

# HARNESSING THE POWER OF ART FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

**By: Maureen McCarthy**

*Different avenues*

*Unleash dormant potential*

*For those in great need.*

Within contemporary Western society there is a pervasive attitude towards the arts as a superfluous experience that while enriching are not of particular importance. This zeitgeist has seeped into educational theory, pedagogy, and practice. Subsequently, the arts “are not accorded the importance in education given to those subjects that might lead to economically productive lives in the world of occupations.”<sup>1</sup> Art education is frequently confined to one classroom and deemed as extracurricular. This phenomenon excludes the potential contributions of the visual arts in furthering the intellectual and social development of children throughout their education.

This reform initiative advocates the harnessing of the learning opportunities inherent in visual arts education for students with special needs. This specific population that traditionally has been marginalized can greatly benefit from a different approach to learning. Strategies will be outlined that address how to make art techniques accessible to special and general education teachers for the benefit of their students with special needs. Integrating art into special education programs has two distinct benefits that will be addressed. First, the incorporation of art into a curriculum, will produce a more

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur D. Efland, *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 7.

holistic pedagogy that can more effectively meet the varied needs of diverse learners. Through an arts based holistic approach to curriculum, a wider range of learning styles can be accommodated. Through meeting the diverse learning needs of more children, fewer children will have to enter the special education program. This is specifically pertinent for children in special education programs, as this population has not been reached by traditional teaching methods. Second, the therapeutic qualities of creating art can be used as a catharsis and to enhance self-esteem of children with special needs. The emotional and social development of children who have special needs can be enhanced through the utilization of art therapy in special education classrooms. Incorporating art into special education programs can unleash the dormant potential of the visual arts for a particularly disadvantaged population of students.

## **ISSUE ASSESSMENT**

The examination of the existing problems within the arena of special education provides a vital perspective for this issue assessment. A major factor contributing to the current state of special education is the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, hereafter referred to as IDEA. Other important measures will be examined as well, including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The affect of this legislation on students in special education programs will also be discussed.

Section 504 of Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1973 as a civil rights statute protecting individuals with disabilities from discrimination. In the educational sector, Section 504 requires that all schools supply students with “handicaps,” in the terminology

of the time, “reasonable accommodations comparable to those provided to their peers.”<sup>2</sup> To qualify for assistance under Section 504, the student must have a disability that limits their basic life abilities.

A different law born in the same era shares many of the objectives of Section 504. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, known as Public Law 94-142, is a benchmark measure passed in 1975 that sought to establish equal educational opportunities for handicapped children comparable to mainstreamed students. While Section 504 spells out the legal rights of children with disabilities, PL 94-142 is the tool or process through which these legal rights can be ensured. Thus, children with disabilities were to be included in public schools with access to individualized services to meet their specific needs.<sup>3</sup>

Two major components of P.L. 94-142 that have had significant and lasting impacts on special education were the development of Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and the Individual Education Plan (IEP). FAPE outlines that a student with disabilities must have free access to the least restrictive environment. Frequently, this translates to special needs children being taught in general education classrooms with children who do not have disabilities. The IEP is developed for each student and identifies the child’s special needs and sets specific goals for the child to attain. It also outlines what services will be provided by the school in helping to reach the created objectives. The IEP is reviewed annually where the student’s progress is

---

<sup>2</sup> Laurie deBettencourt, “Understanding the Differences between IDEA and Section 504,” *TEACHING Exceptional Children* 34 (2002): 16.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra J Altshuler and Sandra Kopels, “Advocating in Schools for Children with Disabilities: What’s New with IDEA?” *Social Work* 48 (2003): 321.

measured and new goals are created.<sup>4</sup> The interaction of Section 504 and PL 94-142 has shaped the form of special education since their inception.

In 1990 PL 94-142 was reauthorized as IDEA and maintained the basic protection of rights first outlined in 1975. However, to address the inability of PL 94-142 to achieve equitable education for children with disabilities, state policies that complied with federal legislation were established. A movement towards inclusion permeated IDEA as children with special needs were to be brought into classes with their peers as much as possible. This was congruent with studies that indicated children with special needs that were mainstreamed learned as well or better as children with special needs in contained classrooms. In addition, it was found that inclusion advanced acceptance of children with disabilities in the community of the school.<sup>5</sup>

By 1997, the act was expanded to address some of the remaining limitations of IDEA. The definitions of the previously existing thirteen distinct disabilities were further clarified and included; specific learning disability, speech or language impairments, emotional disturbance, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment, deafness, mental retardation, deaf-blindness, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, and other health impairments.<sup>6</sup> Children with disabilities not defined in these criteria do not have access to found special education or protection. The “other health impairments” category functions as an umbrella to accommodate children who have disabilities that do not fall under other categories. For example, ADD and ADHD, two disabilities previously excluded from IDEA protection, were incorporated into this section.

