

Engaging Exceptional Students Through Art Activities

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Abstract

Art has the capacity to engage exceptional learners, regardless of the nature of their exceptionalities. Students who experience difficulty with academic subjects may enjoy visual art activities with which they engage holistically to learn problem-solving skills and interact positively with their environment, including the social environment of the classroom. When art educators are included in the teams that develop students' Individual Education Plans (IEPs), they can support the teams' efforts to meet the students' learning needs by finding hands-on ways to develop skills that apply to other classroom contexts. Whether gifted or challenged by physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, or behavioural disabilities, exceptional students can find personal success in art.

New demands are increasingly placed on educators of exceptional students. Educators need to provide more challenging daily lessons, which engage students in creative and critical enquiry to assist everyday problem solving. Visual art is a part of our society and our history – it belongs in every student's learning process (Harris, 2012). When students learn through visual arts, such as drawing, painting, printing, collage or sculpting with clay, they experience real problem solving and critical reflection and observation. They can express themselves freely, with a medium that caters to their strengths. The art room is also an interactive social environment. Students with learning disabilities, whether they are physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, or behavioural, will benefit from art activities and this unique social experience. When participating in art activities, the student is the creator, constantly making new decisions through trial and error; this is why art is engaging. An art-integrated curriculum offers a unique hands-on learning experience. Developmental disabilities were very common in my art classes. Some students had vision impairment and learning disabilities, and intellectual disabilities were most common.

Art rooms are mini social environments where students have the opportunity to move around and socialize with others. Social behaviours of students with developmental disabilities are usually monitored by educational assistants. Problem solving by using various mediums and art techniques can be very satisfying for students. The challenges for students with developmental disabilities are minimized in an art room environment. Building on student strengths in an inclusive art classroom gives students a chance to participate and achieve success. Students learn how to create. "The visual arts are a powerful teaching tool that can enhance the cognitive, emotional and social development of children . . . create a more holistic approach . . . the therapeutic process of creating art can improve self-esteem, promote self-expression, and encourage independence and social skills . . . art to accommodate the individual needs of students makes it a powerful tool in aiding special education programs. (McCarthy, n.d., pp. 21-22). A student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) that includes art would serve and support students with developmental disabilities. Alternative curriculum development such as life skills should include personal hobbies and skills where a student finds personal satisfaction. These students often find success in their strengths, and this can carry them through life's challenges. Educators of exceptional students have the opportunity to personalize their art-integrated lessons across the general curriculum.

Knowing and building on the strengths and unique qualities of the students is essential for every student's success. Creating a challenging IEP for each student that includes the arts will help prepare individuals for independent living and a possible career (Thurlow, 2012). Because

struggling learners with disabilities require special supports (see Beech, 2010; Loesl, 2012), “input from the arts teacher is essential” in order for the IEP to identify “specialized materials or environmental designs and/or assistive technologies” that are needed in the art room (Malley, 2013, p. 10). Only then can the arts can provide individually meaningful and rewarding experiences that can engage exceptional learners. When the educator can set the expectations for the students higher and the students also feel that they can obtain the goals set for them, this is a solution for success. Success builds confidence: the more confidence a student with disabilities has, the easier it will be for the student to communicate through his/her successes. The arts offer the students a visual and interpretive language to communicate their ideas and express their feelings, which is especially important for the 40% of students with specific learning disabilities who have problems “processing involving use of spoken or written language” (Malley, 2013, p. 4). Artistic expression enables these students to extend their comfort zone, building new areas of knowledge and learning. The arts teach new perceptual skills that heighten students’ awareness of the world around them, which makes it the easier for them to cope with everyday life.

Exceptional learners require student-appropriate art activities. These art activities can provide the support required by individual students. The lessons engage the students, heightening their observation skills and improving their motor skills. Art is a visual language that can give students an increased awareness, respect, and understanding for their environment. This sensitivity is a vital component for a sense of personal wellbeing and students will become excited when physically and mentally involved in a deep-rooted educational experience. Developing art-integrated lessons across the general curriculum should address many of the needs and goals that students and society have today. Teachers of exceptional students need new ideas and age-appropriate lesson plans that will motivate students while meeting a wide range of exceptionalities. “The arts help create the kind of learning environment conducive to teaching and student success by fostering teacher innovation, a positive professional culture, community engagement, increased student attendance, effective instructional practice and school identity” (Ruppert, 2006, p. 15). In my art room, I have seen the joy of learning on the faces of students with learning disabilities and their educational assistants as the students become engaged in their own educational process.

