

The Role of Visual Art Instruction in the Special Education Classroom

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Abstract. *Over the past decade, arts education in the classroom has often been overlooked and eliminated, particularly for children with special needs. However, as this study suggests, the use of visual art instruction in the special education classroom assists teachers in the areas of academic readiness, instruction, student assessment, and social development by impacting behavior, communication and learning. Nine special education teachers, grades Pre-K through 6 who utilized an itinerant art instructor through Very Special Arts, were interviewed prior to and then observed during art lessons. The data from the interviews and observations were then examined through Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory and Lakoff and Johnson's conception of embodiment, which opens the analytical questions of under-utilized pedagogy through the use of art to facilitate student growth and engagement.*

Keywords: *visual arts, integrated curriculum, flow theory, special education*



Visual art instruction tends to be overlooked in a standards-based and outcome driven education model (Jarvis, 2004). Understanding the intrinsic value of art is not enough; teaching art requires validation (Mason & Steedly, 2006). Because arts education has been steadily excluded from the curriculum, teachers are not required to teach or expose students to art (Beasley, 2002). As a result, art in the classroom may be limited to filler activities or random placement of art supplies with little to no direction or guidance (Bae, 2004). In the special education classroom, visual arts education often takes low priority because little information is available to assist teachers in assessing “art and artistic experiences” for a student with special needs (Mason & Steedly, 2006, p. 36). However, as Beasley (2002) asserts, understanding the role art education plays in the development of children is essential. The question, then, is what role does visual arts education have for children with special needs? This study addresses the perceptions of nine special education teachers in one school district in a western state and their use of Very Special Arts (VSA) to gain insight on how these teachers approach art education in their classrooms and the value they place on that instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature offers numerous examples of the relationship between art and the student (Beasley, 2002; Jarvis, 2004; Lambert, 2005; Thompson, 1999), including providing a basis for understanding the possibilities of art instruction as a tool for teachers (Bae, 2004; Frisch, 2006;

Hargreaves, Galton & Robinson, 1996). In general, the focus has been on art in general education settings with recent additions incorporating research of students in special education (Hanline, Milton, & Phelps, 2007; Kinder & Harland, 2004; Mason & Steedly, 2006; Taylor, 2005). In an effort to answer the question of what role visual art instruction has in the special education classroom, four aspects of the literature are considered: academic readiness, instruction, student assessment, and social development.

ACADEMIC READINESS

Education becomes more interesting when art is involved because it focuses on “age appropriate activities” (Beasley, 2002, p. 4). In an effort to understand the link between art and academic readiness, Bae (2004) notes that when using art, the child is an active participant in the learning process. Lambert (2005) asserts that academic abilities may improve with arts included in the curriculum since children learn by doing. Further, constructing a vision of the world through art is a “vital physical process to a child’s full, developing experience” (Jarvis, 2004, p. 322). Art can be used as a scaffold in various learning situations to offer mental and physical support during the process (Bae, 2004). Frisch (2006) agrees, and supports the notion that art offers scaffolding as a support for children when working on tasks, or when moving from the known to the unknown.

INSTRUCTION

Art lies in the “formative experiences” of young children (Jarvis, 2004, p. 317). The classroom is a place to share ideas, explore the use of images and ideas, and develop a relationship between language and drawing (Thompson, 1999). Beasley (2002) concurs, finding that art education “provides the foundation for later learning,” especially in the developmental stages associated with preschool and kindergarten (p. 21). Mason and Steedly (2006) indicate that “learning in and through the arts is an activity that is intimately intertwined with social, academic and cognitive growth” (p. 42). Teaching drawing, for example, helps children examine objects and pictures as part of a larger learning process and prepares them for more sophisticated communication (Frisch, 2006). Art education also facilitates internalizing the learning experience (Bae, 2004). Jarvis (2004) opines that art affords a physical, sensory experience for a child that carries on into adulthood due to the various natures of materials introduced at a young age.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Mason and Steedly (2006) indicate that educators need to understand and have methods to assess the “value of using the arts for teaching students with disabilities” (p. 42). According to Hargreaves et al. (1996), standardized tests are not an adequate method for assessing creativity. However, visual arts provide an avenue to assess “developmental progression” using drawing and painting, which progress similarly between children with typical development and those with disabilities (Hanline et al., 2007, p. 150). Hargreaves et al. (1996) concur, indicating that amassing a portfolio of artwork allows for a “fine-grained evaluation of the process by which the product evolved” (p. 200). Hanline et al. (2007) note that while progression is on a similar path, it tends to be slower for children with disabilities.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Art allows for construction of a child’s reality from his own experiences and allows expression through a visual voice (Taylor, 2005). Frisch (2006) asserts that educators have