---

<sup>4</sup> deBettencourt, 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Schiller “Access to Art Education: Ethical and Legal Perspectives,” in *Issues And Approaches To Art For Students With Special Needs*, ed. Andra L. Nyman and Anne M. Jenkins (National Art Education Association, 1999), 9.

<sup>6</sup> deBettencourt, 17.

The 1997 IDEA legislation further extend equitable education opportunities to children that are homeless and those who speak English as a second language. In addition, IDEA incorporates general educators and parents of the child with disabilities to a greater extent into the IEP process. A final addition in the 1997 IDEA act included the increased ability of schools to remove children with disabilities for disciplinary reasons.<sup>7</sup> Thus Section 504 and P.L. 94-142, and their ultimate form, IDEA, have thoroughly regulated special education policy and practice.

Yet, many problems remain in the realm of special education. Four main critiques that relate to this initiative are as follow. First, students with non-traditional learning styles are marginalized in the current general education classrooms. This results in an increased proportion of non-traditional learners in special education programs. Students with non-traditional learning styles are placed into special education programs to receive assistance, yet are further marginalized in this program because of the similar reliance on traditional methods. Thus, it is particularly within special education that attention must be given to accommodate these students. Second, to receive special education support, children must be placed into one of the categories of disabilities. The necessity to fit a child into a category can result in misdiagnosis, which can lead to the child not receiving the assistance they need. Many of these children only have limited reading skills that require direct attention, instead of placement into a special education program. Third, the majority of children who qualify for a disability under IDEA do not improve their status and remain in special education programs throughout their education. While many children need special assistance, for those children who can plausibly move out of special education programs, this should be a goal. Finally, the emotional development of child

---

<sup>7</sup> Altshuler and Kopels, 323.

within special education programs is not adequately addressed. Children in special education face many challenging obstacles that impinge upon their mental health throughout their educational career that require direct support. The culmination of these problems is that the objective of IDEA to achieve equitable education for children with disabilities is compromised.

## **Problems In Special Education: How Art Can Help:**

### **Rationale**

To confront these challenges in special education, this initiative attempts to ameliorate the marginalization of students with special needs with the ultimate goal of improving student success within special education programs or eliminating their need for special assistance. While the aspirations of IDEA are admirable, it is necessary to reexamine the process that seeks to achieve the current goals. Much like *No Child Left Behind*, despite the inspiring vision that shaped IDEA, unsatisfactory results require reform. This initiative proposes that through incorporating art into special education programs, the objectives of IDEA can be better attained while working within the framework of IDEA. It sets two specific goals. First, the strict regulations encourage the misdiagnosis of mild learning problems that limits the capacity of school officials to recognize other educational problems such as literacy. Through creating an arts based holistic curriculum, diverse learners could be accommodated with the effect of reducing the number of children who enter special education programs because their learning styles and educational needs are not being accommodated in the general classroom. Second, the therapeutic qualities of art can address the problem of low self-esteem for children with

special needs. To hope to improve the education of students with special needs, the focus must be on the whole child, including their psychological and physiological well being.

### **Prevention of Misdiagnosis Through Holistic Curriculum**

As G. Reid Lyon of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development argued, the placement of children with general educational problems into the “learning disabled” category is a “sociological sponge to wipe up the spills of general education.”<sup>8</sup> This problem of misdiagnosing children can have lasting implications on a child’s education through placing them into a more restrictive program than is necessary. Gryphon and Salisbury highlight that children diagnosed under the IDEA definition of “learning disabilities” comprise the fastest growing segment of children that require special education. This is in part due to the fact that special education assistance is only available to students with a defined disability. Subsequently, this results in an upsurge in students being labeled with learning disabilities to receive assistance that is perhaps not correct for their problem.<sup>9</sup> Traditional teaching methods that do not accommodate students with diverse learning styles further complicate the matter. Of course, many children are correctly diagnosed and are able to receive essential services through IDEA. Yet, these false diagnoses limit other measures that could directly address the root of a minor learning problem. To exemplify, Robert Pasternack, the Assistant US Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitation Services states “While many children are appropriately classified as having learning disabilities, we know, for example, that many

---

<sup>8</sup> Gryphon and Salisbury., 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 11.

are classified as such because of the lack of effective reading instruction...in the regular classroom.”<sup>10</sup>

To address this issue, a more holistic, integrated approach to elementary curriculum is advocated. A holistic curriculum encourages collaboration between teacher and student instead of a more traditional top down approach. In this constructivist approach, the teacher becomes a facilitator of each child’s acquisition of knowledge, rather than the distributor of knowledge. Subsequently, in this student-centered model, a more active role for the student can be achieved. Furthermore, this collaboration encourages teachers to be more responsive to the needs of each individual child.

