barred instruments.
- Preparing song-writing activities where only isolated words are replaced by the

students, or the lyrics are totally written by the students.

- Asking students to give a name or title to pieces based on the characteristics of the music, or the lyrics of the song.

**Flexibility.** When students are flexible, they allow for different options and for changes in what might have been expected. The ability or willingness to be flexible is especially important for students with disabilities, as being flexible encourages persistence in the face of difficulties. Flexibility is tied closely to problem solving and decision-making (Wehman, 2013). Teachers can promote the development of these skills by:

- Asking students to identify: (1) problems in playing the music, (2) ways or solutions to solve these problems, (3) pros and cons to the various suggested solutions, and (4) based on the pros and cons, the best possible solution.
- Asking students to identify which factors are under their control and which are not for any given classroom dilemma, such as inability to complete a musical task, lack of cooperation from others, cancellation of a musical event.
- Asking students to identify successful solutions to previous problems and how these solutions can be applied to other situations or problems.

**Self-esteem.** Much has been written about the relationship between music participation and one's self-esteem (Darrow, Novak, Swedberg, Horton, Rice, 2009; Costa-Giomi, 2004), although most reports are anecdotal. Various music interventions have been cited frequently as effective in promoting self-esteem (Hillier, Greher, Poto, & Dougherty, 2012):

- Music interventions such as lyric analysis can help young adults identify and express current feelings about their self-worth and their environment.
- Songwriting activities can provide young adults an outlet for expression and a non-threatening forum for sharing feelings. The songwriting product can instill in young adults a sense of pride and productivity. Songs can also be recorded to share with family and friends to increase positive socialization with others.
- Participating in group music activities can assist young adults in building relationships and having positive experiences with others—which can lead to an increased self-esteem.
- Learning to play an instrument has been shown to be a great source of pride for many young adults. Playing an instrument also provides the opportunity for developing

a leisure skill, which has also been shown to affect self-esteem (Costa-Gioma, 2004).

With contemporary digital technologies, even students with profound disabilities can learn to play an instrument.

**Socialization.** Much of the attraction to participating in school music programs is the socialization that occurs at rehearsals, on performance trips, and just hanging out in the music room before and after school. Music educators can assist in the social development of students with disabilities by providing opportunities for interpersonal interactions, and encouraging and monitoring such interactions. Ways to promote socialization for students with disabilities are:

- Use peer partners that include both students with and without disabilities. Students with disabilities are often relegated to the role of ‘helpee’ and never allowed to experience the joy of helping someone else. Even if the student sits on the piano bench with the choir accompanist and turns pages when instructed to do so, he or she will have a role that is integral to the accomplishments of the group.
- One way to avoid cliques in any group, is to have individuals sit next to different people and to allow time for conversing. Giving topics for discussion, such as ‘songs you both like,’ or ‘musical artists you both like’ and ‘concerts you both want to attend’ is one way to initiate conversation and to open up opportunities for shared experiences.
- Structure repertoire choices so that students with and without disabilities perform together. The group can pose solutions for questions such as “How will the student who is blind learn the choreography?” Musical solutions, such as arranging the music so that all students can participate, can be solved by the teacher, or the students. When all students are invested in the success of their classmates, socialization will be productive and rewarding.

Educators may have additional challenges when creating opportunities for students who have limited communication skills or who function at a very low cognitive level to practice self-determination skills. Music educators can collaborate with classroom teachers to determine effective communication means for individual students and to understand the appropriate levels of support needed for each student. In addition, lower functioning students may have slower processing skills and will need additional time to engage in the process, so patience on the part of the teacher is always important. When music educators structure their curriculum to enhance students’ self-determination, they also increase the likelihood that these students

will have a smoother transition to community life as an adult. There is wide agreement that the skills highlighted above (e.g., setting goals, problem-solving, decision-making) are important for a successful transition from school to adult life.

### **Transition to Community Life for Students with Disabilities**

Strong transition programs have been shown to provide opportunities for developing self-determination throughout a student's post-secondary education (Morningstar, 2006). These transition programs included student involvement in the transition process, skill development in self-determination and self-advocacy, and preparation for independent living skills. High levels of psychological empowerment, locus of control, and hope have been found to be evident in students who have experienced high quality transition programs, especially when families were involved and supportive (Morningstar et al, 2010).

Music educators, like all educators, must be concerned about their students' quality of life after graduation. Included in music educators' responsibilities is the task of preparing students for their future and increasing the likelihood that music will be a part of that future. Not all students will continue to participate in music as performers, but it should be every music educators' wish that students continue to be consumers of music. Participation in music, either actively or passively, can make one's transition to adulthood less stressful, and more socially and cognitively engaged. Persons with disabilities often find that transition into community life is easier if they have developed leisure skills that can supplement their, sometimes, limited social lives. If given the opportunity, persons with disabilities can develop musical skills that can be used to promote self-efficacy and motivation.