focused on drawing and art as an “individual expression” (p.76). For a child, drawing “catalyses emotions, knowledge, perception, experience, and storymaking” (Frisch, 2006, p. 81). Kinder and Harland (2004) found that the arts play a role in social inclusion. The arts have a strong association with positive outcomes in “enjoyment, psychological wellbeing and also interpersonal skills/relationship development” (Kinder & Harland, 2004, p. 53). Further, Kinder and Harland indicate that art allows for the development of “creativity and expressive skill” as well as transferable skills (p.53). As Taylor (2005) points out, it is important not to underestimate the power of visual arts in the education of students with disabilities.

While research supports the use of art as a method of addressing academic readiness (Bae, 2004; Beasley, 2002; Mason & Steedly, 2006; Thompson, 1999), developmental assessment (Hanline et al., 2007; Lambert, 2005; Jarvis, 2005, Hargreaves et al., 1996), and a means of providing young students with a visual voice (Frisch, 2006; Kinder & Harland, 2004; Taylor, 2005; Taylor, 2005), we seek to expand on previous work by situating this study in relation to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) notion of flow theory and Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) conception of embodiment.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Nine special education teachers at four elementary school sites within the same western state school district were chosen to participate. The teachers were selected due to their expressed interest in having art instruction in their classrooms. Each teacher requested visual art instruction through VSA and received weekly instruction from the same art instructor over a period of 1 to 4 years. The teachers instruct preschool to 6th grade children in self-contained classrooms and cover a spectrum of students with special needs, including autism and severe intellectual impairments. Table 1 displays demographic information for the participants.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics*

	Gender	Years Teaching	Classroom Type ^a	Student Grade Level
Kathy	Female	6	Strategies	K-3
Lana	Female	3	Strategies	4-6
Carrie	Female	7	CLS	4-6
Angela	Female	4	Strategies	4-6
Linda	Female	8	Strategies	Pre-K
Erin	Female	2	Strategies	4-6
Karen	Female	4	Strategies	Pre-K
Callie	Female	1	Strategies	K-3
Kaitlyn	Female	5	CLS	1-3

Note. ^aStrategies classes contain children with autism. CLS (Comprehensive Life Skills) classes include children with intellectual impairments.

DATA COLLECTION

Over a period of three months, interviews and observations were conducted on the use of visual arts in the special education classroom. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in one-on-one sessions using an open-ended question format, utilizing descriptive, example, and experience questioning (Spradley, 1979). All interviews were conducted by the first author, and the same questions were used for each interview. Questions for the interviews were

collaboratively developed, relying heavily on the experience of the second author, who teaches art in special education classrooms. The interviews focused on teachers' art background, what prompted each teacher to request a transient art instructor, what each felt art offered to her students, and what benefits each felt were the result of art instruction. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview took place at a location of the participant's choosing. The settings were either at the teacher's school or in the office of the interviewing researcher. Following interviews, each participant was observed in her own classroom setting.

Observations were also conducted by the first author. Observations took place during regularly scheduled class visits by the second author, a VSA instructor, to ensure continuity of services and avoid disruption in the classroom routine. Teachers were observed to determine participation, focus, understanding of art materials and lessons, and interaction with students. The observations were documented using analytic and descriptive field notes based on the researcher's interpretations of teacher-related activities during art instruction and information obtained during the preceding interviews (Glesne, 2005). The observations were limited to the amount of time the VSA instructor remained in the classroom, approximately 30 minutes. Immediately following the observations, the researcher dictated observation field notes for later transcription.

