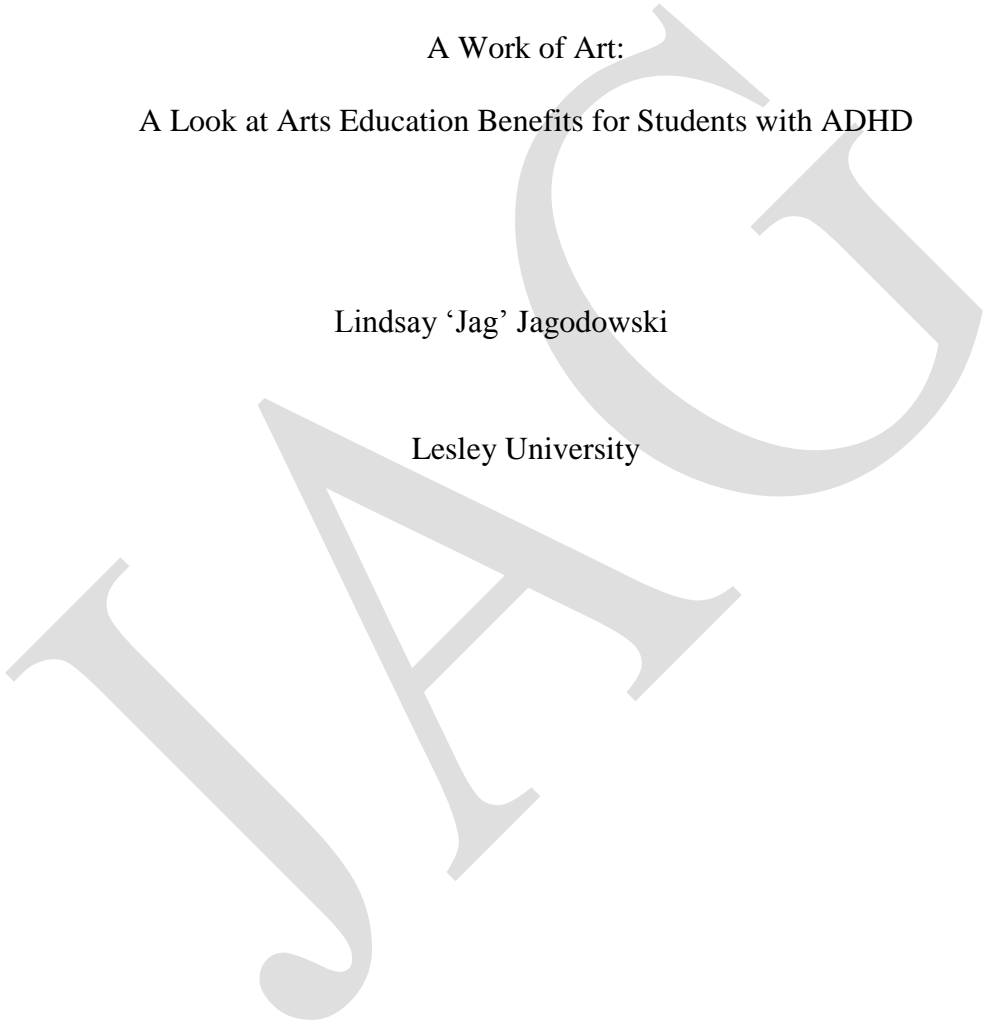


A Work of Art:

A Look at Arts Education Benefits for Students with ADHD

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Rationale

A work of art – regardless of the medium – is a story being told, an emotion being processed, a passion being expressed and a desire being fulfilled. For students with special needs the arts are an important mode of communication that cannot be undervalued. The arts are an amazing educational tool allowing the expression of creativity and personal voice. Because of the multiple senses that can be engaged and the expanse of forms that lend opportunities for innumerable adaptations. In this paper I will outline the core reasons for using arts in special needs education and then specifically with students on the ADD/ADHD spectrum.

One of the greatest aspects of the arts is that they do not demand one specific answer. The arts leave room for exploration and discovery; they create opportunities for the use of multiple intelligences and varied learning styles. Every individual has their own method of learning and this is even more pronounced in students with special needs. Some learn by listening, others by seeing or doing and some learn best using a combination of these methods. Along the same line, we all fall somewhere in the multiple intelligence spectrum, meaning we are all intelligent beings some whose strengths fall in different categories. In multiple intelligence theory there are broad varieties that range from linguistic intelligence, mathematical intelligence and spatial intelligence to musical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intra-personal and even naturalist intelligences. Because of the arts' ability to be adapted to all learning styles, they offer a unique opportunity to foster students' confidence in their unique abilities and confidence is a key aspect of student learning and retention of knowledge.

Another core reason for supporting arts education with special needs students is the opportunity for self expression. Some disabilities hinder a student's ability to communicate through spoken or written word. The arts offer the use of more languages for expression and allow students to develop their own voices to communicate with others. As stated by Powell (1997):

“I don't believe that it is stretching too far to say that, having experienced yourself as a creator in the arts, you will be a better teacher in a classroom like this. For one thing, the arts help teachers become multilingual, because the arts are many languages. You can say things in music that you cannot translate into words; when you dance a concept, it is not the same as when you speak about it. The visual arts are their own particular language, not a shortcut for words ... The more languages a teacher can use, the better chance he or she has to speak (and listen) to diverse students” (p. 6)

Communication is paramount to a student's connection to the community and development of self esteem. When a student feels like their voice is being heard and valued they can gain awareness of her positive contributions.

