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Collaboration and Intervention in Art Education Programs:

**Introductory Thoughts:**

Many students in classrooms struggle with one subject or another. The degree to which the child struggles can lead to compromise in one’s education in other areas. By removing a child from areas of strength in the classroom and expending larger amounts of time on the area in which he or she is struggling, educators may be decreasing the child’s opportunity to succeed in the area of strength. These phenomena can be witnessed often in students with exceptions such as those learning English as a second language, those with learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, mentally handicapped, emotional disturbance, sensory or physical impairments, autistic children, students with Attention Deficit Disorder, and even gifted or talented students. All of these students will be furthermore branched into the classification of intervention students. Such students can qualify for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) after specific testing, but do these programs take into account the student’s abilities, or do they simply focus on the disability? Proponents of art therapy and specialized collaborative art education programs believe these very students can be seen as an asset to the art classroom with their different perspectives on life and may even learn more effectively when art is used to explain a difficult concept or in conjunction with lessons being taught in the classroom in a subject area in which the student struggles. In order to best understand this concept, one must understand each of the learning exceptions described.

**Classifications of Intervention Students:**

*English Language Learners (ELLs):* English Language Learners can be referred to in many ways. Some educators may refer to these students as language minorities, meaning the student does not speak the primary language of the culture. Some of these students may be limited English proficient (LEP) meaning some communication is possible in English. With a larger amount of ELLs appearing in the school systems, educators are becoming more and more concerned with the education received by these students. Many educators and administrators are at odds as to how these students should be taught.

Transitional bilingual education plans begin teaching the student in his or her native language and gradually integrate English until English becomes the only language in which the student is taught. Early-exit bilingual programs teach the student in his or her first-language in kindergarten and first grade and gradually add in English in the second grade. Late-exit programs consist of giving the student decreased instruction time in his or her primary language with each new grade level. Pullout programs simply remove the child from the English classroom for more instruction at specific times. These times are often during curriculum seen as less necessary, such as art. Paired bilingual education programs teach the student in his or her first language and English at different points during the day. Dual-language or two-way programs teach all students English and another language in order to develop proficiency in all students in both languages. As shown, many programs exist and much research backs the appropriateness of each program. The type of program is usually assessed based on student needs. Despite extensive ELL research, little thought has gone into the implications of removing the child from a learning environment, such as art in which he or she can interact more fully with his or her peers and learn English communication skills independently.

*Learning Disabilities:* Students qualifying for a learning disability have a considerable amount of trouble in a school area. Dyslexic students have difficulty reading. Those with dysgraphia struggle with writing. Dyscalculia students labor to understand mathematics. Other students in this category may have trouble with reasoning or listening. Many students in these areas show skill in the arts as observed through classroom collaborative projects done by UNL art students with Clinton and Everett Elementary schools in Lincoln, NE.

*Speech or Language Impairments:* Children with speech or language impairments “have difficulty receiving and/or expressing information and ideas” (Moreno 51). Such examples include students with a stutter or a lisp, or those who have trouble with pronunciation and formation of words. Students in this area may benefit from using art to express emotions and feelings that cannot be communicated otherwise.

*Mentally Handicapped:* The definition of mentally handicapped has been changing since the 1960s, and was more commonly known in the past by the offensive term *mental retardation* (Moreno 51). Prior to this time period children were classified as “mentally retarded” based off of the results of IQ tests with scores below 70 qualifying children for varying degrees of mental retardation. As a result, many ELL students were wrongly labeled as mentally handicapped. An IQ score was not an accurate measure of the child’s behaviors and coping abilities. New standards consider the student’s intellectual level as well as his or her adaptive behaviors to determine mental handicaps (Moreno 51). Mentally handicapped students may have the ability to work in art programs in order to learn basic motor skills and in order to interact more fully with classmates. Art programs may encourage handicapped students to express themselves and their needs more fully. I witnessed such progress during a 2007 trip to Camp Friendship in Annandale, Minnesota. Camp Friendship is a camp for children with special needs and allows the children to participate in many art projects throughout the day. One camper with Downs Syndrome flourished in this area by making woven bracelets and painted masks. She was more communicative and felt able to express herself. Two other campers with severe physical and mental handicaps felt most recognized in the art room when they were able to hold a marker, crayon, or other writing utensil to create shapes and drawings of other campers. These two young women had little verbal communication skills, and much was learned about their emotions and feelings by these drawings. After spending time creating art, the campers overall behaved positively and were more open to communication.