An integrative curriculum encourages students to see connections in the different disciplines and is a vital component of a truly holistic learning experience. Arthur Efland underlines the importance of an integrated approach to developing a deeper understanding of knowledge, “If the aim of education is to fully activate the cognitive potential of the learner, ways have to be found to integrate knowledge from many subjects to achieve a fuller understanding than would be provided by content treated in isolation.”<sup>11</sup> Art can be used in this process to integrate isolated material and provide a wider context. Holistic teaching will help to reduce the misdiagnosis of learning disabilities to children who have not connected with the material or the instructor and have subsequently not had their learning style accommodated in the classroom.

The use of art within the curriculum will promote a more constructivist approach to learning in which the child has a more active role in their education. In fact, studies have indicated that constructivist methods of teaching have great potential for special

---

<sup>10</sup> Gryphon and Salisbury, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Efland,103.

education students.<sup>12</sup> In addition, a holistic arts based approach will reach children with different learning styles that are not targeted by the teaching methods that are already in place. In addition, correctly diagnosing and helping children not only benefits the children receiving assistance, but it is also advantageous to the other children within the school. Excess energy is not spent on the wrong problems and the remaining time can be funneled to other areas of concern. But most importantly, a holistic approach can provide deep interconnected learning experiences for all students.

An integrative approach achieved through the incorporation of art into the curriculum will better accommodate the needs students with diverse learning styles and preferences. There are different types of scales to measure learning styles that can be divided in cognitive, affective and physiological categories. The *Cognitive learning style* includes the way a person perceives and thinks, it refers to *how* a person learns; *affective learning* encompasses the emotional attributes and personality of the learner; *physiological learning* deals with the student's physical self and environment.<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this paper the cognitive modalities of visual, auditory tactile, kinesthetic, and integrate are of utmost importance. The visual modality accounts for the largest type of learners at nearly 30%.<sup>14</sup> As such, to incorporate teaching techniques that accommodate the largest modality is very logical and beneficial to a large group of students. A study by Smith and Woody reinforce that “enhancing the visual aspects of class presentations, are indeed beneficial to students.”<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Trent et. all, 278.

<sup>13</sup> Judith C. Reiff, *Learning Styles*, (National Education Association Press, 1992) 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen M. Smith and Paul C. Woody., “Interactive Effect Of Multimedia Instruction And Learning Styles.” *Teaching of Psychology*, 27 (2000): 220.

Another system for determining learning styles is the Dunn and Dunn Learning Style Inventory that quantifies the student's preferences for environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological, and psychological processing. The necessity to develop teaching methods to reach individual learning styles within this model is imperative as students who have their learning style addressed can have a 75 percent of a standard deviation higher than peers whose learning styles were not accommodated.<sup>16</sup>

The incorporation of holistic methods into the general classroom will also address one of the most fundamental problems in current special education programs – the system does not help students improve and get out of the special education program. The re-evaluation and reform of teaching styles will accommodate the different learning styles of children. This will result in a greater number of students getting more out of the classroom experience and needing less assistance. These measures will not limit the ability of those students who receive essential and necessary assistance from special education programs. Yet, other children do not need special education can be properly assessed outside of the special education program and giving the help they need.

The misdiagnosis of minor learning difficulties limits the capacity of a school to meet the specific needs of its students. Thus, through targeting learning styles with the integration of art into the curriculum can minimize the unnecessary flood of students into the category of “learning disabled.” Through incorporating art into holistic learning experiences, more learning styles will be accommodated and more students will be prevented from entering special education programs when it is not necessary.

---

<sup>16</sup> Michael F. Shaughnessy, “An interview with Rita Dunn about learning styles.” *Clearing House*, 71 (1998): 141.

## **Promoting the Emotional and Social Development of Children with Special Needs with Art Therapy.**

The second problem that this initiative will address is the emotional development of children with disabilities. Often, the stresses of school can be amplified for those in special education programs. Children with special needs face a plethora of overwhelming obstacles including social problems, academic difficulties, and family issues. On a social level, childhood anxieties about acceptance, to the stigma attached to being in special education, and the resulting isolation from this identity can be overwhelming. Secondly, the very reason these children have been placed into special education programs is that their performance in school had been below average. Thus, the children may be dealing with feelings of failure and frustration in relation to their school experiences. Finally, problems at home may have contributed to the child's problems at school, further contributing to their need for assistance.