Music educators can also do much to encourage the continued musical and social growth of students with disabilities by presenting opportunities for music making in the community, both before and after graduation. Community ensembles, church choirs, open microphone night at various venues, civic concerts, and restaurants or bars that host local musicians to play during dinner are all opportunities for music making and/or listening that are generally open to all individuals, regardless of musical skills or disabilities. Students with disabilities may not be aware of all the community music activities available to them. Students' enrollment or engagement in such activities may need to be facilitated by a music educator or parent. As part of the transition plan for students with disabilities, music educators can work with students to determine their interests in various community music activities. The necessary

skill sets, such as concert etiquette or navigating transportation to various music venues, can be a part of their IEP goals before graduation. Participation in such organizations or performance events may make the transition from school to community life more rewarding and less threatening for students with disabilities, and indeed for all students.

### **Conclusions**

Self-determination is a highly desirable, developmental skill that can be linked to success in adulthood. Students develop self-determination skills over time, and this development is influenced by the individual's environment. Skills leading to self-determination can vary by situation and change according to the student's ability to adapt to various contexts. Self-determination is enhanced through the support and advocacy of educators and family members who provide encourage the student to make choices, express interests, practice assertiveness and set goals (Malian & Nevin, 2002).

Self-determination can be addressed through specific skill development curriculum, however efforts to promote self-determination can also be effectively embedded into various curricular experiences. Music education curriculum objectives for students with disabilities should include intentional focus and practice on the self-determination components, and the articulation of plans for a musical life after high school. It is likely that music educators, classroom teachers, school counselors, and parents, will need to assist students with disabilities in preparing to achieve levels of autonomy, self-regulation and self-realization. By identifying long-range goals, and designing music experiences that ensure students gain the skills and connections they need to achieve these goals, music educators can do much to assist students with disabilities in becoming productive and contented musical adults. Helping students plan for a musical future is one of the most important investments music educators can make in their students' lifelong well-being.

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# An Attack on the Tower of Babel: Creating a National Arts/Special Education Resource Center

BEVERLY LEVETT GERBER AND LYNNE HOROSCHAK

A reciprocal relationship exists between educators of the arts and educators who work with students with special needs. Arts educators far too often lack necessary information about students with diverse special needs. Special educators and classroom teachers, meanwhile, need information both about the arts and working with teachers of the arts. This observation was a recurring and frequently discussed goal at the 2012 Kennedy Center forum, “Examining the Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education: A National Forum.”

Arts and special education information and research literature are currently housed in a variety of settings nationwide, rarely easy to access. How can we make that information accessible to all? Most teachers do not know that information about the arts for students with special needs exists. Arts teachers who seek information about students on the autism spectrum in their classrooms, for example, should be able to tap into that information easily (Gerber & Kellman, 2010; Kellman, 2001). The same holds true for a variety of learners. Teachers of the arts, who have had to navigate their own complicated relationships with paraeducators (paraprofessionals) in their classrooms have been without guidance and support. They should know that information about paraeducators in the art room is now available (Guay, 2010; Guay & Gerlach, 2006).

In this paper, we share our professional stories to demonstrate why access to this information is so important. We offer perspectives on our rapidly changing world of information accessibility. In addition, we reflect on the differences in professional languages, an unintentional Tower of Babel. These differences are confusing. For example, the plethora of special education acronyms caused one art teacher to refer to the field as “alphabet soup.” In addition, not all categories of special needs are alike. A “one-size-fits-all” approach for students in special education has never worked and should not exist. Information should be readily available for teachers to help all students meet their potential. A national arts/special education resource center can dismantle that tower and bridge separate, but related, professions with accurate information and professional training.

The visual and performing arts and arts therapies overlap in their goals to bring success to students with special needs through the arts. All have their own resources. Currently, the availability of arts/special education information is problematic. While members of a professional organization are more likely to hear of new research and publications in their own field, relatively few professionals belong to two or more organizations to access information in special education and the arts. There is a crucial need for a *national* arts/special education resource center to make that information accessible to all. That is the goal of this white paper.

### **Rationale for a National Arts/Special Education Resource Center**

Arts research is growing, but there is still too little focus on students with a wide range of special needs in the arts. In addition, arts/special education research is difficult to find and access. Too often information depends on chance and colleagues' knowledge. At a recent convention, members of two different universities (one in special education, the other in art education) discovered they were both working on similar arts research - eye-tracking with students on the autism spectrum. Luckily, a mutual colleague connected them. But, leaving such a pivotal connection up to random encounters does not benefit students with special needs and talents.

Connecting arts research can save time and money when information and methodology is shared. These are obvious points, but there also can be unintended and unpredictable benefits. Sound teaching approaches can be applied effectively in completely different settings. For example, task analysis, a special education teaching strategy, is now used in hospitals to everyone's benefit. A hospital task analysis in the form of a check list of pre-surgery procedures ensures patients, doctors, and hospitals that all necessary steps and precautions are followed. A Boston doctor, Dr. Atul Gawande (2007) of Brigham & Women's Hospital, adapted this "educational" approach to medicine. A pilot's preflight check list is another use of a task analysis. If "good teaching is good teaching," effective teaching methods can have ripple effects in other fields.