Art-integration can accommodate diverse learning styles and learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities often become disengaged with their learning process. This personal frustration leads to low personal self-esteem, causing anxiety. Art-integration can help students to rebuild their self-esteem through its therapeutic qualities. A holistic approach to student learning focuses “on the whole child, including their psychological and physiological wellbeing” (McCarthy, n.d., p. 7). “The use of art within the curriculum will promote a more constructive approach to learning in which the child has a more active role in their education” (McCarthy, n.d., p. 8). Engaging students in a meaningful way encourages them to do their best and enjoy the learning process and regular classroom activities. Diversifying the students’ instruction and adapting techniques that build on the students’ strengths will help them to make connections as they gain an understanding of the curriculum content.

Art-integration also provides visual illustrations that can support learning concepts for students with learning disabilities. Visual images can help students who have problems with reading and writing to comprehend information required for understanding. “While art can be frustrating and stressful for children, this can be minimized by selecting art projects that are suitable to the developmental stage and special needs of the child, while simultaneously being challenging enough to take ownership” (McCarthy, n.d., p. 20). Appropriate assessment is required for students with learning disabilities. This will help educators to organize and target the students’ Individual Education Plans. Art-integrated assignments have the advantage of motivating students with different learning styles and disabilities who “need access to art making experiences as much as or more than their peers” (Loesl, 2012, p. 48). For students whose disabilities are physical, art classes provide “more and longer opportunities to move their hands

and bodies and to increase their strength and independence,” and art can become “a refuge” for students whose disabilities are social and emotional (Loesl, 2012, p. 48). In addition, “students with cognitive challenges learn to concretely work through their understanding of abstract concepts” in the art room (Loesl, 2012, p. 48). Art-integration helps students to develop the physical and mental skills required for lifelong learning.

Monitoring a student’s personal achievement is very important. The student’s IEP must consider the student’s capabilities mentally and physically, and art assignments should be monitored and assessed following the student’s skill levels. Strategies for assessment should be available and an ongoing process of monitoring a student’s achievement is very important. Student goals need to be obtainable and realistic. Intervention needs to take place if a student appears to be frustrated or overwhelmed by completing art projects. Simpler or more basic assignments will need to be created in order to target the student’s skill levels. Considering a student’s support needs is also very important, because educational assistants may make a difference in the student’s success or failure. Collaboration with all members of the education team is always important when monitoring and assessing the success of an IEP. Celebrating a student’s achievements is only possible if the student personally feels success and a goal has been successfully achieved.

Gifted students are exceptional learners who often demonstrate creativity in the arts. Gifted students need to be challenged. Creative problems will give them the opportunity to make new decisions and experiment with different perspectives. When gifted students have the opportunity to invent and to resolve problems that will satisfy their curiosity, their rate of learning can be self-directed in order to broaden their scope of interests and expand their learning horizons. The special interests of gifted students can be easily adapted into art projects. Self-directed art projects are also self-motivating. The subject matter chosen by the student and the media can constantly change, making new decisions through trial and error. Gifted students who are underachievers will be rewarded with personal satisfaction by seeing their completed art projects. This meaningful hands-on experience will engage the students and personally challenge them. Whether the student interests lie in visual art, music, or performing arts such as dance and drama, areas of the curriculum can be adapted so that the students may pursue personal areas of interest. All of these areas provide gifted students a chance to excel at their own rate, by means of self-directed and open-ended activities. The arts offer gifted students with the limitless opportunities to advance to the level of their choice.

Educators can adapt the curriculum for exceptional students in the art room. Students with learning disabilities often struggle in a regular classroom. Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Asperger’s Syndrome tend to be creative, imaginative, and enthusiastic, often thinking outside the box. As an art teacher, I have found these students creative and enthusiastic to learn. They are outgoing risk-takers willing to experiment with artistic techniques and subject matter. In the art room, step-by-step instructions and the self-motivating atmosphere will provide the assistance that students with ADHD require. Students with Asperger’s Syndrome especially enjoy the social atmosphere of the art room; they tend to be unique visual thinkers who like to share their artistic gifts with others. A teacher can always build on the strengths of students and the rewards can be dynamic. Teachers need to think outside the box as well, like a student with ADHD or Asperger’s does.