Another consideration for the development for these children is that the emotional and behavioral problems may be intertwined to the child's disability. Thus, it is a pressing necessity to thoroughly support the emotional and social development of children with special needs in the face of so many challenges. Without addressing these additional obstacles for students in special education programs, other educational gains cannot be achieved. Placing the emotional needs of the child on at the forefront is a facet of holistic education. It requires treating the child as a whole individual, not simply a student who needs to learn, but rather a child whose success in learning is contingent on personal psychological and physiological well being.

The use the therapeutic qualities of art for children with disabilities is a valuable way to support the emotional and social development of the whole child. Art therapy emphasizes the role of the creative process in making art as a healing process. The American Association of Art Therapy advocates that “Through creating art and talking about art and the process of art making with an art therapist, one can increase awareness of self, cope with symptoms, stress, and traumatic experiences, enhance cognitive abilities, and enjoy the life-affirming pleasures of artistic creativity.”<sup>17</sup> Children in special education programs are given a frameworks and constructive outlet to work through the many stresses that they face that hinder their optimal emotional development through creating and talking about art. In addition, a visual means of expression maybe a necessary alternative for children with impaired speech faculties.

Creating art has therapeutic qualities that are of particular assistance for children in special education programs. Special educators can use techniques used in art therapy to channel the cathartic quality of art in a controlled environment. Banks et. all proposes that “Art can be a form of communicating emotions which might then be healing.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, art therapy does not necessarily require the interpretation of a piece of art that is created. The feelings of accomplishment through the creation art are valuable experiences that could greatly encourage children who are struggling in other areas.

In addition, collaborative and cooperative group work in such a setting has been found to lessen feelings of isolation that is rampant amongst this population.<sup>19</sup> The study of Banks et. all indicates that directed art activities can improve social behaviors of

---

<sup>17</sup> The American Association of Art Therapy, Inc., <http://www.arttherapy.org/>, November 2004.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Banks, Pat Davis, Vikki F. Howard and T.F. McLaughlin, “The Effects Of Directed Art Activities On The Behavior Of Young Children With Disabilities: A Multi-Element Baseline Analysis.” *Art therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 10 (1993), 236.

<sup>19</sup> Banks, 235.

children through the process of creating followed by discussion between the student and teacher.<sup>20</sup> Activities lead by the special education teacher that promote self-expression of thoughts and feelings would encourage positive self-image and self-esteem for students with special needs who are particularly in need of emotional support.

It is vital to incorporate a method of addressing the emotional and social problems that children in special education face. The use of art therapy in special education classrooms can support the development of the whole child.

The incorporation of art into the curriculum of general and special classrooms creates enriching learning experiences that is of particular relevance to children with special needs. Nearly 70 percent of students with disabilities are instructed in general education classes and have additional special education assistance.<sup>21</sup> Thus these programs are designed to be resources for both special educators and general educators. This audience needs access to these programs to bolster their understanding of the different techniques that can be used to improve the education experience of their students with disabilities. The examination of the current limitations of special education resulting from IDEA reveals that the integration of art into special education programs offers specific solutions to some of the limitations of the current system. The integration of art into a holistic curriculum in the general education classroom can accommodate diverse learning styles and prevent misdiagnosis and entrance into special education programs when it is not necessary. For those children properly placed into special education programs, art therapy can enhance their emotional development. Through enacting these changes, students can become more engaged and empowered in their education and in society as a whole.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 239.

<sup>21</sup> deBettencourt, 17.

## **REFORM INITIATIVE**

*“Alternative pathways open new modes of questioning, of confronting, of resolving. The arts must never be merely decorative.”<sup>22</sup>*

The power of art to address the problems of students with special needs has been examined in the issue assessment. In addition, the urgent necessity to address the problems of misdiagnosis and the emotional and social development of these children is evident. This section outlines how these goals can be ascertained.

### **How to Prevent the of Misdiagnosis Through Accommodating Diverse Learning Styles**

One of the best ways to improve special education programs is to ensure that students with special needs are receiving the specific assistance that they need. As outlined in the issue assessment, special ed programs cannot be the answer for children that have minor learning problems. This goal can be met by correctly diagnosing special needs children we can provide the best help for these children.

To prevent this misappropriation of children into special education under the “learning disability” and other health “impairments” umbrella it is vital to accommodate a variety of learning styles. A more holistic constructivist approach to teaching will be adopted by general education teachers. The incorporation of art into general classroom curriculum will accommodate a diverse group of learners in such a way learning problems are caught early on and properly treated.