Information is a powerful ally. All teachers can benefit from an easily accessed arts and special education resource center. Arts research can demonstrate the value of the arts for students with special needs. This type of research not only justifies bringing more, not fewer, arts to students, it can truly *individualize* their education. There are many stories of artists with learning needs who have been helped, sometimes saved, by their school arts experiences. The

lives of painters Chuck Close (New York) and Pat Moss (Virginia), and New Jersey glass artist Paul J. Stankard were dramatically changed because of their school art experiences (Gerber, 2011, Lokerson & Joynes, 2006). Arts teachers who may not realize their power and positive impact on students' lives should hear these artists' inspirational stories. Arts experiences emphasize the artists' skills and strengths. Their abundant artistic skills and arts classroom experiences brought them success in otherwise dismal school careers, often due to art teachers without a special education background.

Our current national focus on test scores puts students like these artists at an extreme disadvantage. It raises the question - why pile on more traditionally taught reading/math/etc. for students who have demonstrated learning difficulties in these same subjects? Do provide the remediation skills and incorporate assistive technologies and the instructional strategies students need when they learn in a different way. But, at the same time, **provide more arts opportunities** so students with special needs who are skilled in the arts can excel. More arts research and stories of success are needed to support and justify school arts programs for the students who need them most.

In the sections that follow, we describe radical changes in information access that have occurred during our own professional lifetimes. Our stories describe efforts to bring arts/special education information to teacher training at the university level and in the public schools. In addition to the experiences of the paper's authors, graduate students at Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia share their arts/special education information needs. We conclude with a list of categories and recommendations for a National Arts/Special Education Resource Center.

### **Gerber's Stories**

**Changes in professional information access.** The process of information retrieval has radically changed within a relatively short period of time. My own experience and that of my husband, Stuart Gerber, (professor emeritus of special education), illustrate those changes. Stu's research methods as a doctoral student at the Harvard School of Education would be unrecognizable to today's students. In the mid-60's, Stu carried a long cardboard box filled with hundreds of perforated IBM cards to the basement of a building that housed the campus mainframe computer. Each card contained hand-punched, raw research data (in itself a slow and time-consuming process). During Stu's pre-scheduled time slot, the punched cards were

“fed” through an enormous, apartment-size computer that filled three rooms. After a wait of several days, while the information was processed, Stu returned to the data center for a printout of the statistical results of information he had entered on the cards.

In the mid-1980’s, research information and journal articles could be found on computers located in university libraries. Individual computers were not yet available. Graduate students had to sign up for computer research time and access was limited. I reserved my computer access time for one of the designated computers in the Teachers College, Columbia University library. Today, all this can be accomplished on hand-held devices. Older colleagues may still be in shock at our students’ easy access to almost unlimited, nearly simultaneous information. Imagine the ability to access significant information about arts/special education programs and schools in this country and around the world.

There is no need for arts teachers to reinvent the wheel. They can quickly learn about and adapt methods from model programs that teach students with special needs through the arts. One model school is the Port Phillip Specialist School (PPSS) in Melbourne, Australia ([www.portphillip.gov.au](http://www.portphillip.gov.au)). PPSS unveiled its Visual and Performing Arts Curriculum (VPAC) in 2005. Sara James (2012) describes PPSS’s arts curriculum.

VPAC isn’t a program to teach the arts, but a vehicle to deliver a curriculum through the arts. Put another way, PPSS isn’t training students to be dancers, musicians, artists or actors; rather, the school employs dance, music, art and drama to teach children communication, numeracy and living skills. While there are other schools teaching special education that uses the arts, no-one else offers an arts-based curriculum quite like VPAC” (p. xvi).

Closer to home, the Academy in Mayayunk (AIM) in Philadelphia, ([www.aimpa.org/New/index.shtml](http://www.aimpa.org/New/index.shtml)) uses the arts to teach students with learning disabilities. The mission of AIM Academy is to:

Provide extraordinary educational opportunities to children with language-based learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, using research-based intervention strategies and an arts-based learning environment that is college preparatory in scope and sequence.

Teachers who find their own art programs under budgetary threats may find persuasive arguments for arts defense from AIM and PPSS “down under.” AIM uses research based on

the Lab School in Washington, D.C., created by Sally Smith in 1987, to shape its arts-based philosophy and teaching strategies. PPSS's documented visual and performing arts curriculum continually demonstrates the power of the arts to reach and teach students with special needs (Smith, 1987).

**A professional Tower of Babel.** At Teachers College, I unexpectedly learned about some subtle professional differences between special educators and art educators. My doctoral courses combined special education and art education and were located in adjacent buildings. The buildings shared a common wall and stairs, joining one building to the other. Although next to each other, the buildings are architecturally quite different. The art department building has very high ceilings and hallways trimmed with dark wood paneling. It is considerably older than its special education neighbor, designed in a contemporary style with glass curtain walls and low ceilings.

When I moved from a class in one building to a class in the other, the staircase separating the two became a metaphor for the subtle changes to come. Art education classes were on the 4th floor, special education classes on the 5th. But, to go from the 4th floor of the art education building to the 5th floor of the special education building meant taking the staircase down, not up, one floor. The reason – the high ceilings in the art building did not match the low ceilings in the special education setting. The 5th floor in the special education building was actually lower than the 4th floor in the art building.

