



# The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education:

## Exemplary Programs and Approaches

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

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The Kennedy Center



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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.

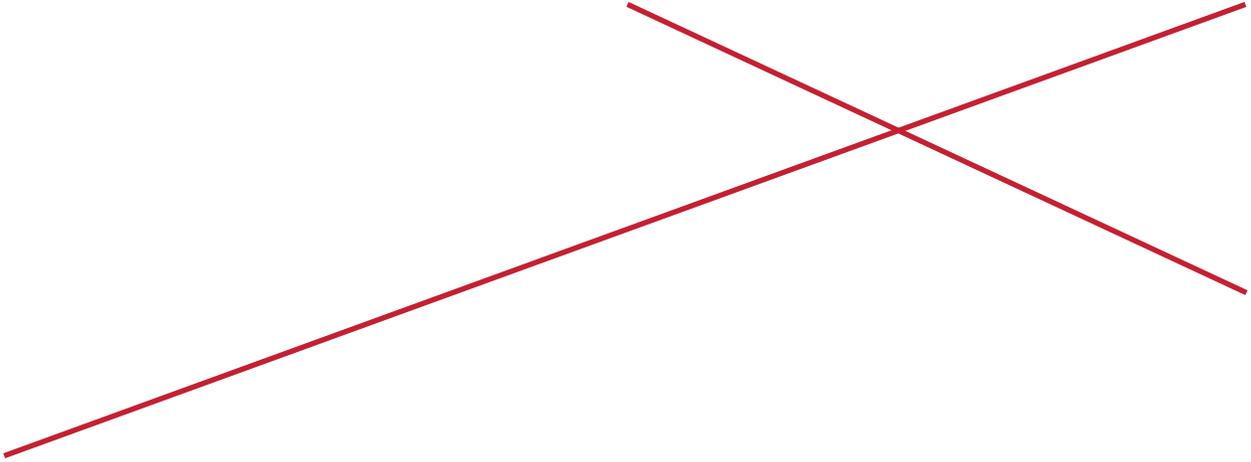
### **Conclusion**

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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