---

<sup>22</sup> Maxine Green, “Learning to Come Alive,” in *Letters to the Next President* ed. Carl Glickman, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004, 224.

This specific program will be initiated in the early elementary years and could be carried throughout and elementary curriculum. The focus on early elementary classrooms results from the belief that if children have a strong foundation of fundamental skills they can develop these skill throughout their education. If this is not the case the child will have to play “catch up” and fall farther and farther behind his/her classmates.

The incorporation of art will produce a more holistic curriculum that engages more students. To elucidate, the integration of art into early language programs will be examined. Early language programs are key to preventing an unnecessary influx of children into special education programs due to poor reading and writing expression. Through channeling the inherent ability in children to communicate through art, the often rocky transition towards a learned system of communication of words is alleviated. This programs can reach to these at risk students by using techniques such as thematic units and cooperative learning that are connected through art.

Paula Eubanks defines language as “signals or symbols with conventional meaning; a code or system that organizes the set of symbols; and the use of this system for communication.” Using this definition she argues that art is a language in and of it self and that it one of the first languages of child.<sup>23</sup> There is an innate push within children to use art for communicative purposes at about the age of 3 or 4 when children’s drawings begin to tell stories instead of only being marks on a page.<sup>24</sup> The visual language of expression, as opposed to writing, comes earlier as it does not need to be learned. Children chose symbols to depict reality and can look at symbols and construct a narrative.

---

<sup>23</sup> Eubanks, 109-110.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Cole, Shelia R. Cole *The Development of Children*, (New York: Worth Publishers, 2001), 364

Drawing from this theory, the innate understanding of visual symbols can be utilized in the process of learning to express and interpret written language. By using pictorial representations of language, the written and visual modes of communication are present. Activities such as creating a story, first expressed in pictures and then in words can ease the transition towards expression based on learned symbols or words rather than inherent visual symbolic understanding. Thus, art can heighten many children's early language skills as a "visual means of thinking can foster the development of written language, because it provides an opportunity to rehearse develop, and organize ideas prior to writing."<sup>25</sup>

Thematic units can connect cross-curricular material to add to the holistic experience.<sup>26</sup> For example, the integrated writing and drawing project as previously mentioned could be a story about dinnertime during a unit on nutrition. A math lesson could include charting the favorite dinners of the students. These integrative lessons that encourage active participation of the students also provide multiple ways of exploring a unit such as one on nutrition. This enhances the children's ability to understand the theme as a whole rather than an isolated topic.

A second technique to promote the holistic learning is to ensure that cooperative experiences are available to children. Cooperative learning also accommodates students who learn better in group settings. A simple change in the classroom environment such placing desks in groups rather than individually in addition to structuring group activities, can accommodate cooperative learners and encourage students to learn from one another.

---

<sup>25</sup> Paula Eubanks, "Art as A Visual Language that supports Verbal Development," in *Issues And Approaches To Art For Students With Special Needs*, ed. Andra L. Nyman and Anne M. Jenkins, (National Art Education Association, 1999), 112.

<sup>26</sup> Lesley Mandel Morrow, Diane H. Tracey, Deborah Gee Woo,. "Characteristics of Exemplary First Grade Literacy Instruction." *Reading Teacher*, 52 (1999): 468.

A vital component of this proposal is a space is provided for teachers to discuss incorporating art to produce a more holistic approach to teaching. This space could take the form of meetings with the art educator and special educator as coordinators and facilitators. These individuals would be a resource for the school in this endeavor. This produces a perspective of “teachers as learners” that can extend not only in this setting but also into their classroom at large.<sup>27</sup> In a constructivist setting in which the students become active participants in their learning process it follows that their teachers would need to become an active learner within their classroom to facilitate this transition. In addition, it allows teachers to be more responsive to individual student needs. The meetings would provide an opportunity to exchange ideas.

Assessment of how to incorporate art techniques into general education curriculum is a necessity. The focus of this assessment must center on who needs more individual attention and who is responding well to visual learning. Within the meetings suggested, other methods can be discussed incorporated for children who are not responding to this curriculum. Teachers within the network could use each other as a resource to what has helped children with similar problems. Thus, the dichotomy of the role of the teacher as teacher and learner reemerges. Interestingly, drawings produced by the children can be used as a part of the assessment to show gaps in student learning.<sup>28</sup> A visual depiction of concepts may illustrate that a child understands a concept when they cannot put this coherently into words. Through this assessment, a teacher can identify where clarification is needed.

Incorporating art into general education curriculum can reach more children through targeting a variety of learning styles. This promotes holistic learning to better

---

<sup>27</sup> Trent et. all, 300.