Going “up the down staircase” or “down the up staircase” became a physical prompt to prepare for differences in professional language and focus. Sometimes it was a bit unnerving. The excitement generated in an art education class about children's involvement in graphic arts processes drew a polite, but distant look in my fellow special education graduate students. A similar “ho-hum” attitude ensued when I described a special education experience, filled with jargon and acronyms, to art education graduate students. Each group could relate to their own stories and experiences, but not fully to the other's because the professional words and examples were different. These experiences emphasized the qualitative differences in languages and methods used to teach the same children.

It is important to recognize these everyday word nuances, differences, and difficulties in communication. To demonstrate this, give a spouse, partner, or well-meaning neighbor your grocery list. Your assumption would be that grocery items written on your list will be the same

items that are purchased. Assumptions are so often wrong. Each of us interprets those written grocery items and sizes based on our own past experiences and judgments. If the grocery purchases do match those on your list, consider yourself lucky. More likely, some items will be variations of those written and others will need to be returned or exchanged.

The classroom is far more complicated than this simple exercise. Just as each person brings his/her own personal experiences and language interpretation to a routine domestic task, teachers bring their unique professional backgrounds and learned vocabulary to the classroom. Do not assume we all speak the same professional language. Burton (2012) reflects on our differences. "At the end of the day, good teaching remains an intimate, personal, and idiosyncratic profession, and willingness to be a thoughtful, ongoing, and energetic learner is paramount" (p. XI).

**Creating a collaborative textbook.** As an art education undergraduate student teacher in 1961, I found no textbooks that addressed students with special needs in the art room. At that time, I was the first Connecticut art education undergraduate to student teach in the art room of a residential school for children with developmental disabilities. My special education information came from Lowenfeld's (1960) detailed descriptions of children's developmental stages in art. Lowenfeld's stages helped me informally, but accurately, identify and understand my students' interests, levels, and skills (Gerber, 2011). I knew then that art education pre-service teachers needed their own text about students with special needs, one addressed to their teaching setting.

Years later, as a member of the SCSU Special Education faculty, I taught "Introduction to Special Education" to pre-service undergraduates (a survey course of special education that Connecticut art education students are required to take). The course and textbook was developed for special education undergraduates and was loaded with special education history, laws, academic diagnostic, and remediation approaches. None of the chapters in the special education textbook addressed the art room, the numbers of students taught weekly by art teachers, or classroom behavior strategies that fit the art room. We have come a long way since.

Today, two textbooks have been collaboratively written for teachers of the arts by experts in art education (National Art Education Association, NAEA) and special education (Council for Exceptional Children, CEC). *Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs*

*through Art* (Gerber & Guay, 2006) was written for art teachers. Special education leaders wrote about their special education area of expertise. Art educators wrote about their classroom art experiences with special education populations. Whenever possible, chapters were collaboratively written to reflect the languages and viewpoints of both fields. Authors who contributed to this book had over 500 years of professional experience. No single author could have written such a comprehensive textbook. *Understanding Students with Autism through Art*, (Gerber & Kellman, 2010) was written in response to art teachers' requests for information about the growing number of students on the autism spectrum in their classrooms. It too, brings the combined experience and perspectives of experts from special education, art education, and neuroscience.

Special education, arts therapies, and the visual and performing arts education include vast amounts of information. A collaborative effort was necessary to bring reliable, relevant, and appropriate arts/special education textbook material to classroom teachers. A similar effort is now needed to make arts for special education information accessible to practitioners across disciplines.

### **Horoschak's Stories**

**Teaching art in the inner city.** There they were - children in wheelchairs with tracheotomy tubes, children curled in the fetal position, lying on mats on the floor, and children whose arms were flailing and heads bobbing as they stood propped up by a standing device. I had been teaching in the inner city of Philadelphia for ten years and now, in 1976, I stood in front of my new class, having no idea what to do. I mean no idea. Art College hadn't prepared me for this. My life hadn't prepared me for this. Now what?

After the initial panic subsided, I went to each student, softly saying "hello," calling each by name and giving a compliment on their hair, shirt, barrette, or smile. It was the beginning - the beginning of a lifelong love affair of using art to work with children with special needs. It was a beginning that resulted in the design of a one-of-a-kind *Master's Degree in Art Education with an Emphasis in Special Populations*. Over the next few weeks, I recognized the personality of each student, saw them for the individuals they were, learned their strengths and challenges, all the while discovering my own.

We grew to know each other, creating hand-over-hand art-making, rolling aluminum foil balls around wheelchair trays, finger painting with butterscotch pudding, and giggling at the

crinkling of shiny paper. I laughed when Anna, who is non-verbal and uses a wheelchair, played that two-year-old game of throwing her marker on the floor so I would pick it up. Later, she had a look of disbelief on her face when the marker didn't fly out of her hand because I had velcroed™ it onto her glove. I no longer saw a wheelchair or a tracheotomy tube. I saw a child. I saw an artist.

Resources? There were none, with the exception of the excellent classroom teacher aides and special education teacher who knew the children and taught me about them. I learned what worked in the art room by trial and error, adapting the lessons of my typical children. The art of my "Severely and Profoundly Impaired" (SPI) students in 1977 - who are the Life Skills students of today - was matted and hung in the school hallways along with their schoolmates. At Halloween, I dressed the students in costumes and painted their faces to include them in the school parade. They knew something special was happening. Their presence was integral to the school community. It was through the practice of making art and being artists that they shined.

