



The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education:

Exemplary Programs and Approaches

Introduction

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The Kennedy Center



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

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

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

among ourselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

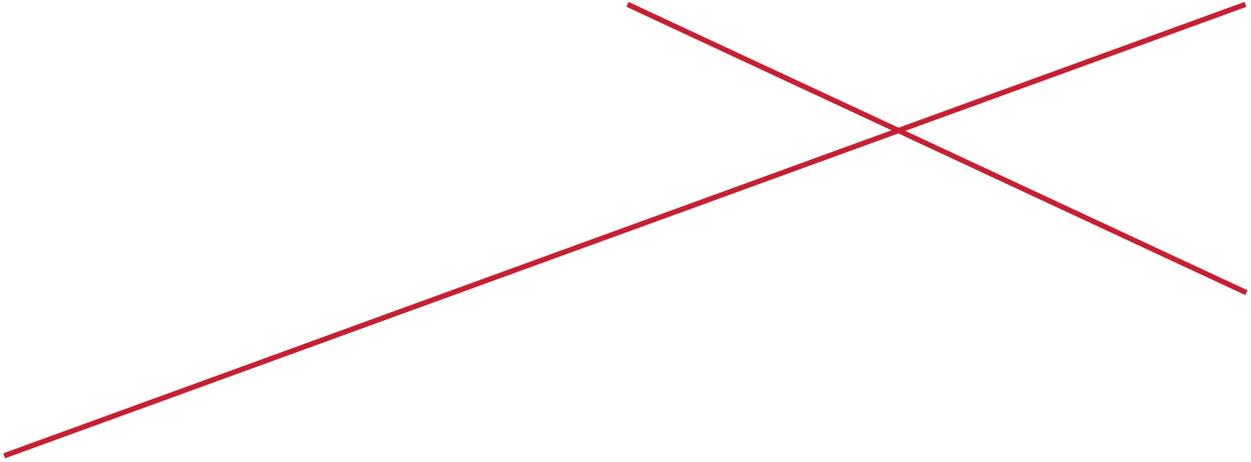
with disabilities. Adamek, Professor of Music Therapy at the University of Iowa, and Darrow, Professor of Music Education and Music Therapy at Florida State University, include strategies for developing characteristics and skills, that lead to increased abilities to set goals, solve problems and make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

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

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

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