<sup>28</sup> Eubanks, 112.

accommodate students who may not thrive under traditional teaching methods. Through curriculum that incorporates a visual means of learning to reach more students individual styles of learning, fewer students can be placed into special education programs.

Furthermore, this is beneficial to all students in the classroom, not just those who are in jeopardy of needing special assistance. Through this holistic approach, deep learning experiences are available to more students in the classroom with the subsequent effect of reducing the amount of learning difficulties.

## **Responding to the Emotional and Social Needs of Special Needs**

### **Students**

This illustrates the strengths of incorporating art to aid the emotional development of children with disabilities within IDEA as art can be tailored for each individual's specific needs.

For children who are correctly diagnosed and are in genuine need of special education assistance, art is also a valuable tool. First of all, the methods discussed in the Prevention section of this initiative will be received by the 70% of children that are taught in general education classrooms. In addition, the incorporation of art into wider classroom practices can be introduced in special education classrooms. This would be dramatically successful for children who have difficulty in producing language either verbally or written by allowing them to have a nonverbal mode of communication.

In addition to promoting the holistic learning experiences, the visual arts can provide therapeutic outlets that specifically aid the emotional and behavioral development for children in special education programs. The emotional and social development of

children within special education programs must be addressed in order to have a healthy child that is able to learn to the best of his/her ability.

This achieve this goal, the second branch of the initiative will more intimately involve the special and art educator. The environment for this response would be within a special education classroom either in individual or group setting. The teacher would administer different art projects that would promote a) self-expression of thoughts and feelings and/or b) positive self image and self esteem. The projects would also emphasize the creative process rather than the finished product. The special educator would not make a diagnosis based on these projects if troubling content arose within the artwork. However, they would be able to make referrals to ensure that the child could get the help they needed. As such, incorporating art therapy techniques into special education programs provides an avenue of assessment to ensure that children within the program are receiving the correct assistance.

Art projects to encourage self-expression would be developed by the art and special educators. As previously stated in the Prevention section, the innate ability to communicate through visual symbols can be a scaffold for children who have difficulty with verbal or written expression. Teachers can facilitate in this process by fostering dialogue about students projects. This allows the child to further express themselves in alternative ways. Yet, the teacher's role should focus on enhancing the expression of the child, not telling the child what to think. Therefore the educator must be cautious not to place their own interpretations onto the children's work. In addition, a primary component of encouraging self-worth is the creation of an environment that supports creative expression and mutual respect. After the expression inherent in creating is complete, the projects can be a launch pad to "develop appropriate social skills through

the discussion of their own opinions and thoughts about works of art and the thoughts, ideas and works produced by classmates.”<sup>29</sup>

The environment that promotes self-expression will lend itself to the development positive self-image within its students through incorporating art therapy techniques. This goal of fostering self-esteem can be further achieved with the inclusion of group projects that promote interaction amongst group members. Not only will this increase cooperation but simultaneously reduce feelings of isolation that many children in special education experience. It could also provide positive examples of group interaction and social skills. Through artwork that encourages students to maintain a positive self image more independent behaviors and better social interactions are likely to follow.

The nature of creating art in and of itself is a resource for healing for children in special education. Teachers must be mindful that this group of students may be easily frustrated, have limited attention spans, and express their emotions through actions rather than words. Ironically, some of these very characteristics may have contributed to or be a product of the child’s needs for special assistance in the first place. While art can be frustrating and stressful for certain children, this can be minimized by selecting art projects that suitable to the developmental stage and special needs of the child, while simultaneously being challenging enough to take ownership.

The therapeutic qualities of art can be utilized to enhance the emotional and social development of children in special education programs. The act of creating art can heighten children’s self-esteem and provide a constructive way to handle stress. In addition, cooperative work presents a positive model for social interaction. Through

---

<sup>29</sup> Dorothy S. Carpenter and B. Stephen Carpenter, II, “Promoting a Positive Self-Image Through Visual and Verbal Inquiry: Art Appreciation for Students with Multiple Disabilities,” in *Issues And Approaches To Art For Students With Special Needs*, ed. Andra L. Nyman and Anne M. Jenkins, (National Art Education Association, 1999), 119.

these beneficial effects of the use of art therapy can enhance the health of the child with special needs.

### **Art as a Bridge in Special Education**

The literature available for utilizing art education for exceptional students is generally addressed to art education teachers to use in their classroom. However, expanding the use of art in the education of children with special needs into general and special education is advantageous to these individuals. The art educator can evolve to be a resource and perhaps a liaison between the special and general educator. Thus, to improve the education afforded to students with special needs, art can act as a bridge between general, and art educators to enhance the communication and cooperation between these specialists. Creating a cohesive network between art educators, special and general educators, draws upon the unique perspective that each educator has that can help the others in bolstering special education programs.

