

Teaching Artists: Serving Special Education Students in Local Schools

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Abstract

The performing arts center of a major university has partnered with many local school districts to provide support for teaching artists who work directly with children in many diverse, co-taught classrooms. The artists were concerned with their ability to properly handle the students with special needs who are a major component of their classroom assignments. The artists completed a survey related to this concern, and self-characterized in a group setting to reinforce the fact that there is diversity in any classroom setting. The teaching artists then voiced their feelings about their special education students' characteristics and their view of the schools' culture in the facilities where they teach. A brief review of the literature and two professors' personal backgrounds, expertise, and experience led to a very insightful discussion about potential solutions for the professional teaching artists' perceived problems.

Teaching Artists: Serving Special Education Students in Local Schools

The Artists' Concern

The performing arts center of a major university has partnered with many local school districts to provide support for teaching artists who work directly with children in many diverse, co-taught classrooms. These individuals are practicing artists with little to no teaching experience. The professional teaching artists have voiced concern about their ability to reach the special education students in these classes. They are very interested in learning how to better serve this student population. To respond to this concern, the director of the performing arts center invited two university professors to meet with the teaching artists to strengthen the artists' ability to work productively with their special education students.

The professors decided to visit a teaching artist working in an inclusion class in a local district. The students in this class had attended a performance of "Sticks and Stones". This is an original, multimedia presentation, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, which utilizes song, story, poetry, and monologue. It is based on actual bullying experiences of suburban middle school students, but was adapted for younger audiences (Tilles Center, 2008). In the class the professors visited, groups of students roll played responses to situations that involved bullies and bystanders.

Survey Results From the Artists

The professors surveyed all the dancers, musicians, visual artists, and actresses to ascertain their concerns (see Appendix A for complete survey). The professional artists were interested in learning about the characteristics of children with autism, physical disabilities, health impairments, ADHD, and learning disabilities. They also wanted information about behavior management and how to adapt methodologies and materials. In essence, the teaching artists were interested in developing engagement and creativity. The artists wanted more information about learning styles and how to work with teachers and paraprofessionals. The performers were also interested in students' sensory/tactile issues and the students' literacy needs. Based on an analysis of the survey the professors began to formulate an agenda for the in-service workshop.

The Artists' Self-characterization

To begin this in-service session, as an ice-breaker, the professors asked the artists to list two characteristics that most describe their own personality. The professors needed to know their audience as the teaching artists need to know the characteristics of their special education students to begin establishing relationships and creating both academic and emotional connections with them. One person said that she was fluid and spontaneous, while another noted that she is organized and changing. One artist self-identified as open and creatively adventurous, while another thought of herself as an inventive thinker. A passionate citizen sat next to someone who said that she was distracted and emotional. One curious, improvising person shared ideas with a self-proclaimed passionate, analytical soul. Compassion matched with liking to take chances for one artist, while another viewed herself as an analytical progressive. To be both global and intimate was one person's designation, as another said that she was empathetic and intra/interpersonal. A compassionate person who liked to take chances was the way another artist described herself. The director self-characterized as open and silly, while the professors listed themselves as organized and analytical or creative, passionate, and interpersonal. The diversity in this room mirrors the inclusion classes in which the professional teaching artists are currently engaged.

The Artists' Characterization of the Students

The artists then identified the following positive and negative characteristics of the special education children they recently met in their current classroom placements. Positively, the arts instructors noted that the students who are motivated by the arts are often tactile learners, friendly and energetic, offer unique perspectives, and are intense. On the other hand, these professionals find that some students do not function well in a group. The adults also view some of the special education pupils as very emotional, self-conscious, and detached. To them, some students lack focus, while others are overactive or focused on something other than the activity at hand. The artists perceive that special education students are easily embarrassed, and some fear judgment, or are very shy. Many of the special education students seem to the artists to assume that they will fail at

these new activities. Many of the adults identified student difficulty with transitioning between activities, and other artists simply said that the students are “different” from what they expected.

The Artists’ View of School Culture

These artist-practitioners feel that there is not enough co-planning and co-preparation amongst the teachers, aides, and teaching artists. The performers also believe that there is insufficient teacher involvement in the implementation of what is happening in the classroom when the artist is present. They wonder how well the general education teachers have been prepared to manage their students with special needs. The visiting artists feel that the teachers and the paraprofessionals are not managing children with impulse/self-control issues in a sensitive or efficient manner when the artists are in the classroom. Add in peer pressure, positive reinforcement from classmates when being a “clown” or disrespectful, or simply the problems associated with a change in routine, and the teaching artists are experiencing behavior problems which they are uncomfortable handling.