**Moore College of Art & Design Graduate Program.** The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 guaranteed all students an education with services to meet their needs. It did not guarantee that the "services" – this art teacher – would have resources to learn the best ways to teach the children. This initial experience prompted me, after 36 years of teaching hundreds of children with Individualized Education Programs (IEP's) in the Philadelphia School District, to design a Master of Arts degree program in Art Education with an Emphasis in Special Populations for Moore College of Art & Design. My first-hand experience with children with disabilities opened my eyes to the importance of creating a Master of Arts Program that specifically focuses on best practices of teaching art to children with disabilities.

In 1996, I was an Adjunct Professor at Moore College of Art & Design teaching art education classes in the evening and my elementary school children during the day. Before my college classes, I talked with the Interim Chair of Art Education, Margie Thompson, SSJ, about art-making with my special needs students. Our conversations evolved into a proposal for a required three-credit Special Populations class for the B.F.A. Art Education students.

What makes this course unique is that from 9:00-10:30 on Saturday mornings, Moore students teach art to children with various disabilities. Their teaching is under the guidance of a certified art teacher and takes place at Moore. This class is hands-on, real-life learning. When

“Jeffie” refuses to engage in the art lesson, preferring to spend the entire morning looking out the window, how does an art teacher modify that behavior – in real time? With a real child?

After the children leave, class time is devoted to processing the morning activities. To this day, the class continues to be invaluable to Moore’s art education students, the children with disabilities, and the parents of the children who dedicate their Saturday morning to bring their child to class. One parent wrote:

Until we discovered this class, we’d been unsuccessful in our efforts to find a program for him. Art has become the high-note in his life. It’s all I can do to get him dressed fast enough on class days. I can’t imagine a more wonderful education.

The semester culminates with a student art exhibition. Installed by the Moore students, the children’s exhibit boasts of the exciting art created during class. Family and friends, complete with cameras, come to enjoy the event. We celebrate those who reach 21 years of age with bittersweet goodbyes. With the success of this course for the children and the Moore Students, I realize that my practical background as an art educator in the city of Philadelphia has served me well - well enough to know that art educators are missing an important component of their education, learning how to teach children with disabilities. In designing an M.A. in Art Education with an Emphasis in Special Population ([http://www.moore.edu/graduate\\_programs/ma\\_art\\_education](http://www.moore.edu/graduate_programs/ma_art_education)) in 2009, that missing component was found.

Our Program is designed for the working art educator. There is an intense six-week summer session and courses are held one weekend a month in the fall and spring. The degree can be completed in four semesters, or seven semesters if one attends part-time. Moore’s new program has graduated sixteen students and eight students are scheduled to graduate in August, 2013. Most of our graduates are art educators working in public, private, or charter schools. Four students did not have art teacher positions, but after earning their M.A., three of the four are currently teaching art full time.

Students follow these procedures for their individual thesis: (1) develop a question and research it; (2) gather and analyze data from their field study; and, (3) come to a conclusion and develop an action plan. Finding appropriate research for a thesis in journal articles has proven difficult (as outlined by the students below). However, our graduate students’ theses have already had an impact on art and special education. The data from one thesis changed a school district policy regarding the inclusion of children with autism in the lunch room, bus, and other

school activities.

One of our graduates presented data that successfully tracks integrating art in math and English classrooms in an urban school district in New Jersey. Another graduate's art curriculum is being incorporated in a Youth Detention Center. Still another applied and was accepted into a doctoral program to further her study on the acquisition of language and literacy skills by English Language Learners. The graduate students at Moore are making a difference in a brief time. They are emphasizing the need for arts education for children with disabilities. They are making us more aware of the lack of information that connects art and special education.

Because of her experience in Moore's MA in Art Education with an Emphasis in Special Populations, Linda Moye, a 2012 graduate, is currently assembling available arts resources into one place and reporting them to the Kennedy Center. We hope to continue to expand on her effort, gathering more resources and educational sites where the arts and special education intersect. With suggestions from graduate students and colleagues in higher education, the Arts and Special Education Resource Center will house pertinent and current material reinforcing the importance of teaching the arts to children with special needs.

My graduate students quickly realize that the best teaching methodology for diverse learners can be applied to typical children in their classroom. After our first summer session in the MA Program, Kim Gavin, a graduate student wrote:

I had no idea how much the decision to go to this graduate program was going to change my life and the way I see the world . . . I needed to reach deeply within myself to expose my own prejudices and preconceived ideas.

I needed to feel as exposed and vulnerable as someone who is outside of normal.

The graduates' theses include a variety of topics ranging from "reinforcing the social skill of listening for special needs students' through culturally responsive pedagogy" to "analyzing the impact of technology with students who have special needs." The challenge encountered by our graduate students when writing their literature review was sorting through data bases to find information on their specific topic. For example, typing in "emotional behavioral disorder," "social justice," and "art" did not yield any sources. Knowing which sources were reputable and which were reliable was also a concern. Developing a database of current and relevant articles, books, and journals that is housed in one site would significantly improve the research for arts and special education.