### **Conclusion**

The visual arts are a powerful teaching tool that can enhance the cognitive, emotional and social development of children. Children in special education programs are particularly in need of the assistance that the arts can provide. This support provided in this two pronged plan incorporates different aspects of art into the learning experiences of these children. First, the inclusion of art to create a more holistic approach to teaching, targets an increasing number of students that have specific learning styles that are not well received by traditional methods of teaching. This proposal can ensure that

the children who enter special education will receive the correct assistance. Second, for these students properly placed in the special education program the therapeutic process of creating art can improve self-image and self-esteem, promote self-expression, and encourage independence and social skills. This does not simply aid the emotional health of the individual. The increased mental health improves the student's capacity to learn, thus improving what the child with special needs can get out of their education and subsequently what the child can give back to society. It also implies that students around the child with special needs will benefit as well. By interacting with children with special needs non-special peers can become more tolerant. The ability of art to accommodate the individual needs of students makes it a powerful tool in aiding special education programs. The incorporation of art into the curriculum of special needs children reminds us "To be sensitive to the child's needs means to understand the child."<sup>30</sup>

### **Works Cited**

- Altshuler, Sandra J; Kopels, Sandra. "Advocating in Schools for Children with Disabilities: What's New with IDEA?" *Social Work*, 48 (2003): 320-330.
- Banks, Susan "The effects of directed art activities on the behavior of young children with disabilities: A multi-element baseline analysis." *Art therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 10 (1993): 235-240.
- Bloomgarden, Joan "Creative Art Therapy/Special Education in Higher Education: Toward an Interdisciplinary Model." *Art Therapy*.
- Cole, Michael, Cole, Shelia R. *The Development of Children*. New York: Worth Publishers, 2001.
- deBettencourt, Laurie. "Understanding the Differences between IDEA and Section 504."

---

<sup>30</sup> John A. Michael, ed. *The Lowenfeld Lectures: Viktor Lowenfeld on Art Education and Therapy*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), 9.

*TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 34 (2002): 16-23.

Efland, Arthur D. *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2002.

Gresham, Frank M., MacMillan Donald L. "Social Competence and Affective Characteristics of Students With Mild Disabilities." *Review of Educational Research*, 67 (1997): 377-415.

Gryphon, Marie., Salisbury, David. "Escaping IDEA: Freeing Parents, Teachers, and Students through Deregulation and Choice." *Policy Analysis Report No. 444*, July 10, 2002.

Guay, Doris M. "Cross-Site Analysis of Teaching Practices: Visual Art Education With Students Experiencing Disabilities." *STUDIES In Art Education*, 34 (1993): 222-232.

Imber, Steve C., Radcliff, David. "Independent Educational Evaluations under IDEA '97: It's a Testy Matter". *Exceptional Children*; 70 (2003): 27-44.

Michael, John A., ed. *The Lowenfeld Lectures: Viktor Lowenfeld on Art Education and Therapy*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982.

Morrow, Lesley Mandel., Tracey, Diane H., Woo, Deborah Gee. "Characteristics of Exemplary First Grade Literacy Instruction." *Reading Teacher*, 52 (1999): 462-477.

Nyman, Andra L., Jenkins, Anne M., eds. *Issues And Approaches To Art For Students With Special Needs*. National Art Education Association, 1999.

Reiff, Judith C. *Learning Styles*. National Education Association Press, 1992.

Shaughnessy, Michael F. "An interview with Rita Dunn about learning styles." *Clearing House*, 71 (1998): 141-146.

Smith, Stephen M., Woody, Paul C., "Interactive Effect Of Multimedia Instruction And Learning Styles." *Teaching of Psychology*, 27 (2000): 220-224.

Terrasi, Salvatore, Sennett, Kenneth H., and Macklin, Theodore O. "Comparing Learning Styles for Students with Conduct and Emotional Problems." *Psychology in Schools*, 36 (1999): 159-166.

Trent Stanley C., Artiles, Alfredo J., Englert, Carol Sue. "From Deficit Thinking to Social Constructivism: A Review of Theory, Research, and Practice in Special Education." *Review of Research in Education*, 23 (1998): 277-307.