DATA ANALYSIS

We conducted the analysis using an inductive, constant-comparative approach in which key concepts grounded in the data were allowed to emerge (Bogden & Bilken, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This approach examines data occurrences for similarities that reflect general categories or themes. Analysis began with both the first and second authors independently conducting open coding, the initial process of reading transcripts line by line to "formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest, no matter how varied and disparate" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 143). These researchers then organized data into domains. New domains were assigned until all of the data were carefully analyzed and placed into existing domains. At this point, the two researchers met to compare the domains with one another to discern a general framework that could be used to interpret the data. The domains were then grouped together by common themes. Themes were compared across participants and refined, expanded, or deleted as we searched for contrasts and grouped similar categories together. Both researchers reached consensus on wording of the final themes prior to entering this information into a conceptual framework or paradigm (Bogden & Bilken, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Validity concerns were addressed by triangulating interview and observational data, through peer debriefing, and through member checks with participants. To ensure the credibility of findings, the interviewing author provided copies of the transcribed interviews to each teacher. Throughout data analysis participants were informed of the directions of findings and asked for verification of their perspectives.

To promote the dependability of data analysis, following the development of the initial conceptual framework or paradigm the first two authors met with the third author, who had independently read all interview and observation transcripts. Additions were made to the paradigm as we collaborated to establish validity through pooled judgment. The outcome of this detailed analysis led to a greater understanding of special education teachers' perceptions of the benefit of art instruction for their students. We strove to collect and analyze data in ways that ensured their individual voices would be heard (Glesne, 2005). In light of this, the importance of trustworthiness cannot be overemphasized, and through the extensive methods used, the results are credible and dependable.

FINDINGS

Each of the nine special education teachers studied received weekly art lessons in her classroom through VSA. Although children in the teachers' classrooms were served under multiple categorical labels and were of varying ages, each teacher indicated that her students benefited from art instruction. These benefits fell into three major categories: (a) behavior, (b) communication, and (c) learning.

BEHAVIOR

A paramount challenge for special educators teaching in segregated classrooms is improving children's behavior to the extent where they may be increasingly included in general education classrooms. Our teachers indicated that students' participation in art activities had both tangible and intangible behavioral benefits.

TANGIBLES

Both interview and observational data revealed the tangible benefits of art activities. Tangible behavioral benefits are those which can be readily observed during the art activities. Included in those tangibles were the aspects of social interaction, creativity, and promotion of calm, relaxing classrooms.

Social interaction. All nine teachers indicated that art activities promoted social interaction between students in their classrooms. For example, one specific social task Erin mentioned pertained to students working together. She indicated:

It gives them the opportunity to work with everyone. There's only so many things you can do with them as a whole because when I have reading group, they're not all at the same reading level, and when I have math group, they're not all at the same math group, so there's only a handful of things that we can have where we're all working together. And so I love that I can have all five of my kids sitting at the same table.

Karen, who teaches preschool children with autism, echoed the benefit of having all students working at the same table, "I see it in a way, too, of them being able to interact, especially because we can try and talk to them about what so and so is doing and getting them into that social aspect." Callie's sentiments were similar, "Kids who don't normally like group are able to come and are starting to really maintain the group." Kathy, Carrie, and Kaitlyn emphasized the social interaction skills of sharing and waiting to take a turn. Kathy explained, "They have to share the supplies. If there is only one green paint out, they have to wait. I think it's good for them because it's hard to learn how to wait."

Creativity. A second tangible behavioral benefit seven of the nine teachers identified was the opportunity to be creative. Lana's statement is representative of the teachers, "They love painting, they love being creative. And it's nice, giving [them] that chance to be creative." Linda, a preschool teacher, explained, "We don't want to dictate how it's going to look. They still have control over it and that's what makes art fun is that you can still be creative as an individual." She continued, "[They] have the fulfillment that I created something. This is my own work and kids start to do that at a very early age."

Calming/relaxing. The promotion of calm, relaxing classrooms was the final tangible mentioned by six of the nine teachers. Carrie gave an excellent description of how this pertained in her classroom:

I think it's just the way that they feel comfortable in doing something and so it, it kind of relaxes them a little bit and they're able to produce work that they're not necessarily seeing as having to do work. So it keeps them calm.

Linda expanded upon this concept stating that art can be an activity that her children will be able to enjoy outside the classroom, "It's a leisure activity, and with autism it's really hard to teach leisure activities because you have to teach play skills, and play and leisure go together." Callie also saw future benefits to art's calming aspect, stating, "Its teaching them to find things and exposing them to as many different things that might calm them down at home. That might be a lifelong thing. And art is one of those things."

