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The Power of Collaboration: Two Teachers Working Together for Their Students' Success

BY ELLEN POCHEDLEY AND JULIANN DORFF

This article presents an anecdotal discussion of collaboration between a college art education professor and a high school teacher. In the past 4 years, the secondary experiential course for pre-service art teachers has included teaching a class of students with special needs at a local high school. The goal is to provide pre-service art teachers with confidence and skills that will improve their teaching practice with all students.

“In art class, children are often praised for the uniqueness of their work, rather than its conformity to a predetermined standard or response” (Hurwitz & Day, 2007, p. 28).

The University Course

Art Education Field Experience is a required senior level course for art education majors prior to student teaching. The course provides secondary teaching experience for pre-service art teachers in preparation for their student teaching experience. After implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of

1997, a review of the course led to the inclusion of an assignment that places pre-service teachers in a classroom of students with special needs. The hope is that pre-service teachers will realize the humanity in all students and overcome the fear that keeps teachers from fully including every student in their classrooms.

As stated by Hurwitz and Day, the art room is a place where uniqueness and individuality are celebrated. In order for all students to find this environment welcoming, teachers must be confident in their abilities to teach all children. This sense of teacher efficacy directly relates to

student success in the classroom (Delacruz, 1997, p. 58). Exposure and experience help develop teacher efficacy in pre-service teachers.

The High School Students with Autism

Identified on the autism spectrum, the five participating students possessed deficits in speech and language, cognitive development, and social skills and behaviors. Instructional planning was based on an embedded functional curriculum focusing on life skills, work experiences, functional academics, and community activities. The instructional goals of the curriculum were making independent choices, communicating needs in a nonverbal manner (e.g. picture cards, communication boards, gestures), completing work tasks, and demonstrating appropriate social courtesies and practices. The descriptions below provide a sketch of each student and his or her abilities.

Kevin was a 17-year-old with echolalic speech. Speaking in first person to Kevin increased his responses to the teacher's questions. He enjoyed drawing, and he placed a high priority on completing every project that he started in a session.

Martha was 17 and possessed a very large repertoire of sight words. She was the most vocal student in the class. During art class she demonstrated heightened verbal expression and varied voice inflection. Martha worked slowly and precisely on her drawings, using them to express her interests.

Anne was 21 and used basic signs and gestures to communicate her choices and needs. She also utilized an augmentative communication device with teacher support. Anne's fine motor skills were delayed, and she received occupational therapy to learn and practice daily living skills that require fine motor use.

Matt was 17 and followed many established rituals during the school day. He displayed some stressed behavior when his routine or environment was changed.

Adam was 16 and worked in short sessions timed with a visual timer. He began his project, took a

break for physical activity, and then returned to his art project.

Kevin, Martha, Anne, and Matt followed a written daily schedule indicating times and activities. Each student carried a clipboard with his or her schedule attached and marked off scheduled activities as they occurred. Adam utilized a picture schedule kept in the classroom that he checked after completing each activity or lesson.

Planning for Instruction

Due to students' special needs, increased modifications and adaptations are needed for successful experiences in the art classroom. The first step for the pre-service teachers is an observational visit to the classroom. This provides them with the opportunity to meet the students, talk with the teacher and para-professionals, and begin to develop ideas regarding instruction. The pre-service teachers are encouraged to incorporate the instructional goals of the class within their art lessons.

The pre-service art teachers then identify artworks of interest. When selecting artworks to share with the students, they are encouraged to select works with identifiable subjects rather than non-objective (abstract) imagery (Yenawine, 2002). This enables the students to connect with the artwork and read the stories presented in the pieces. After a thorough critical examination of the artwork to uncover the story, meaning, and message, the pre-service teachers develop detailed two-day lesson plans that include scripts. As with any student population, investigating ideas of interest to the students is essential.

The pre-service art teachers are encouraged to post their names and pictures of themselves on the board. These are left up throughout their tenure to reinforce their identities. The pre-service teachers create visual schedules for each of the students. These provide a reference for the steps of the lesson. This advance notice provides a more relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. For example, knowing that "washing hands" is a step in the lesson, students are more comfortable working with messy materials. These visual schedules are reinforced with posters of the art materials and

processes being used when appropriate. A large visual timer is used to establish the duration of each step in the lesson. Students are more easily convinced to continue a task when they know there is a set end to the activity.