Each year, on the second Saturday in November, Moore hosts an “Art and Special Education Symposium.” Noted experts in the field of art and special education, including Beverly Levett Gerber, co-editor and contributing author of *Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs through Art*; Peter Geisser, visual artist and retired art teacher at The Rhode Island School for the Deaf; and David Flink, Co-founder of “Project Eye,” have addressed the participants. This year we look forward to Beverley Holden Johns’ (past president of the International Council for Children with Behavior Disorders) keynote on “Behavioral Techniques for the Art Room: Real Stuff You Can Use to Modify Behavior of Children with Special Needs.”

Round Table Discussions follow the keynote address and give voice to the successes and challenges art teachers, special education teachers, and parents face each day. Participants leave rejuvenated and excited to put into action the techniques and strategies they have learned about and experienced during the symposium. And, it is free ([http://www.moore.edu/graduate\\_programs/ma\\_art\\_education/symposium](http://www.moore.edu/graduate_programs/ma_art_education/symposium))!

**Feedback from Moore College of Art & Design graduate students.** Both of us have experienced difficulty locating arts/special education information throughout our professional careers. It would be gratifying to report at this time that information has become easier to discover. That is not the case. As described above, our graduate students continue to encounter difficulties finding relevant arts information about students with special needs. Information is scattered among diverse sites (i.e., national arts and art therapy professional organizations, national, state, and local special education organizations, parent organizations, and world-wide artists with disabilities sites, etc.). Accessing existing information requires not just persistence, but a prior knowledge of each organization’s goals, professional language, and the specific search words used to research topics. It still is difficult to fathom why an early search using the words “art education” and “teacher creativity” brought up so many references to “business entrepreneurs.”

Without courses or a program to teach and mesh the knowledge and skills from both fields, teachers are left with a “hit-or-miss” approach. This is not surprising. Time is limited and today’s teachers continually juggle many roles. Multi-tasking during their busy school day is routine. Teaching the arts brings even more classroom demands and pressures. Inclusive arts classrooms have increasing numbers of students with learning and behavioral needs to address (often without teacher training or supports). There are external pressures because teacher

evaluations are in flux and are often contentious. Add budgetary restraints to this complicated scenario, particularly in arts funding. Arts budgets are cut even as we observe students with special needs benefitting from their arts experiences!

Most arts classroom teachers do not have combined backgrounds in the arts and special education. And, despite increasing teacher certification requirements to include information about special education, some arts teachers still have no training to teach students with special needs. The Moore College of Art & Design Graduate Program is unusual. Moore's graduates learn to navigate art education and special education's professional goals, methods, and languages.

Moore's graduates were recently asked about their experiences accessing arts/special education information during their training. They compiled the following list:

1. Difficulty finding information on specific topics involving art and special education (e.g., a search for "Emotional and/or Behavior Disorders (EBD)," "social justice" and "art education" yields no sources).
2. Difficulty finding peer reviewed articles from recent years.
3. Difficulty finding information that referenced "art." The information was very general.
4. The search for research by the M.A. students in Art Education with an Emphasis in Special Populations candidates proved that there was information in other content areas (highlighting the need for research in art and special education).
5. Art educators "do" and we need to research in a scholarly manner to prove that what we do impacts special education students. (In fact, much from the special education field can be transferred to non-special education classes.)
6. A list of reputable authors, programs, and advocacy groups would be a tremendous resource.
7. A way to refine the search would be useful because the word "art," for instance, yields "Language Arts" and "Bachelor in Art," not the intended subject.
8. Articles flagged with the specific content topic and reader comments would create a more efficient path to pertinent information. Abstracts written by the authors *should* offer a clear, concise overview. Often, once you get past the abstract to the substance of the article, you find it doesn't meet your needs. Flagging articles with comments could cut down on that problem.

9. The vocabulary was different in different search engines (e.g., “parent involvement” in one site and “parent participation” in another”).
10. There is a need to know about arts/special education research conducted in other places.
11. The Resource Center could notify researchers of cutting edge articles on the specific topic they are studying.
12. There is a definite need for a databank of reputable, preselected articles relevant to art and special education

### **Conclusion**

The Tower of Babel has been constructed by the miscommunication that exists, not only between arts and special education, but within each field. Working with a student with autism (who is on a spectrum of disorders) can differ from teaching with a child with dyslexia or Williams Syndrome. Arts teachers have learned to adapt their teaching to diverse groups of students, but more and better communication is needed to highlight this information.

The arts can reach students in ways that differ from traditional classroom approaches. Temple Grandin (2006) describes the visual language, not the spoken language, as her primary language. Grandin teaches us to look for the learning avenue that fits each student’s skills and needs. The arts have always provided a visual, auditory, or movement approach to learning and they use sensory modalities that reinforce concepts and teach to the students’ strengths. Theatre and dance allow students with kinesthetic skills to excel and become comfortable with their bodies in space. The visual arts provide many different forms and media that expand students’ skills and allow them to find their own area of expertise.

