



# The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education:

## Exemplary Programs and Approaches

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Arts Education and Inclusion

SARI HORNSTEIN

The Kennedy Center



# Acknowledgements and Credits

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# Arts Education and Inclusion

SARI HORNSTEIN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

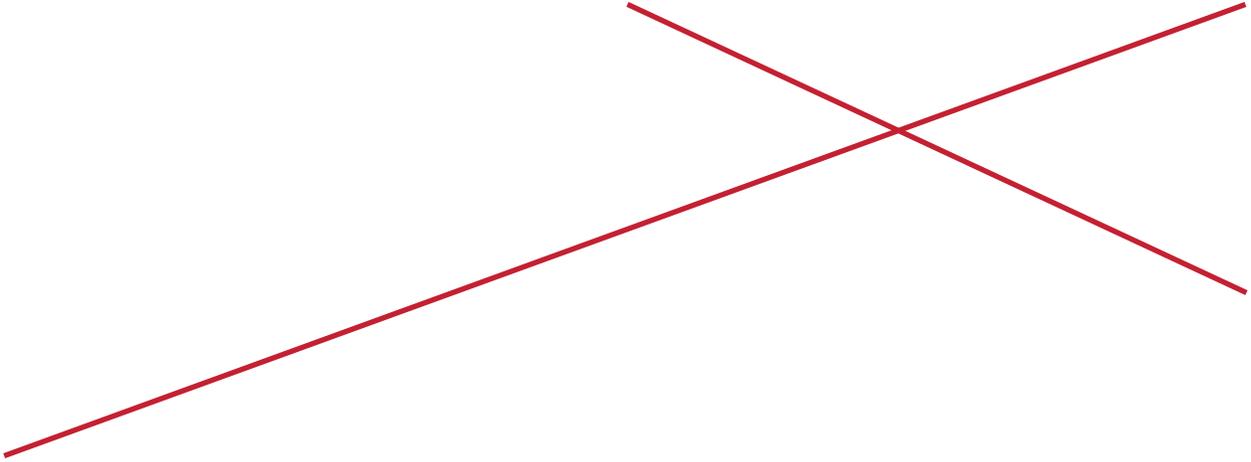
As a mentor, I witness the most raw and profound forms of sincerity while watching these actors both on and off stage. My observations during ArtStream and during my other theatrical endeavors have taught me to notice and apply the difference between sincerity and artificiality both onstage and off.

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

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

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

It is nothing short of magical.



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