



The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education:

Exemplary Programs and Approaches

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

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

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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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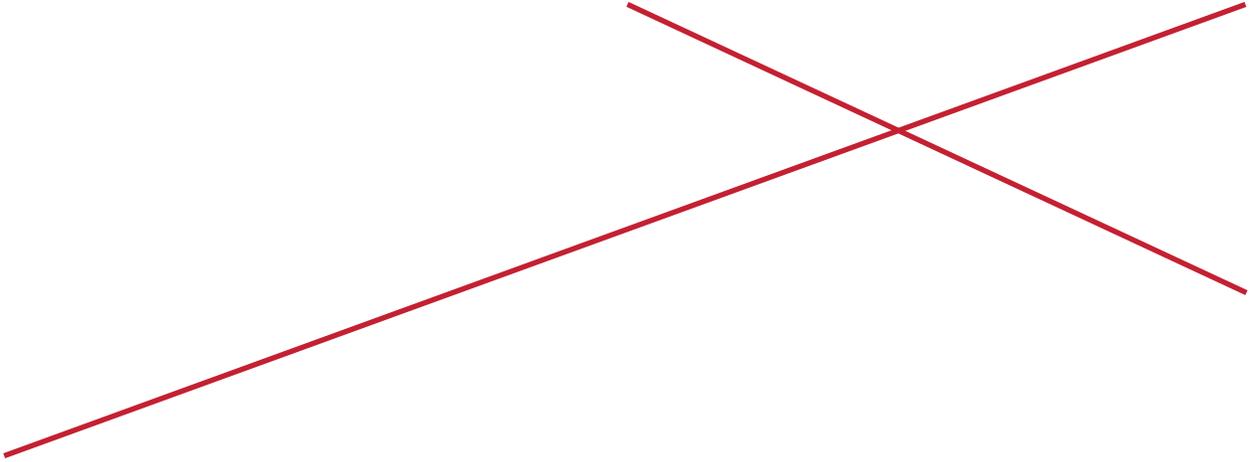
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