



# The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education:

## Exemplary Programs and Approaches

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

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The Kennedy Center



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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.

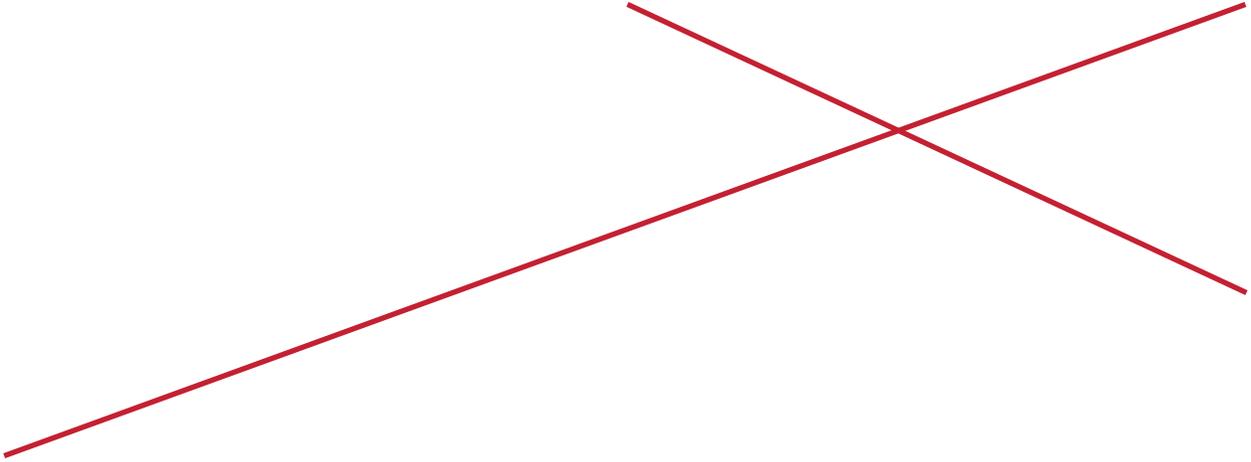
## **Conclusion**

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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