*Emotional Disturbance:* Emotionally disturbed students regularly portray developmentally inappropriate behaviors that have a negative effect on interactions with others as well as their learning experience. These students have an inability to learn and interact not because of other factors, but because of abnormal behaviors under otherwise normal circumstances. Such children can be further classified as internally emotionally disturbed or externally emotionally disturbed. Internally disturbed students usually display symptoms of depression, guilt, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies (Moreno 52). Externally disturbed students are hyperactive, defiant, hostile, and cruel or violent (Moreno 51). Such students may benefit from an art therapy regimen (Malchiodi 109). An art therapy regimen for internally disturbed students could be as basic as portraying the issues they currently struggle with in an art medium and writing about their frustrations privately in their art journal. The student can have the option to share the journal writings with others or keep the thoughts confidential between the child and the educator. Externally disturbed students may benefit from a similar therapy regimen, but may find creating artwork that has a repetitive or meditative quality more useful in order to calm their emotions. Such artwork could be created through painting patterns over and over or gluing beads into a pattern. Perhaps the most helpful may be working with sewing or textiles which requires a repetitive act, but also shows progress and focus. Externally disturbed students may benefit from writing about their anger and having an educator explain and model why such behavior is unacceptable in a classroom setting.

*Sensory or Physical Impairments:* Students with sensory or physical impairments may have varying levels of hearing, sight or orthopedic difficulties. Through my own personal childhood with two students of this nature, I found that both students felt more welcomed and appreciated by other classmates in the art classroom where a near-equal playing field could be created. A legally blind female in my class once told me that she loved art class the best because she was able to color with crayons on a raised surface. The act of using a crayon was appealing to her because she was able to use the same tool as students with sight, rather than her Braille typewriter which she had to use in place of our pencils and pens.

*Autistic Children:* Students with autism have “extreme social withdrawal and deficiencies in cognitive and language processes” (Moreno 52). Many symptoms of autism vary from case to case, but some autistic people may have savant syndrome, or a “skill that is extraordinary or remarkable compared with other skills” (Moreno 52). This aspect of autism may be especially interesting to art educators as some savant syndrome children show great skill in photographic memory and recollection, such as the now well-known British artist Stephen Wiltshire who recreates detailed cityscapes from recollection (“Stephen Wiltshire MBE- Biography”).

*Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD):* Children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder have difficulty prolonging attention span and concentrating. They are usually unable to finish tasks due to their highly distractible nature. ADD children are also extremely impulsive. Another classification includes children with ADD who are also hyperactive. This is called attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). ADD and ADHD can cause specific challenges for educators across all pedagogies and should be considered especially in the art classroom in which some procedures take prolonged concentration. Creating an IEP for these types of children in art may be helpful, however, due to the quality of many art mediums to express various thoughts on the same page.

*Gifted or Talented Students:* Traditionally, gifted or talented students were classified based off of IQ scores, but these scores are based in majority cultural backgrounds. Therefore, many schools evaluate any number of areas such as leadership, creativity, academic success and arts abilities to classify talented or gifted students. Artistic expression may often be a cathartic process for minds which are often thinking, such as the minds of gifted or talented students. These thoughts can be expressed in an art work and can also serve as a way to organize or meditate upon entangled thoughts. Many gifted students may wish to use art as a release from academic tension. Art educators should be cautioned to create a project that matches the talent or skill level of the student as many gifted or talented students may experience boredom from some projects thought suitable for their age level.

*Individualized Education Programs (IEPs):* Moreno defines Individualized Education Programs as “an instructional plan mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that is devised by the general and special education teachers, resource professionals, and parents to meet the needs of exceptional students” (50). These programs are often very structured with little room for flexibility. The student may not have much of a say at all about his or her likes or dislikes in the educational arena, but must simply be herded from class to class. With such a strict schedule, it comes as no wonder that such students would enjoy an art class in which structure is not necessary and many answers are possible.

