

# Impact of arts integration on voice, choice, and access.

Mason, C. Y., Steedly, K. M., & Thormann, M. S. (2008). Impact of arts integration on voice, choice, and access. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, 31(1), 36.

## Abstract:

VSA arts conducted this study to investigate the relationship between substantive arts involvement and social, cognitive, and artistic development among students with disabilities. This study was conducted in two phases including focus groups to determine teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of arts integration among their special needs populations and a pilot project that examined the efficacy of rubrics in measuring various skill areas. Results suggest that arts may assist special needs students in demonstrating knowledge of academic content and skills. Moreover, teachers and artists cited examples of how the arts provided both access to learning and opportunities for students to express preferences and interests.

## Key Findings:

The first component of this research sought to examine teachers' perceptions of the value of both including students with disabilities in arts activities, and of integrating the arts across the curriculum. Three key findings emerged:

- *Voice*: Children use art and the process of creating art to communicate information about themselves and their world, and the arts help them to express emotion in appropriate ways.
- *Choice*: The arts exercise children's critical capacity for decision-making and problem solving, which are important developments for preparing children with disabilities to be active and independent citizens.

- **Access:** The inherent flexibility of all art forms allows students multiple ways to access content and provides teachers with opportunities to meet the unique needs of their students.

The second component of the research engaged teachers in a Community of Practice—an electronic learning community—as they implemented rubric assessments in their classrooms. Teachers found the rubrics useful for measuring outcomes of arts integration, and viewed the Community of Practice as instrumental to their success in integrating the arts.

## Significance of the Findings:

Though several recent studies have focused on arts integration for the larger population of students, very few have specifically addressed the arts and students with disabilities. This study explores important questions related to the value teachers place on arts integration in their classroom for students with disabilities, as well as effective ways for teachers to collaborate in implementing and evaluating such programs. The findings, though limited to the teachers' perceptions, emphasize that arts integration is important to this population of students and that collaborative and supportive relationships with colleagues as well as well-designed tools, such as rubrics, can help enhance academic instruction and student learning.

## Methodology:

This study was conducted by VSA Arts, a non-profit organization focused on the arts abilities of individuals with disabilities. The purpose of the study was to better understand the value of arts instruction in academic settings for students with disabilities. It was a teacher-focused investigation carried out in two phases.

*Phase 1* The researchers conducted thirty-four focus groups in sixteen states over a two-year period. Teachers, artists in residence, and VSA arts affiliate directors participated in these sessions. Representation included elementary, middle, and high school teachers in inclusive environments and special-education centers. The interviews were transcribed and coded for topical categories by independent researchers who were not VSA staff members using qualitative analysis software.

*Phase 2* In the second phase, participants received support in implementing a rubric approach to evaluation of the arts. They also participated in an electronic community of practice with the goal to share knowledge and expertise while implementing rubrics in

their classroom. Researchers analyzed teachers' rubrics and associated student work to assess the efficacy of these tools in teachers' practice.

## Limitations of the Research:

This research is limited in that it collected data solely from the teachers' point of view as expressed in focus groups and interviews in the first study phase, and the second phase is limited by its small sample of teachers.

## Questions to Guide New Research:

What are the effects of arts integrated practice on students with varying disabilities? A comparison of special needs students that do and do not participate in arts integrated instruction might help highlight the possible benefits of arts integrated instruction for students with disabilities.

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