Other concepts considered during planning ensure that each activity can be completed in the time allowed. For example, books must be read in their entirety, or students like Kevin will be upset. If this is not possible, copies of the appropriate pages must be provided rather than the entire text. It is also recommended that instruction be varied rather than routinized. This variation limits the development of a ritual. It is also essential, due to the students' difficulty in processing auditory information, that verbal instruction is provided in simple commands. These commands are more effective when reinforced with hand movements, including sign language. Because students with autism interpret language literally, commands must be phrased for clear understanding. The command, "Recess is over" has little meaning, but "Time to get back to work" is clearly understood. It is also important to provide only one activity at a time. For example, instructions are lost if given while distributing papers.

It was also important for the pre-service art teachers to be aware of behaviors that communicate student anxiety. Rapid eye movement, flapping of hands and arms, and hand biting are indications that the students are becoming upset.

The Lesson Strategies

Because the five students were mostly non-verbal, creative methods were needed to engage the students with the artworks and the concepts of the lesson. It was important to provide the students with visuals they could easily see. Rather than posting an image on the wall, the instructor handed out individual copies for each student to allow him or her to examine the image close up. Based on the story being told, different activities helped the students explore the image. For example, when viewing the work *Giant Snowball* (2003) by Andy Goldsworthy, the pre-service teacher began by placing an ice cube on each student's desk. As the students examined the progression of the

melting snowball in the artwork, they witnessed the change taking place in real time through the ice cube. To assist the students in understanding a sculpture of a toy bear by Jeff Koons, the pre-service teacher brought in the actual toy along with texture plates and porcelain so the students could feel the difference between a plush animal and a statue. This was reinforced by playing a mystery touch game where differently textured objects were placed in bags for the students to touch without visual cues. Simple costumes were also used to make connections. When examining the work *Some/One* (2001) by artist Do-Ho Suh, the students discussed the concept of security. They were each given a baseball mitt, a kitchen apron, sunglasses, and a hard hat to wear—protective objects that helped them feel safe.

Individual works allowed students to play "I spy," identifying key objects in the artwork. This can be done in a variety of ways. With laminated reproductions, students can use a washable marker directly on the piece and circle important elements. In another activity, pre-service art teachers cut out images from the work and prompt students to find matching pairs. Alternately, the artwork can be cut into simple puzzle pieces that when assembled reveal the story. Paint color swatches can provide easy matching tools to identify the colors present and relate them to colors on a color wheel. This also demonstrates how students with autism will often match the color swatches to less significant facets of the work rather than the focal point. For example, when examining the work *Buttons, Her Strength is in Her Principles* (1982) by Elizabeth Layton, Kevin focused on the outline of the figure in the colored-pencil drawing.

Studio Production

Any studio materials can be effective for students with autism provided reasonable precautions are taken. Care must be taken to provide the students with clean, cared-for materials that ease stress. For example, when providing watercolor trays, it is important to have the cakes clean and intact. The size of the paintbrush as well as the design also needs consideration. For example, sponge brushes hold additional paint and thus limit re-loading with paint. Large brushes allow for covering larger

areas and push students to use broad expressive strokes.

Whenever possible, materials are chosen that have the benefit of texture to provide further sensory connections with the students. Making texture rubbings over different materials such as screens provided sound and created an image. In another project, students designed printing plates of found objects. Printmaking was particularly rewarding as it provided the students with the opportunity to replicate an image. Clay methods of pinch pots and push/pull animals were also successful. At one point, students worked together to create collaborative pieces using foam core and fabric.

It has also been important to identify tools and techniques that can be adapted for these students. Using pyramid-shaped crayons helps students get a variety of stroke widths with the same tool. Adaptive scissors help with hand-over-hand instructional techniques. Sponge brushes are made with paint pads inside the sponges to eliminate the step of refilling the brush. Flavors can be added to paint to provide the added sensory stimulus of smell.

The Results

The pre-service art education students develop their teaching environment to meet the needs of the targeted students. This results in effective and meaningful teaching.

Independent decision making: The students regularly make independent decisions related to their choice of color, media, and the content of their work, creating personal stories. In other subjects, Kevin tends to copy his friends' work. This behavior is not as evident during art class where Kevin creates independently. Sometimes Kevin copies the teacher's demonstrations, but with modified instruction he creates his own work of art.