**Cathartic and Therapeutic Benefits of Art Education:**

Art is a natural way for children to communicate, and art therapy can be done by a diverse group of learners with simple modifications for skill levels (Malchiodi 47-48). Art making is an intuitive process that has a sense of play which can be carried into other classroom settings in which the child may feel uncomfortable pursuing a certain subject (Malchiodi 57-58). In her book, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, Cathi A. Malchiodi notes the numerous instances in which clients shared with her the definitive moment that they knew they were not skilled at art. This moment was at about age ten or eleven when an influential adult criticized their art (52). Such an experience nearly always ended in the child putting away the art materials and giving up. Could such an experience be possible in other domains? Could one have a definitive moment in his or her educational career where he or she conclusively decided that he or she lacked the skill to excel at English, mathematics, reading, or science? As a future educator, I feel the answer to this question is a resounding, but unfortunate “yes.”

After speaking with one young man (whom we will call James) who was an intervention student for a reading disability for most of his elementary and middle school years, I have learned that he can recall the moment when he was told he was “bad” at reading. This particular instance took place in fourth grade when James’ teacher announced in front of the entire class that James must go to special reading every day during story time. As a result James was forced to endure the rude names used for learning disabled students for the rest of his elementary and middle school years for his perceived lack of skill. This shows the need for educators to be more aware of comments made to students about work, and the long term effects of negative criticism. Such comments can lead to low levels of self-efficacy, a term used by educational psychologists to describe one’s belief in one’s own ability to perform a task correctly. Low levels of self-efficacy can lead to self-handicapping behaviors in which the student chooses to disengage from an activity for fear of failure.

How does an educator help students to express the pain associated with feeling less than or the hurt that comes from struggles at home? Malchiodi suggests bringing art therapy into the curriculum. Art therapy can be used in conjunction with other art projects and can help to improve writing and expressive language skills. Malchiodi describes the creation of mandalas, or sacred circles in which students draw a circle to synthesize opposite emotions. “For many people who are struggling with emotional or physical problems, the mandala emerges spontaneously as a sign of change or transformation (Malchiodi 123). Creating a circle to process one’s emotions has a calming effect, and may be helpful for students who struggle with emotional disturbance or ADD.

Malchiodi also suggests keeping an art journal. She says, “Writing, in addition to art making, can be very therapeutic…It also will help you to use the power of storytelling to give meaning to your images, connect thoughts and feelings, and help you discover personal symbols over a period of time” (117). Keeping a journal may help students to communicate emotions that are too painful to say out loud. The activity of writing about one’s art can cause more critical thinking, and greatly improve writing skills.

The use of art therapy in the classroom may naturally lead to greater communication among students. “Group situations naturally create the opportunity for communication, interaction, negotiation, and other types of exchange” (Malchiodi 197-198). The play and creativity involved while making art can also lead to friendship (Malchiodi 200). Malchiodi often practices art therapy in groups and suggests two approaches. The first approach is a psychotherapy group formatted with an opening discussion, and experiential process and a post-experiential discussion (197). The second approach is open studio in which the experience is psycho-educational and the students learn about art history and art materials (209). The open studio approach fits in well with art curriculum in the classroom and has been used successfully on patients from various walks of life. Art therapy clearly has practical benefits for all people and can be linked to educational objectives across the curriculum.

**Educational Benefits of Creative Activities:**

*Social and Sensory Benefits:* The educational benefits of incorporating the arts into a classroom curriculum are numerous and go beyond the realms of art therapy. The process of creating art can aid in developing basic interaction and life skills. Making art is a multi-sensory activity, utilizing both visual, and kinesthetic senses, as well as auditory, and olfactory senses (Kelner 231). Along with using many of one’s own senses, students must learn positive social skills such as manners and negotiation while sharing art materials (Daniel 15). Art making has been shown to enhance engagement and concentration, as well as to keep students focused on the task at hand, a helpful tool for learners with ADD (Lorimer 10; Daniel 5). Students are more willing to work with peers in an arts education centered activity (Lorimer 11). This may be beneficial for students with emotional disturbance, or students who are ELL who may have difficulty interacting socially. Otherwise quiet children may show full comprehension of concepts through arts integration (Kelner 231). This finding has major implications for all exceptional students and for advocating alternative forms of testing. Art education increases student persistence and attention to detail, two very important traits for students to possess in any career. Drawing activities, such as a blind contour drawing improves hand-eye coordination as well as perceptual observation (Lorimer 11). This may be helpful for students with physical or sensory impairments. The process of creating form also increases visual spatial skills. Such skills may be necessary to further develop in students with physical disabilities.