INTANGIBLES

Beyond art's obvious tangible behavioral benefits, the teachers identified several intangible behavioral benefits for their students. The intangibles, while not readily apparent, are behavioral qualities that contribute to students' quality of life. The intangible benefits expressed by the teachers included self-esteem, independence, self-expression, and enjoyment.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was an intangible benefit mentioned by seven of the nine teachers. Kathy indicated, "[With art] there are no mistakes. Whatever they create is what they create, and we put it on the bulletin so they're very proud of them and take them home." Lana found that her students were "so proud to show their artwork. They go up to teachers, 'Hey, look, I did this.'" Carrie said that the reaction of her students was similar, "They make a final project, a tangible, hands-on project that we can all look at and share with other people and it really builds their self esteem because they're like, 'I did this. I did it by myself.'"

Independence. Completing art activities not only promoted students' self-esteem, but increased their independence as well. Kathy's statement is representative of the five teachers who mentioned this benefit, "They can do it by themselves, and that's what I really strive for, is independence." Likewise, Karen noted an increase in the independence of one of her students:

I can see he's starting to really watch what [the VSA instructor] does and then he tries to do it on his own, as before we would have to do a lot of hand over hand. But he really watches her to try and imitate what it is.

Self-expression. All nine teachers saw self-expression as an intangible behavioral benefit for their students. Kaitlyn indicated, "Even though they have a finished product that they're supposed to hand in, they have some leeway with that and they're able to be themselves." Angela saw art as a benefit for those students who may not have other means of expressing themselves, "They can just be who they are and they do the project that's assigned to them but they do it in their way." She elaborated:

It's in them all and I think it's so important to pull it out because I think they can really show their emotions and feelings, and even maybe verbalize what's going on. With their problems, they could draw a picture if they were upset.

Erin viewed her students' self-expression in much the same way:

I think it's a way for them to express themselves whether they just want to get out some anger and just take that crayon and dig it into their paper, or just to have fun with it, whether it's I'm mad or I'm happy or I'm excited.

Enjoyment. The final behavioral intangible identified by all nine teachers was enjoyment. Angela indicated, "They love it and they love the instruction and they love learning new ways of doing art." Similarly, Callie found that, "the kids really enjoyed it and they made some really cool stuff and it was a good way to get the kids in group because they all loved it so much." Kathy's statement demonstrates not only the enjoyment factor for the children, but also a

benefit for teachers, “There are rarely any behavior problems when it comes to the art lesson. Everybody’s involved; they’re loving it and so it’s just really positive and it’s really nice to have.”

COMMUNICATION

The second major finding category is the benefit art provided for students’ communication. Our teachers indicated that many students in their self-contained special education classrooms had limited communicative abilities. They indicated that art allowed the children opportunities to display expressive and receptive communication skills.

EXPRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

Five of the teachers produced specific examples demonstrating how art benefits students’ expressive communication skills. Lana noted that some of her students with no verbal language were able to communicate their preferences through art. These same students “draw what they think a story is about. They can express, they can use it [art] for reading activities.” Similarly, Angela described a student with limited communication skills who would draw cartoon characters and “go to the picture and say ‘this is Big Bird. And this is Pooh and this is Tigger.’” Four teachers indicated that art increased students’ ability to request needed items. For example, Erin noted an increase in requesting and overall communication skills, “They ask for things politely and are nice to each other and occasionally they’ll interact with each other, which is like, oh my gosh, they actually talk with one another.” She continued, “If one of the kids wants the yellow crayon, they have to make sure that they raise their hand and they have to ask for something.” Karen teaches preschool and reported on the communication of one of her students, “If not all the materials are there, he knows that he needs to try and ask for it.”

RECEPTIVE COMMUNICATION

All nine teachers provided examples of students demonstrating receptive communication skills during art activities. Kathy indicated, “Following instructions and following the steps to complete the task is really big for them.” Carrie specified that all her students had goals for “Following oral directions, so all of those are kind of incorporated during [art] time” Kaitlyn, Callie, Karen, Linda, and Angela all indicated that art increased their students’ abilities to follow oral directions. Lana explained, “If it’s step by step by step, they learn how to manage their directions. Okay, you have to do this first; you have to do that second.”