Students who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have difficulty with social interaction, communication, and motor skills. The art room can give these students an opportunity to communicate and express themselves visually with hands-on skills to increase their motor functions. Students can be empowered through success with art activities and through social interaction with other students, which eases the stress built up in students. Students who have autism may be able to express and improve communication through their art activities with others. The following benefits are listed by Evans (n.d.) for autistic students involved in art activities: “increases self-awareness, develops social skills, changes behaviors, develops problem solving strategies, allows an individual to engage in creative thinking in a safe

environment, and allows an individual to focus solely on the activity at hand and shut out other thoughts that may be intrusive” (Evans, para. 5). ASD students working in the art room are brought into a co-operative environment. Here they can share creative experiences and gain self-respect while they improve their motor skills and social skills.

When students are engaged in the art-making experience, they are free to explore and manipulate several types of media. Working with clay could be a door-opening experience for an autistic student who is tactile defensive. A visually impaired learner can discover clay as the perfect medium to etch visual designs and fulfill a dream of making an artistic object appreciated for its textural qualities. The plastic nature of clay means that it can be manipulated and changed several times, or recycled and worked on again another day. Art provides the opportunity for students to make something of their own. Regardless of whether final project is successful or not, the process and the final product are theirs. I still treasure the little gifts that my children made in class and brought home from school for me, from their early years’ classes. The pieces are not great works of art, but my children made them for me, which makes them special.

When I was the coordinator of an ArtsSmarts project a few years ago, one of my artists told me of her day in class. The subject teachers of the school that she was visiting warned her of two students diagnosed with HDHD. These students would be disruptive, and they could stay on task for only two hours, so the teachers would take them out of the room when they started to be a problem. Well, the day went on and all students remained on task, following the artist’s instructions and completing the projects. These two students in particular were very excited to take their projects home to show their parents what they had accomplished. Either these students with behavioural issues worked through their personal issues in class, or they were just too busy and engaged working for the issues to become a problem. “There is something inherent about the creative process within each of us that can help us become creative and productive members of society” (Loesl, 2012, p. 60). Eisner (2004) described how the skills that a student develops in art are transferable into other classes, such as critical thinking and multiple perspectives for problem solving. These new skills will find students being more willing to become involved in other subject areas. The students who have gained personal confidence are now willing to take greater risks and express themselves in different ways.

I have seen art become a stepping stone to success for a number of students. “The arts may be a great equalizer in education because, regardless of language and ability, music, visual art, and drama are accessible to all, are largely nonverbal, and focus on creativity and self-expression” (Hutchinson, 2014, p. 272). There was an exceptional art student in my Senior I art course. He loved to draw, so much so that he was always drawing in every class, not only art. I adapted an art program for him – all art, all day, every day. The Senior III and IV students loved his work and he began working with them, more as an “artist in school” type of relationship. He began researching artists in different periods, thus studying art history. He was very interested in Escher and his illusions, thus studying mathematics and geometry. He wrote explanations about his own art, which meant that he was using language arts. I found a number of elective courses that I could offer him. He completed that school year, and then completed his high school compulsory courses and graduated two years later. He went on to university and graduated.

Educators can be proud of their success stories, but the reality is that many more students are in need of help. Art-integration techniques work, but art-specialists are few and far between. Educators need to reach out to administrators for help. “Despite convincing research and strong public support, the arts remain on the margins of education, often the last to be added and the first to be dropped in times of straining budgets and shifting priorities” (Ruppert, 2006, p. 18). From my experience working with exceptional students as an educator, art can be the medium to engage students in successful educational endeavours that they and their parents can be proud of. The evidence in the literature, and information from art educators such as me, and other teachers, compels educators to consider art as an essential part of the IEP process. For

many students with exceptionalities, art can be the key to unlocking their potential for academic enjoyment and success. Engaging exceptional students in the arts can enable these students to overcome their disabilities and attain the goals set out in the IEP. Academically challenged students can acquire the targets the team has set for them but probably more important targets are the ones the students themselves have achieved.

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About the Author

Eric Lowe came to Brandon University in 2007 as a sessional lecturer after 18 years of teaching in the public school system, which included coordinating ArtsSmarts and hosting PD sessions for educators. He has two M.Ed. degrees from BU and is currently completing a third M.Ed. in special education.