*Cognitive Development Benefits:* Art education can prove beneficial for higher order thinking skills as well. Art can aid in defining one’s personal identity and can lead to individual transformation (Bauerlein 44). This may be most crucial during adolescence in which students are attempting to reconcile their own personal identity with the identity seen by the world. The meaning behind a work is often thought about by the student, allowing more room for self-expression and furthering self-identity development (Lorimer 10). Critical thinking is developed along with analytical thinking and problem solving skills when art is created as one must answer numerous questions about how to go about the process of making a finished product (Lorimer 10). Conceptual themes, which are often difficult to explain concretely, can be explored in art making, and can cause further comprehension of such abstract concepts (Lorimer 10). Before making a piece that is difficult to understand, one must use sophisticated research skills, which can prove to be a useful tool in any domain (Lorimer 10). Art making over an extended period also develops time-management skills as students must estimate and account for the time needed in order to complete each task in the creative process. During a critique, students must make justified and rational arguments for the purpose behind their art, causing improved articulation and communication skills.

*Development of Professional Skills:* Creating art with a mock patron in mind may be helpful for older students as it causes the student to show professional skills and communicate with the mock patron in a socially acceptable way (Lorimer 10). Furthermore, thinking of a mock patron may force the student to explain his or her reasoning and better comprehend his or her metacognitive processes (Lorimer 10). Art making causes students to use other upper level thinking skills when they ponder the future functionality of the piece or the rationale used to create a piece (Lorime, 10).   
Educators could encourage the students to write a proposal to the mock patron in order to improve writing skills (Lorimer 10). Through the use of one’s own ideas to pitch to a client, students may feel that they are more actively involved in creating their own learning experience (Kelner 231).

*Educator Benefits:* Not only does arts education have benefits to students, but such implementation can also benefit teachers. Teachers reported increased joy and motivation when the arts were added to the classroom along with more motivated students (Lorimer 10). Many educators note that students more actively participate in a lesson when the arts are involved (Kelner 231). High-arts involvement students report less boredom in school (Daniel 6).

In the age of No Child Left Behind many educators are feeling pressure to improve student English and math skills. Significant amounts of research show direct correlations to academic achievement in math and English language arts with a consistent art education program (Daniel 1-2). Educators also emphasize improved SAT and ACT scores for students. Numerous studies have shown increased years of enrollment in arts courses are positively correlated with higher verbal and math SAT scores (Daniel 5).

*Societal Role of Art Education:* Art education is being cut across the board in order to reduce spending, but arts education has a rich history and legacy (Bauerlein 44). Art education may be important to assist in other domains, but it is also an important domain within itself. In the past, art has been used as an agent of social change (Bauerlein 44). Why not educate children about such social change so they can change social ills in the future? Today, the thoughts of thousands of deceased artists are immortalized through their work and the appreciation of that work. The relationship between the artist, the art and the viewer is cyclical and symbiotic (Bauerlein 45). The AEP found that arts education helps students understand and celebrate multiple cultures and perspectives (Daniel 3). This finding is useful for educators to advocate for arts implementation in classrooms with multiple cultures represented. Our society is becoming increasingly visually-oriented with the Internet being the primary mode for answers to queries, making visual literacy imperative to higher education (Daniel 7-8).

Art can be beneficial to a community as well. A 2002 study found that the nonprofit arts industry generates $134 billion in annual economic activity (Borrup 23). Art informs many design professions including: architecture, interior design, landscape architecture, transportation design and engineering. High arts involvement students watch fewer hours of television and participate in more community service (Daniel 6). With arts students showing higher scores on testing, further funding may come to schools through the No Child Left Behind Act, further improving school buildings and materials. Higher educational levels lead to stronger communities due to a higher concentration of experts in a domain. While the research may seem like a strong argument, observed cases also serve for a compelling argument for arts education for all students.