LEARNING

The final major finding category is learning. This category is especially significant as it demonstrates that rather than detracting from the business of schools, art enriches other typical learning activities. Linda succinctly expresses these advantages:

The more art that they do, the more activities they do at tables, the more cooperation they need. [Art] works on social skills. It works on attention skills. It works on language skills. It works on all that stuff. [Art increases] the amount of time that we have to do those things. Plus it’s fun.

We distinguish the learning benefits extolled by our teachers in two distinct areas, those that contribute to general abilities of learning, and those that are specific to art related learning.

GENERAL LEARNING ABILITIES

Students in segregated special education classrooms often need to develop basic skills that will prepare them to be successful in inclusive education classrooms. Many of the general learning abilities mentioned by the teachers fulfill that requirement.

Responding to a different instructor. Because VSA brings a transient art teacher into the classroom, our teachers praised the value their students achieved in responding to a different instructor. Seven of the nine teachers saw this as a benefit for their students. The following statement from Erin is representative:

Just having a different face come in, having someone else take the role as teacher. When she comes in here, I'm not the teacher anymore. It's Ms. Heidi and she gets to do her thing. And it gives them the opportunity to work with someone else.

Increased attention span. Eight teachers commented on the benefit art instruction had in increasing students' ability to attend. For many, there was a progression during the school year as they increased art instruction from 15 to 30 minutes. Carrie noted how this impacts other curricular areas:

I think it's lengthened all their attention spans. They just love doing it and it's kind of carrying over into their other activities, too. I can remind them, "Well, you sat through 30 minutes yesterday in art class, so do you think maybe we can sit and do math for 30 minutes today?" And they're like, "Oh, that was 30 minutes?" and I was, "Yeah, let's try it today." And so it's something to compare it to and it really helps them.

Linda, Lana, Carrie, Callie, Angela, and Kaitlyn concurred, indicating that even students who initially had difficulty attending had increased their ability to participate during the entire 30 minute art activity. Erin saw the 30 minute art time as an activity where students not only attend, but "do art and be productive."

Following directions. To be productive during art activities, the teachers found that many students can now follow multiple step directives. Although we reported some of these comments as part of receptive communication, inasmuch as all nine teachers described this skill, it is important to note that this was an area where teachers not only saw, but also documented growth. Linda indicated, "Following one-step directions is one of the main IEP goals that I have in this classroom for preschool." Callie commented on the ability of one student during an art activity, "He followed each step. He did the Ys, he did the trees, he folded it over to make a reflection and then he drew the ground."

Enrich current knowledge. This domain represents the most robust finding. All teachers provided multiple examples of how art instruction enhances students' present performance in developmental and academic areas. Kathy saw art as "supporting all aspects of curriculum." Carrie indicated that during VSA visits the transient art instructor "does such a good job at relating it [art] to different core subject areas that I really see it as just enhancing all of our other core subjects." Kaitlyn recalled one project that challenged students' math skills, "There was one project that they had to make a certain number of things and so, yeah, there are, there are numbers involved. Another one was making patterns." Lana indicated "art helps develop more logic skills." Angela reported on her students with autism, "There are a lot of skills in art and they don't know that they're learning them, and that's good too, because they don't know that they're learning it during art. There are a lot of things that they're learning." Similarly, when asked whether she thought taking time from art impacted her time with other curricular areas, Linda explained that it was up to the teacher to see the value of art:

No, I think it enhances it, to tell you the truth. It really just depends on the teacher. If your attitude is this is taking away from my ABC time or my calendar time, why

couldn't you incorporate some of those skills in an art project? So I really think it's the teacher's mentality.

Eight teachers gave examples of enriching of current knowledge by using art as a strategy when addressing IEP goals. Specific goal areas included sensory and fine motor skills, socialization, behavior, cognition, communication, and academic curricula such as literacy and numeracy. Karen indicated she addressed goals "with coloring in the lines, with forming shapes, obviously cutting shapes but then also making shapes like with drawing." Erin expanded on the benefits, "fine motor skills, their colors, their numbers, their behavior - everything."

Three teachers saw students use specific art media to demonstrate abilities while developing new skills. Linda's students may demonstrate fine motor abilities by using a paintbrush rather than a pencil. Angela gave a specific example:

I have a boy who doesn't like to do any kind of academics, like writing activities, although he's very good at the math and writing. But if I allow him to use markers, he will do them all day long. So I let him use markers and he writes all day and he does wonderful at math. He probably looks silly coming home with his math pages in rainbow colors, but he's learning.