What the Literature Says

Although much has been written about arts integration and the core content area advantages for students who have such skills as musical keyboarding, painting, and writing, not enough has been noted about the needs of teaching artists when they incorporate the arts in inclusion and/self-contained classes. In terms of core content/arts integration, Ohler (2009) considered art to be the next R, right after reading, writing, and arithmetic, and Caughlan (2008) identified three areas of the arts in an era of multiliteracies. Arts-based benefits are the knowledge and skills of the artistic disciplines. Arts-related benefits are cognition and work habits, and ancillary benefits are especially seen in math and literacy. Henderson (2008) noted that the arts develop capturing, which is preserving new ideas. They foster challenging, which is solving difficult problems. The arts are also broadening, which boosts creativity. Additionally, the arts are surrounding, which means that through the arts students associate with diverse, interesting people and things (Henderson, 2008). Aren’t these the skills that we want all special education students to acquire?

Infusing visual and performing arts into curriculum added critical, whole child components, and supported interdisciplinary learning (Lorimer, 2009), while quality arts programs contributed to the intellectual, physical, and emotional well-being of children (Nelson, 2009). In some programs, visiting artists helped teachers integrate the arts into all curriculum areas (Morris, 2009; Sloan, 2009), while in other programs, teachers reinvented their own practice as a result of daylong workshops (Amorino, 2008; Sloan, 2009). In one program, working artists taught in a community based classroom, where students demonstrated confidence and competence. The students were reengaged when previously their teachers had voiced few positive expectations for them (Thomas 2007).

As long ago as 1987, Ernest Boyer, a former United States Commissioner of Education and President of the Carnegie Foundation, argued that the arts stimulated the intellect and enhanced the human spirit. Development of these two characteristics is sorely needed by our special education population. Integrating art with content connects academic work to students' own experiences and feelings. Furthermore, students experienced a sense of accomplishment, especially when they worked with local artists (Rankin & Redmond, 2006) and they boosted their self-confidence (Compton 2008). At the Boston Arts Academy, for example, where 13% of the students have a learning disability, 95% of the diverse, majority lower socio-economic (SES) and English Language Learner (ELL) population received college acceptances (Nathan 2008).

Balkin (2009) indicated that music energizes the language arts, social studies, math, and science curricula through teamwork between classroom teachers and music specialists and Southgate's study (2009) confirmed this correlation for reading and math, as did Piro and Ortiz (2009) in terms of vocabulary and verbal sequencing. Olshansky (2009) found that by publishing a book of original paintings and letters about one of their ancestor's journeys to America, some third graders learned about immigration. Some ELLS developed their poetry writing through discussing journeys and interactions with visual art (Reilly, 2008). How valuable these experiences could be for our special education students.

Transformative, compelling educational experiences require both rational, intentional acts and anticipation, that is, the imaginative sensing of possibility. This is Dewey's aesthetic philosophy. Teachers develop these experiences when they emphasize students' non-rational faculties, use non-verbal communication, show –not tell, teach connotation, unfold an event, direct students to the future, encourage students to trust their feelings, and develop vocabulary that expresses sense and feeling (Wong 2007). How often do educators, do this? How many have tried to conduct problem solving conferences to stop student misbehavior or solve students' problems (Crowe, 2008)?

Greene (2008) stated that students "with behavioral challenges are not attention-seeking, manipulative, limit-testing, coercive, or unmotivated (p.160). What they lack are teachable thinking skills or they are victims of an unsolved problem. The arts can help them want to attend school, aim high, and improve their skills."

A Potential Solution

To attempt to remedy the teaching artists' beliefs about their ability to manage the special population with which they are dealing, the professors offered some suggestions to help the performers reach their special education students. A discipline and management self-assessment was distributed and completed by the artists. This survey dealt with preparation, use of time and space, and development of routines and relationships. The goal was learning how to engage students by presenting clear behavioral objectives demonstrated through appropriate learning experiences with suitable expectation levels. Following from this activity, the artists completed a semantic web where they identified

what they felt were the causes of discipline problems and inattentive behavior in their classrooms.

Discussion followed. The artists felt that they needed more classroom management training, and may have inappropriately assigned work that was too hard, too easy, or was a mismatch with the special education students' learning styles. Some artists felt that they were either boring or confusing the children. Thinking about it, they felt that they may have presented unclear standards, expectations, and consequences. The artists identified both value and culture clashes among the students and the children's sense of learned powerlessness. Additionally, the teaching artists felt the need for more information about students' special education characteristics. The performers identified some external physical causes of concern, such as, hungry students or overly hot or cold rooms. But, mostly, the artists realized that they needed to introduce an element of fun and stimulation into their teaching (Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 2008).

Using a PowerPoint presentation and handouts the professors discussed the characteristics of specific types of disabilities. They then emphasized the power of explicit instruction, enhancing content through guided note-taking, and the use of graphic organizers and mnemonics (Heward, 2009). To directly teach, the artists were reminded to explain how and why what they were doing was important, to state an objective in child friendly terms, and to explain and model the steps in a process. The performers needed to remember to walk the students through the activities, let the students practice, and give clear, immediate feedback. Additionally, the professors pointed out that downtime, delays, and distractions often lead to classroom problems. Therefore, the artists were encouraged to make quick transitions, anticipate problems, and always be overly prepared (Saphier, Haley-Speca, & Gower, 2008).