### **Dissemination Plan:**

1. Present to faculty of a particular elementary school, including a general, special and art educator.
2. Present to academics in these fields as well.
3. Receive feedback from both communities.
4. Revise reform initiative accordingly
5. Working with academics in these fields to have these topics incorporated into the syllabi to make students aware of the uses of art for special needs children.
  - a. Create bridges in curriculum and in education departments between special, general, and art educators
6. Post paper on websites that focus general, special, and art education to make ideas accessible to teachers already in these fields

## **Annotated Bibliography**

The American Association of Art Therapy, Inc., <http://www.arttherapy.org/>,

This website is an excellent resource for those wanting to familiarize themselves with the techniques and benefits of art therapy. It also serves as an excellent introduction for those unfamiliar with art therapy. In addition it provides helpful and relevant links to other websites.

Altshuler, Sandra J; Kopels, Sandra. "Advocating in Schools for Children with Disabilities: What's New with IDEA?" *Social Work*, 48 (2003): 320-330.

Altshuler and Kopels highlight the role of social workers in the new IDEA context. They provide useful background information on the legislation that lead up to IDEA. They also succinctly outline the major changes in the 1997 amendment. They do not, however, critique or thoroughly analyze IDEA.

Banks, Susan "The effects of directed art activities on the behavior of young children with disabilities: A multi-element baseline analysis." *Art therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 10 (1993): 235-240.

Banks performed a study that examined the how art affected the behavior of one kindergarten and two preschool children with behavioral problems. Her results indicate that social behaviors of children may improve through the use of directed art activities. She advocates the use of art therapy as a way for children to release complex feelings and reduce isolation.

deBettencourt, Laurie. "Understanding the Differences between IDEA and Section 504." *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 34 (2002): 16-23.

This article compares and contrasts IDEA and Section 504. It is fairly intricate and seems to target teachers or parents of children with special needs. It aims at giving these individuals the necessary knowledge to provide all the resources they can to the child. It does this through specifically examining how to identify students with disabilities, eligibility, evaluation procedures, the Individualized Education Programs, least restrictive environment requirements, and due process.

Efland, Arthur D. *Art and Cognition: Integrating the Visual Arts in the Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2002.

Efland strongly advocates for the integration of art into curriculum to expand cognitive development. He pays particular attention to the concept of cognitive flexibility and how this form of thinking is enhanced through art. He argues for the benefits of integrative learning and the role of art within an integrated curriculum. He attempts to dispel the historic and popular attitude that devalues the importance of the arts and its role in society.

Gryphon, Marie., Salisbury, David. "Escaping IDEA: Freeing Parents, Teachers, and Students through Deregulation and Choice." *Policy Analysis Report No. 444*, July 10, 2002.

These authors underline what they see as the problems of IDEA. The central problem they argue is the federal nature of an education act that creates bureaucratic requirements that results in the misallocation of financial and human resources. They suggest that through state level reforms that decentralizing special education services, and increased parent participation in their children's education, children's access to special education will improve.

Guay, Doris M. "Cross-Site Analysis of Teaching Practices: Visual Art Education With Students Experiencing Disabilities." *STUDIES In Art Education*, 34 (1993): 222-232.

Guay examines the practices of eight art teachers in instructing children with disabilities in segregated and integrated settings. The article outlines the importance and the ability of art to promote the normalization for students with disabilities, meaning inclusion in mainstream environment and equally participating in art lessons. She further recommends that the art classroom should emphasize the similarities between children with and without disabilities through a "comprehensive art curriculum" instead of changing activities for special needs students.

Nyman, Andra L., Jenkins, Anne M. *Issues And Approaches To Art For Students With Special Needs*. National Art Education Association, 1999.

This book is a compilation of different author's perspectives on how art can be used to the benefit of students with special needs. It focuses generally on how the art educator can improve their ability to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities within the art classroom. In addition, the authors advocate the unique learning possibilities that art can create for children with disabilities

Smith, Stephen M., Woody, Paul C., "Interactive Effect Of Multimedia Instruction And Learning Styles." *Teaching of Psychology*, 27 (2000): 220-224.

This article outlines differences in learning style in terms of visual and verbal processes. It found that class format interacted with student learning styles to impact on student

learning. It specifically found that students with visual orientation benefit from multimedia instruction.

Trent Stanley C., Artiles, Alfredo J., Englert, Carol Sue. "From Deficit Thinking to Social Constructivism: A Review of Theory, Research, and Practice in Special Education." *Review of Research in Education*, 23 (1998): 277-307.

This article traces the development of special education throughout the century and emphasizes the past reliance on thinking about children with special needs for what they lack, rather than what they possess. They advocate moving away from this mode of deficit thinking, and towards a constructivist approach that empowers the learner. Specifically, they design a literacy programs that follows constructivist theory to better address the needs of children in special education.