Similarly, Callie recounted, "I have one boy who can write his name perfectly in shaving cream with his finger. That tells me he knows his name."

Finally, teachers indicated that participation in art activities promoted skills that would prepare students for inclusion in general education classrooms. Linda, a teacher in a preschool class for children with autism, saw that her students were "working on skills they'll need when they're older, like in kindergarten." Kathy concurred; she saw art as teaching her students "skills that will hopefully transfer them to their general education classrooms."

ART RELATED LEARNING

The students learning during art activities were not limited to academic or school behavior learning. Because the students were participating in art activities, they were also able to learn about art processes.

Art as a process. Four of the nine teachers indicated they saw their students benefiting from the process of completing an art activity. Kathy indicated, "There's an end process, instead of just cutting out a triangle and being done with it." Linda commented on the overall product, "It doesn't necessarily have to be a beautiful product, but the experience. It's the process, it's not really the product." Kaitlyn meanwhile pointed out that "getting to that finished product is part of the purpose." Karen agreed, explaining that she sees her students recognizing that there will be several steps before they are finished with their project.

Art allows exploration. Three of the four teachers who commented on their students' exploration through art were teachers of children with autism. Angela noted, "I think they see everything in pictures and I think that they are very artistic children. They all seem to be artists in one way or another." Callie appreciated the variety of media her students were able to explore through art. Similarly, Karen commented, "I see a lot of exploration with it. Art is so hands on that they really get to kind of create something with certain materials. Their imagination really gets to take hold of that, too."

Exposure to different modalities. Seven teachers identified the importance of students' exposure to different modalities. This perspective extended to both different techniques and different materials. Kathy indicated that "learning the different techniques just makes their lives a little bit more interesting." Angela explains that her students are "so involved when they

come in and show like, hey, you can paint and you can do it this way or fold the paper and look what happens." Linda represented the experiences of Lana, Erin, Callie, and Karen when she indicated, "My philosophy is to expose them to as much as possible." She elaborated:

We do shaving cream. We do painting. We work with little fine motor stuff, like beans and things that will give them different experiences. A lot of our kids are tactilely sensitive, which means they don't like to touch anything maybe sticky or slimy. Finger painting might be awful for some of our kids. But if you just give them a brush, they love it. So it's really trying to match the experience to what the child will permit you to expose them to.

SUMMARY

Analysis of both teacher interview data and observation field notes found that teachers perceive numerous benefits for their students during art instruction delivered by a VSA instructor. The major categories of findings developed during analysis are: (a) behavior, (b) communication, and (c) learning. Behavioral benefits to students included both tangible and intangible components. Teachers documented student opportunities for skill development in both expressive and receptive communication during art instruction. Finally, analysis revealed that teachers perceived various learning opportunities during art instruction, including general abilities, those that may appear on a student's IEP, and art related learning.

DISCUSSION

Art can assist students in reaching educational goals across cognitive and social domains due to its accessibility, multimodality (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), and inherent opportunity to integrate instructional goals as is evident in Angela's example of the student who did not like to write but began to engage in writing using alternative materials, and in Callie's description of her student writing his name in shaving cream. While the use of markers may not appear to be art, it does represent an alternative tool and mode for expression beyond what a pencil accomplished for a particular student. The multimodal nature of art as a mediating mechanism for integrating learning across contexts and contributing to long term gain and transfer is unique and commensurable with flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Multimodality (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), in relation to viewing art as a medium for learning, is typified by the use of various modes for students to access and control versus those found in a typical classroom curriculum. Kress and Van Leeuwen describe four domains of practice in their conception of multimodality: discourse, design, production, and dissemination. Student experiences during art activities can be situated in notions of discourse whereby students are a part of the art activity's dialogue community while participating in the actual design of their own product. Along with discourse and design, the students' multimodal experience is also tied to the actual production of a work of art, which is then disseminated in a particular way to a specific audience. Production is our focal point in this paper as defined by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), "The actual material articulation of the semiotic event or the actual material production of the semiotic artifact" (p. 6).

According to the teachers, the actual production of artwork provided opportunities for the students' enjoyment. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2004),

Enjoyment...is the experience that leads to growth. It is what we feel after physical exercise, when we master a skill, when playing music or an interesting game. It is what

keeps creative persons struggling against heavy odds and what leads children to learning (p. 344).