**Observed Cases:**

While participating in a University of Nebraska-Lincoln Community Arts course as an undergraduate student in the spring of 2011, I was given the wonderful opportunity to observe two struggling elementary schools in the area. The first school was Clinton Elementary, and the second school was Everett Elementary. Each of our projects involved going into the art classroom and creating projects with students during their fifty minute class periods for three hours twice a week for five weeks.

At Clinton Elementary we created a mosaic mural of bees, butterflies, and other creatures in a field of wildflowers. Each mosaic piece was made from tracing individual children’s hands and placing textures on the hands. The hands were then fired with glaze and placed specifically onto board with a thin set paste and grouted with black grout. The collaborative mural will now hang permanently in the school. The students we worked with were in first and second grade. The students did not seem to have a very firm grasp of the art elements or principles or even what the purpose of art class was. Many students felt that art was a break from normal classes, but did not know the significance of creating. During each lesson, we would work one-on-one with students and use the visual vocabulary necessary for design. The students learned about line, texture, shape, pattern, form, and repetition by hands-on process.

I worked specifically with a young girl with behavioral disorder (we will call her Patty). She seemed quite excited to make art in the classroom and was very attentive for the entire lesson, making very imaginative textures. She was also being creative outside of the art classroom. Patty proudly showed me a small rectangle of paper upon which she had drawn the image of a cell phone. She pretended as though the cell phone actually worked and called her friends with it. I did not have any troubles with Patty except for asking her to end the activity in which case only minor re-direction was needed. I later learned that she was often off task in other classes or disobeyed directions. From my observation and research I would ask that those designing and IEP for Patty re-examine her love for creativity and imagination and use those skills in other domains.

At Everett Elementary we created 6-inch by 6-inch clay tiles with low-relief renditions of the students’ heroes on them. We asked the homeroom teachers to have the students come to class prepared with research about their hero and some writing about why the individual was the student’s hero. The tiles were glazed and placed on a board with grout to make a collaborative mural to stay in the school permanently. The students we worked with were third, fourth and fifth graders. They seemed to have a better grasp of the creative process, but still lacked a visual vocabulary. We used this visual vocabulary with the students during the lesson, and taught them about dimensionality, form, shape, pattern, texture, and line. We had hoped that the project would go across curriculums, emphasizing student’s research and language skills, but, unfortunately, many of the homeroom teachers did not prepare their students for the art class and simply gave the students a hero that the educator thought fit the student. Many students knew very little about their hero, and fewer still knew the difference between a hero and a role model, but we made the best of the situation, and educated the students as we worked with them one-on-one making their tiles. We also felt it was important to emphasize the necessity of education to these students who lived in a community where higher education was not emphasized. When asked if they had heard of the university (only a one mile away from the school) many students had not. We encouraged the students to think about future careers and to work hard in school.

I worked with many students over the course of this five week collaborative project, but a few in particular come to mind. The first student we will call Bettie. Bettie was from another country with a very different culture from our own here in the United States. She is on the list for not meeting math or English language standards. She must attend special intervention classes instead of art, physical education, music, and computer much of the time. She was a very kind young woman, and cared very much for her family. Bettie expressed her liking for art, but also expressed her hesitation about her art skills. I felt as though Bettie had been wrongfully sent the message that she lacked competence at school-related activities. With encouragement, Bettie made an excellent tile and could talk about many of the art elements and principles she used when creating her project. When asked about college plans, Bettie said she would not pursue higher education even though she enjoyed helping animals and wanted to possibly be a vet. She stated that she would search for employment immediately after high school in order to help her family financially. I encouraged her to think about a college education with little response. Bettie seems to be having trouble adjusting to this new culture. She has a firm grasp of the spoken language, but written English seems to prove difficult for her. She may also be experiencing some motivational doubts even at her young age as she believes that school may not be necessary to her future career. I would suggest to IEP coordinators to allow Bettie to attend more of the non-core subject classes and to speak with her more about her educational potential in a college and here at elementary school. She needs a boost of confidence and a mentor who cares about her success in all subjects.