Extended attention span and social skills development: Students are more attentive during art class than during other activities. Appropriate social skills and positive behavior are displayed throughout each lesson. If the focus of the lesson is lost, the visual tools and media greatly assist the distracted student, regaining his or her attention.

Demonstrated personal communication through connections to personal experiences: The students are clearly communicating through their art. For example, Martha was given a questionnaire to take home regarding a recent family vacation. Her parents returned it with information about their New York City trip. The pre-service art teacher used this information as a focal point in the lesson. Inspired by her memories, Martha included a precise drawing of the Broadway Theatre her family attended. She also included at least five other sites in NYC that the family visited. Today, Martha's drawing hangs in the classroom, and on occasion she will admire her work and initiate conversation about her NYC trip with her family.

Breaking out of routines and rituals: Matt has many rituals in his daily routine. The pre-service art teachers have designed their instruction to require Matt to make choices that are outside of his routine. During art class, Matt will make choices more readily and with less stress. He smiles frequently and has tried different kinds of media. He has grown in his willingness to work with messy, wet, or dirty materials. As part of his routine, Matt wears the same color shirt everyday. To begin art class, he is required to put on a protective paint shirt. He will cooperatively put the paint shirt over his daily uniform shirt. This newfound flexibility is quite an accomplishment.

Pacing and flexibility in planning: Adam has shown his pre-service art teachers that a lesson can be divided into smaller segments with success. His participation in art class is possible because the pre-service teachers have recognized his need to take breaks while working on a piece. They understand his desire to return and finish his project. The pre-service teachers have also encountered teaching days when Adam is not ready to return after his break. They have been required to make changes and adaptations while teaching.

New opportunity for family and community connections: Parents enthusiastically endorse the program and comment about how happy their children are on Wednesday morning because it

is Art Day. Parents also attend a public display of their children's work organized and presented by the pre-service art teachers. The art show is attended by extended family and the community as well.

The art class' influence extends into the home as well. Inspired by her artwork, Anne's mother painted and decorated her room using four paintings that Anne completed as the focal point.

Importance of well-organized lesson plans, adaptive tools, and personal flexibility: One of the most valuable lessons that the pre-service teachers have learned is the necessity of organization within their plans as well as the development of instructional tools that will be effective in teaching their lessons. Taking the time to cut out aspects of the artwork so that students can focus on the key elements in the piece, creating visual schedules for each day's teaching, and planning variations in instruction to meet the needs of each student are essential. It is also important to maintain good humor when situations in the classroom make these extra efforts ineffective.

Power of professional dialogue: Both the pre-service art teachers and the high school teacher benefit from this collaboration. By working directly with the classroom teacher, the pre-service art teachers gain immediate feedback to improve their instruction. The new ideas presented by the pre-service art teachers help to invigorate the more experienced educators.

Conclusion

At the beginning of each semester a new group of pre-service art teachers is assigned to develop art lessons for this class of very special students. They begin this assignment with trepidation, concerned that they do not have enough experience and are unprepared. After their teaching assignment is finished, their most common reflection is how this was the most rewarding teaching experience they have had to date.

Educators can never fully grasp all there is to know about teaching, but they can always be open to learn. It is the responsibility of art teachers to teach all students. To do this, they need to have confidence that they are able to create and teach meaningful art lessons that support the

learning outcomes for each student. Through this collaborative effort these pre-service art teachers gain the confidence and skills needed to reflect and grow in their teaching. With the experiences this program provides, they are prepared to welcome all students into their classrooms.

References

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Potter a place in the minds of naturalists and in the hearts of children in many countries. Biographer Linda Lear in *Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature* uses ordinary experiences to depict the extraordinary life of a naturalist, writer, illustrator, entrepreneur, farmer and environmentalist. She also revealed the heart-rending story of true love cut short on the eve of a wedding. Lear leads the reader through emotional peaks and valleys revealing epic contributions of Beatrix Potter whose success as wise businesswoman in a masculine world is juxtaposed with her creative spark as storyteller who created a new fable where "animals behave always as real animals, with true animal instincts accurately drawn by a scientific illustrator" (p. 153). Peter Rabbit's creator embarked on a challenging new career and found a lasting new love after the age of 50. The work of epic proportions reaches worlds beyond the expected. Through Potter's legacy of perseverance through gender bias and personal loss, Lear brings the power of a brilliant artist, scientist, and conservationist to the forefront of educational literature.