In other words, taking pleasure in learning activities lowered the affective filter and allowed students to make progress in previously inaccessible areas of learning; once the affective filter was lowered they could reach and/or surpass established goals across domains. Flow activities can lead to growth and discovery. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) indicates that individuals need variety rather than doing the same thing for too long, "We grow either bored or frustrated; and then the desire to enjoy ourselves again pushes us to stretch our skills, or to discover new opportunities for using them" (p. 75). Our teachers overwhelmingly indicated that their students loved participating in art activities. Kathy's statement demonstrates not only the enjoyable factor for the children, but also a benefit for the teachers, "There are rarely any behavior problems when it comes to the art lesson. Everybody's involved; they're loving it and so it's just really positive and it's really nice to have."

Therefore, flow theory serves as a means to theorize and capture the ways the teachers described students' engagement in the art activities themselves. "The experience of flow is one of the most powerful manifestations of complexity at the interpersonal level. When totally concentrated on a challenging task we use relevant skills: physical, mental, emotional, volitional - to their fullest extent" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004, p. 342). The ways in which the teachers discussed their students' reaction to art projects aligns with flow theory, as explained by Carrie "They make a final project, a tangible, hands-on project that we can all look at and share with other people, and it really builds their self esteem because they're like, 'I did this. I did it by myself.'" Teachers described students' behavior, communication, and learning while participating in the art activities, they indicated that students' capacity for reaching educational goals was enhanced. They addressed the art-based tasks placed before them in alternative yet challenging ways. The reported high levels of engagement demonstrate how the students were able to challenge themselves in relation to their own learning goals. Art allowed students to participate in what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes as "flow activities" in relation to "optimal experiences," in that they have "rules that require the learning of skills, they set up goals, they provide feedback, they make control possible. They facilitate concentration and involvement by making the activity as distinct as possible from the so-called 'paramount reality' of everyday existence" (p. 72). Moving art into classroom structures opened the realm of possible venues for students to engage in behavioral, communicative, and learning goals outside of typical modes of learning, as represented by Karen's discussion of how one of her students was physically engaged in the art activities and developing his skills, "I can see he's starting to really watch what she [the VSA instructor] does, and then he tries to do it on his own."

In relation to learning, art's multimodal nature and opportunity for "optimal experiences" affords students with multiple means of accessing objectives and provides opportunities for embodiment. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) posit that concepts and reason are embodied, a complex position we simplify in relation to using art with students with disabilities whereby, "perceptual and motor systems play [a role] in shaping particular kinds of concepts: color concepts, basic-level concepts, spatial-relations concepts, and aspectual (event-structuring) concepts" (p. 16). Embodiment during art activities reinforces notions of learning by experiencing them through the senses. For example, Karen explained how one of her students attempted to imitate rather than having her use "hand over hand" support.

Moving beyond learning to replicate movements or procedures, a cognitive science and cognitive linguistic view of embodiment as theorized by Lakoff and Johnson (1999), addresses how art allows students to conceptualize and understand their world socially and academically.

This mirrors what the teachers described in relation to their observations of their students' performance in developmental and academic areas. Our teachers strongly expressed the value of art as supporting multiple aspects of the curriculum and as a means for addressing IEP goals. While we cannot make any direct links between art and academic goals for the students, the teachers' interpretations of their students' learning was based on students' observable behavior during art activities and how it relates to the teachers' daily instructional goals.

In closing, we end with Csikszentmihalyi's (2004) statement in relation to education, "Our ways to educate children are overly differentiated without being meaningfully integrated. The result is tunnel-vision specialization, at best, at worst frustrating confusion" (p. 345). With this in mind, we hope to resituate art as a means for reaching behavioral, social, and academic goals for students with special needs. The teachers and students in this study illustrate the importance of attending to instruction while using art as the mediating vehicle for the meaningful integration of activities. Our deliberate attention to the role flow theory and embodiment can play in student growth, enjoyment, and engagement is designed to move art into an analytical frame that respects its potential for facilitating student growth and engagement. Further exploration of the interaction between teachers and students in relation to flow is necessary to unpack how embodiment through art plays a role in cognition at the interpersonal level. Future questions to address include examining what "optimal activities" related to art might encourage flow, and an exploration of particular activities or pedagogical methods that open up student experiences conducive to flow.

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