While the skills taught in and through the arts may need to be modified for some, they reach many others because of their open-ended, creative qualities. Students can tell their own stories in their unique ways. There are no test scores, no “right” or “wrong” answers. The arts are different. As we learn each other’s language, the alphabet soup can become part of our mutual short-hand and the arts can lead the way to individualize instruction. The arts and special education need to learn from each other. The Tower of Babel of professional language does exist. But it can be dismantled as professionals access the research, teaching strategies, and success stories from each other.

## **An Inclusive National Arts/Special Education Information Resource Center**

We have organized a list of topics to suggest the scope of a National Arts/Special Education Resource Center. One of its goals is to begin the dialogue among professional organizations and individual arts teachers in the schools and related settings. We hope that a National Arts/Special Education Resource Center is continually updated to reflect classroom practices and ongoing research. More specifically, we hope that the Arts/Special Education Resource Center will be the go-to site.

- Information about national arts, arts therapy and related organizations including:
  - The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC),
  - The National Art Education Association (NAEA),
  - The American Art Therapy Association (AATA),
  - The National Association for Music Education (NAfME),
  - The American Music Therapy Association (AMTA),
  - The National Dance Association (NDA),
  - The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA),
  - The Educational Theatre Association (EdTA),
  - The National Association for Drama Therapy (NADTA),
  - The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP),
  - The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD),
  - The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and  
Rehabilitative Services,
  - The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.
- Publications and Websites:
  - Arts Education Professional Teaching Journals
  - Special Education Professional Teaching Journals
  - Professional Organization access sites
  - Parent Organization sites
  - Arts/SED Research Articles
  - Arts/SED Dissertation sites
- In-service SED/Arts teacher training model
- Working with paraeducators (paraprofessionals) in the art room

- Pre-service arts training:
  - Descriptions of teacher training courses/programs that focus on the arts for students with special needs.
  - Course syllabi
- Model arts programs:
  - National and international arts-based special education school programs
  - Arts infused curriculum models
- State listings of arts programs for students with special needs:
  - Descriptions of existing programs and population served
  - State arts/special education awards/grant opportunities.

### **Recommendations**

Because we are familiar with individual and group past efforts to create an arts and special education information site, we offer suggestions for a more permanent, financially sustainable resource center. In the past, small arts/special education resource sites have been established by faculty at universities, issues groups at national organizations, and local non-profit groups. All have experienced challenges due to limitations of time and personnel. A National Arts/Special Education Resource Center will require personnel to maintain an active Resource Center. These past experiences logically lead to the conclusion that a National Arts/Special Education Information Resource Center also needs a sustainable system of financial support.

Another Kennedy Center 2012 Forum recommendation is to establish a national arts/special education group to become an advocate of the arts for students with special needs. Representation should include members of the varied special education, arts education, and arts therapy professional communities. Members of this group might also act in an advisory capacity to the Arts/Special Education Resource Center. An advisory group of three to five members from the professional organizations listed above can guide the content and practice of the National Arts/Special Education Information Resource Center.

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# Arts Education and Inclusion

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*No Child Left Behind*, a federal legislative blueprint that was introduced by President George W. Bush in 2002, has been left behind. The benchmarks for achievement to which students, teachers and schools have been held accountable have now been waived in 36 states, thus far, in favor of more nuanced ways to evaluate their collective progress.

What has not been left behind are high expectations of students, teachers and schools: Children could and should achieve substantial gains in their performance and knowledge in the course of their education. This is true for all students, including those with disabilities. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* stipulates that children with disabilities must receive a *Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)* and that children with disabilities must also be given the opportunity to learn in the *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)*. In other words, where appropriate, they must have the opportunity to learn with typically developing peers, in regular classrooms. The *inclusion* movement, as it is known, blends children, able and disabled alike, seamlessly in one learning environment. High expectations apply to all students.

The waiver of NCLB regulations means that teachers have been freer than they have been in years to support and encourage curiosity and creativity in the classroom without having to face the prospect of interminable testing. It also means that prior emphasis on reading, math, and science at the expense of art, music, and physical education in K-12 classrooms can be reversed, omissions that have contributed to undermining learning. Art, music, and physical education all contribute in various ways to students' ability to meet high expectations.

Reintroducing the arts into the general curriculum is a critical step in supporting and promoting a child's social and emotional growth and development. Critical, because the arts, broadly conceived, offer unique opportunities to develop awareness in children, able and disabled alike, that broadens their perspectives, celebrates their differing talents and creativity, and encourages their acceptance of others. Engaging students in the performing arts - theater, music, dance - also provides rich opportunities for self-expression, the acquisition of skills and the bolstering of self-confidence, all of which encourage children's growth and development.

Children play. They create imaginary worlds and endless possibilities. It is intrinsic in their nature to imagine, and properly supported from their earliest years, their creativity

flourishes in preschool and kindergarten. Imaginative play facilitates children's learning about the world around them, about relationships, about ideas, about obstacles and limits. Regrettably, it is precisely this playfulness that is often drummed out of our children once they enter first grade, where greater emphasis is placed on skills and the acquisition of knowledge.