Teaching artists can plan varied activities in workable chunks, and make sure they have the students' attention before they begin by using special signs, such as, hand signals or the ringing of a chime. The artists should learn and use students' names through name tags or cards on their work areas, and model respectful language and actions. The performers can calmly confront inappropriate behavior, and use multi-modal learning activities. Positive humor, not sarcasm, is most effective, too, they were told. The teaching artists should talk less than their students and investigate their children's' background knowledge through warm-up activities on the current topic as they begin their tasks. Think-pair-share was suggested as some special education students prefer to talk with groups smaller than the whole class until they are comfortable with the topic. As performers the artists know about timing, projecting without raising their voices, and using dramatic pauses for effect. All of these skills are imperative in an inclusion classroom. (G: TA Guide, 2008; Lerner, 2009; Myers, 2009; PDK, 2008).

The Performing Arts Center encourages their teaching artists to observe classes and to hold pre-planning and planning sessions with special and general education teachers. Suggested classroom management tips to be emphasized at these meetings include asking if time outs are allowed for disruptive students and how the educators acquire the students' attention when they begin a new activity. The teaching artists were shown the

benefits of gearing their curriculum-linked, scaffolded activities to the students' special needs and were emboldened to give responsibility and recognition to students with serious challenges. The teaching artists were encouraged to collaborate with classroom teachers and aides as allies and partners, and focus on fostering positive student behavior. They were reminded that praise and support help keep the group moving, and usually result in accomplishment for all types of students.

Before concluding this in-service program, the professors wanted to leave the artists with more than just a memory of a productive in-service session and a book of hand-outs. So the seminar leaders distributed a survey that the artists could use with their classroom teachers when they visited different districts. To help the teaching artist plan productively for their special education students, the survey (see Appendix B for complete survey) requested such information as the disabilities of the students in the classroom, the roles of the aides in the classroom, and the rituals the teachers use to get the students' attention. As one teaching artists said in her post-session evaluation, "Teaching artists are perfect for children with special needs. We are not interested in paper and pencil tasks. We want to tap into the gifts these students possess. We can teach concepts that the students cannot get from textbooks or other typical school sources. We are the TEACHING artists!"

Conclusion

The goal of this school partnership program is to capitalize on the ability of the arts to foster cognitive skills and improve academic achievement across the curriculum for special and general education students. The program builds critical thinking and stimulates the perceptual abilities of learners. This aesthetic experience can transform special education students into more active learners who self-express their sometimes hidden potential. As another teaching artist stated, "We are all on the same page as to the importance of a differential learning experience to affect different types of student. The best way is not always the direct way." But the best way for many special needs students may be to experience the arts.

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Appendix A

Dear Teaching Artists,

On Thursday, 1/8/09, from noon - 3:00 PM, we will have the opportunity to discuss your classroom interests and concerns. So that we can focus our time and our activities in the most meaningful way for you, we would appreciate some direction. Please answer the questions below and return to Deborah Robbins by 12/10/08.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Roberta and Louisa

1. Would characteristics of different categories of classified students interest you?

Y _____ N _____

If yes, classification category(ies)

2. Would classroom techniques interest you? Y _____ N _____

3. Would adapting methods and materials interest you? Y _____ N _____

4. What other topics interest you?

Appendix B

Dear Classroom Teacher,

To better serve your children, please supply me with the following information:

1. What are the categories of disabilities of the students in your class?
- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Learning Disabled | <input type="checkbox"/> ADHD | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotionally Disturbed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Autistic | <input type="checkbox"/> Speech Impaired | <input type="checkbox"/> Deaf |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physically Disabled | <input type="checkbox"/> Health Impaired | <input type="checkbox"/> Multiply Disabled |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Traumatic Brain Injured | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> Blind |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | | <input type="checkbox"/> |

2. What is (are) the role(s) of the aide(s) in your classroom?

3. Where are special education students seated?
- | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> randomly integrated | <input type="checkbox"/> back of room | <input type="checkbox"/> in their own group |
| <input type="checkbox"/> front of room | <input type="checkbox"/> isolated | |

4. What is the physical layout of your classroom?
- | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> rows | <input type="checkbox"/> horseshoe | <input type="checkbox"/> activity center _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> tables | <input type="checkbox"/> groups of desks | <input type="checkbox"/> |

5. What ritual do you use to get your students' attention (focus)?
- | | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> lights | <input type="checkbox"/> hand signal | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> percussive sound | <input type="checkbox"/> clappers | <input type="checkbox"/> keywords/phrase |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

6. Will you supply student name tags?

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> NO |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thank you! | |

_____, your Teaching Artist