The next student from Everett that I observed was a fourth grade female we will call Jane. Jane was very quiet and seemed to have trouble with her pronunciation. She was a very smart young lady, sharing that she really enjoyed drawing in her free time. She made an excellent clay tile and understood the art elements and principles almost immediately after they were explained to her. She did not seem confident in her abilities to remember things about her heroine, Sacagawea, but she listened well when I told her what I knew about this well-known Native American woman. Jane was also very quick to understand the difference between a hero and a role model. I would suggest that those formulating lesson plans with Jane in mind should use more activities in which Jane can speak about her drawings. She seems to be quite intelligent, but I feel as though Jane is not being given a voice due to her trouble with articulation. When asked about higher education, Jane proudly stated that she wanted to go to college. She was not sure what she wanted to do, but she did know that college was the right path for her. I would further suggest that mentors encourage this drive and motivation within Jane and give her further information about college.

The final student that I observed from Everett Elementary was a third grade boy that we will call Tom. Tom was very sweet on the first day, but had trouble staying on task. He often had to be redirected and seemed unhappy with any work he would make. He had no idea who his “hero” was and we had to tell him the name of his hero and why his hero was famous. Tom did not respond well to the use of visual vocabulary, but did enjoy making artwork that was “nice and neat.” He was not interested in drawing a hero on a tile, but drawing a rabbit. I asked him to draw a rabbit as well as his hero, but he did not feel like doing either. He seemed quite excited for his birthday the following day and used his manners throughout the lesson. The following class, Tom seemed like a completely different child. From the sounds of things, Tom did not have a very positive birthday experience. None of his friends came over and he did not have a cake. He did receive a toy gun which he told me numerous times he played with all afternoon. Tom was rude toward his classmates and me, failing to follow directions and being very distracted from the task at hand. Even when several college students assisted me in trying to redirect Tom we received meager efforts. Finally, Tom tried to create something permanent and finished his tile. Asking him to clean up after himself was like asking a pig to fly, but we finally made it through clean up with Tom being frustrated at the end. When I asked Tom about college I was very saddened by his answer. “College? What I need that for? I probly just end up in jail.” I asked him to consider college and finishing school. If I were to speak with those planning Tom’s IEP, I would strongly urge them to begin behavioral intervention and investigate his home life. Tom seems as though he needs more positive mentors to show him his strengths and aid him in appropriate social interaction. Such positive mentors could be found in the TeamMates Program or Big Brothers Big Sisters, both located in Lincoln, Nebraska, that pairs a youth with a mentor for positive interaction one hour each week. While researching professional knowledge on a topic is important, hands-on experience opened my eyes to many changes that could be made with intervention students.

**Concluding Thoughts:**

Many students in today’s educational system may struggle with subjects across several domains. The degree to which the child struggles can lead to compromise in one’s education in areas perceived as “less important”. By removing a child from areas of strength in the classroom and expending larger amounts of time on the area in which he or she is struggling, educators may be decreasing the child’s opportunity to succeed in the area of strength and develop in areas of weakness. Throughout the course of this research we have discussed the many different classifications of children with exceptions that may be eligible for intervention programs. Although these are categories, the attributes in each of these categories are not specific to each child. Many IEP’s focus simply on improving the disability, rather than developing the students lacking skills based off of talents or interests already possessed. Proponents of art therapy have noted through research the benefits of creative activities in the classroom across domains for emotional and social well-being. Proponents of arts education cite the numerous research studies which support an arts-based education. My own personal experience shows that IEP’s should be radically re-evaluated as should the value of arts education to intervention students. The need for reform in our schools was recognized with No Child Left Behind, but it was not fully addressed. Now, we as active citizens and dutiful educators and parents must advocate for the rights of all learners to a complete education across all domains. Students can clearly benefit from a combination of subjects, and, as such, should have an IEP that works with this goal in mind. We are all more gifted in a certain domain than others. This gift should be spread throughout a student’s educational career to create more motivation in difficult areas and cause students to be successful in their lives after formal education has been achieved.

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