Creativity in the classroom--mixing up art and science, music and math lessons - is ubiquitous in the early years but seldom to be found as children advance through school and teachers become ever more specialized in imparting content to their students. Indeed, the failure to engage, inspire, and challenge students throughout their schooling might well be contributing to the lamentable early drop-out rates among teenaged students before they have obtained their high school diplomas.

Teachers today increasingly are being directed to introduce real life examples into their lessons as a means to engage older students, by piquing their interest and enlisting them in the wonder of learning so that lessons and homework assignments are not just exercises in abstract thinking, but resonate in their daily lives. Flexibility in the curriculum that encourages teachers and students to make connections between abstract ideas and their practical applications is not just a potent recipe for learning. It reflects how children actually learn. Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence to show that the arts enhance the teaching of traditional subjects.

My son's experience offers two cases in point: He is a member of the metropolitan Washington, DC based *interPLAYcompany Band* (<http://interplayband.org>) that draws together the talents of professional musicians and amateur musicians, with and without disabilities, in which technical skill is developed through clever instruction and peer support. In the second case, he is a member of an acting company, *ArtStream Inc.*, also based in the metropolitan Washington DC area (<http://www.art-stream.org>), in which actors, with and without disabilities, team together to develop a story, flesh out the plot, character, and context, and create dialogue that results in entirely original annual productions.

These two activities have been powerful motivators for him, enabling him to focus, learn new things, and find new ways of expressing himself both musically and theatrically. The experiences have bolstered his confidence and encouraged him to participate in activities that would formerly have been beyond his reach. They have lured him in and engaged his full participation in ways that have been quite novel, challenging and enriching.

Over the course of 6 years, as a member of his acting troupe, he has graduated from a

nominal role, delivering one line of text in a play with the aid of a script, to being an integral part of the production. In his last several performances, he delivered many lines well (without a script), acted in character, developed his role, worked with the ensemble of other actors, and even participated in the writing of the original stories.

Where once he had neither the capacity, nor confidence, to speak before others, he has now the poise and self-confidence to articulate his lines publicly. This is true of his musical talents as well. Where before he was too shy to stand before others, he has now performed his own original solo harmonica compositions, introducing them to audiences with words about what inspired his interpretations and why. His is just one example among many others.

But this is only one part of the equation. What my son gains by exposure to the arts in thoughtful, creative, and supportive environments is matched equally, and then some, by the benefits for everyone who works with him.

Consider just some of the words of one of the typical actors of the company, Sasha Berger, a high school student and mentor to my son, who wrote the following in her college application:

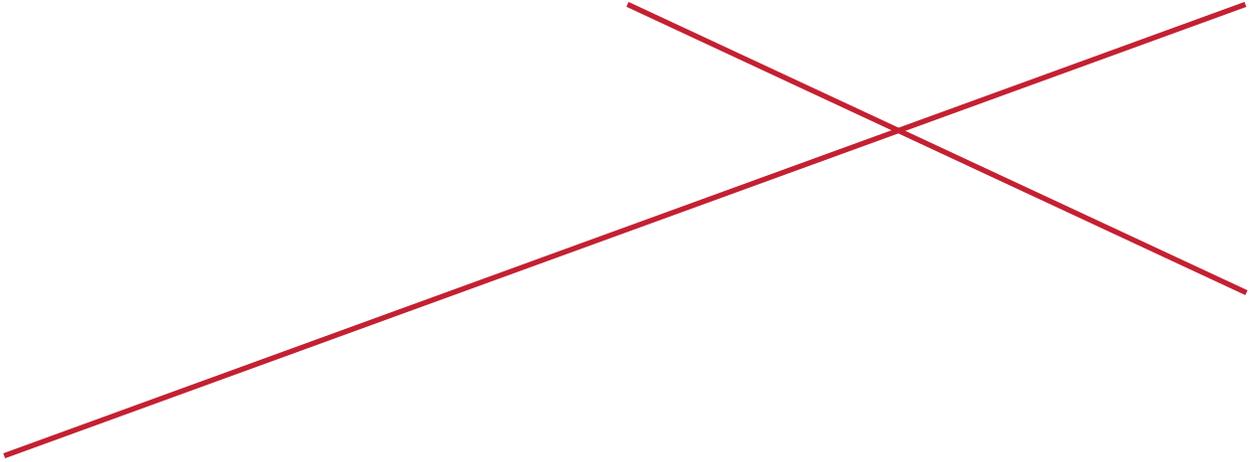
As a mentor, I witness the most raw and profound forms of sincerity while watching these actors both on and off stage. My observations during ArtStream and during my other theatrical endeavors have taught me to notice and apply the difference between sincerity and artificiality both onstage and off.

The benefits to be gained by joining actors, with and without disabilities, together in artistic endeavors are not one sided at all.

Investing in the arts and inviting broad participation in them is an enterprise that benefits all parties lucky enough to participate, by transforming theirs, and our, perceptions of reality in unimaginably wonderful ways. One by-product of that effort includes the creation of vibrant, new, and innovative communities.

In my lifetime, I have experienced the transformative power of the arts--in music, theater, and dance. As a mother of a son on the autism spectrum, I have also experienced the transformative power of having a child with a disability. Combining these two together is a transformative experience of exponentially greater power and depth for all those who are given the opportunity to do so.

It is nothing short of magical.



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