With self esteem and self awareness in place, a student can use the arts to engage more fully in the human experience by connecting to others. Through exercises in theater and dance, for example, a student can engage in the act of role-playing situations and experience consequences to gain further understanding of themselves and others in a social context. This can be beneficial to students with learning and social disorders that affect their awareness of acceptable social norms. These practices can help these students to gain understanding of acceptable social behavior.

Students can also communicate about their cultures and develop lasting relationships with their communities. Powell (1997) brings to attention that, “creativity involves drawing on sources from within, finding images, words, sounds, or movements inside oneself to express one’s perceptions. That is what artists do ... As they find these inner resources, they begin to affirm that what is in them is trustworthy and valuable” (p. 2). Working together in groups to create a dance or a larger art piece creates community bonds and trust between students and teachers alike. Fowler (1994) says that, “the arts – creative writing, dance, music, theater/film, and visual arts – serve as a way that we react to, record and share our impressions of the world” (p. 5).

Another “seed” to the core value of the arts in special needs classrooms is the development of skill sets that will benefit the students throughout their lives. In their most basic forms arts require the use and development of gross and fine motor skills. Through the use of tool and lesson adaptations and group work all of these skills can be made accessible and beneficial for students with a broad range of abilities. The act of cutting paper, drawing shapes or dancing across a floor are all skills that can be refined and developed through arts activities in the classroom. Another skill set that is developed through arts education is that of creative skills. Storytelling, painting, drawing, dance - the arts themselves - are sets of skills that enrich the lives of people across all abilities and cultures. Having a broad range of mediums available to express thoughts, emotions and what students have learned can offer a greater opportunity for assessment and academic progress.

In the 1994 article Fowler states that “one of the most important contributions the arts make to the development of young people is the cultivation of their emotional and spiritual wellbeing” (p. 8). I think it is important to acknowledge the growth opportunities offered by the arts for a

student's mental and physical health. Imagine not being able to get your point across or express to someone how you feel ... the avenues created by the arts for speaking to and listening to students with special needs are innumerable and invaluable. Through art forms like dance, stretching and exercise can be worked into a classroom activity that is both fun and physically beneficial to all students. Adaptations of movements and through collaboration with peers can make artistic expression accessible to students with physical disabilities.

In her article, Author Jesl Cruz talks about the myths that people associate with special needs education. One of these myths is that "these kids can't do analytical work," but through her work in the arts she has made great advances toward dispelling this myth. Her answer to those who would argue that special education means second class education is that she is "not working in a field that yields success in a linear fashion, but rather a spiral fashion, where all possibilities are explored, and where solutions are found based on inquiry" (p. 151). I completely agree with Cruz. Just because the learning is taking place at a different rate or in a different mode does not rank it as second class. Through the arts, special needs students have access to the development of skills such as critical thinking, abstract thinking and problem solving which will benefit them throughout life. Fowler (1994) states that: "when we involve students in creative problem solving, we invite their participation as partners in the learning process. Instead of telling them what to think, the arts engage the minds of students to sort out their own reactions and articulate them through the medium at hand" (p. 5).

A work of art ... all of the reasons for the use of arts in special education can be summed up with this simple phrase. In my first year as a theater teacher I had a student named Montannah in my third grade class. Montannah had severe ADHD which caused her to act out, interrupt others and

in turn, her disability caused a great deal of social turmoil between her and her peers. One day the headmaster asked me to speak to Montannah because she had expressed great distress about her inability to write a monologue. As we spoke, I reassured her of my faith in her and her abilities. That Monday, Montannah came in to my class with one of the most touching and well written monologues of the entire class. She wrote about a painful and personal experience, having to put down her horse. Through this expression of emotion, her classmates were able to connect with her and offer her support. This is just one example of one opportunity for one child.

With the innumerable benefits for special needs students offered through the arts there is no excuse not to include broad arts education as a part of their curriculum.

Research: ADHD

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is recognized by the American Psychological Association as one of the most commonly diagnosed disorders in children. It is estimated that anywhere from 3-17 percent of school-aged children have ADHD that is diagnosable.

ADHD is described as a consistent pattern of behaviors including inattention, hyperactivity and impulsive behavior. According to Baren (2002) “Traditionally, the definition of ADHD includes disturbances of motor skills, academic performance and lack of impulse control ... deficits in quality of work, social interactions, organizing, listening and following directions contribute to educational impairment” (p. 125).

Most children diagnosed with ADHD begin to show signs before the age of seven and in some children, signs are noticeable as early as infancy. Some of these symptoms may include failure to

pay attention to details, trouble maintaining focus, difficulty following through on tasks like homework or household chores, avoidance of tasks that require sustained mental effort, such as homework or frequently losing items that are needed for tasks such as pencils, difficulty completing assignments or losing completed assignments.

Many of these symptoms overlap with those of attention deficit disorder (ADD) without the hyperactivity and impulsive behavioral aspects. Now, let us look at some of the symptoms that differentiate ADD from ADHD. Hyperactivity is often marked by an inability to sit still for any prolonged period of time or continual fidgeting when stillness is expected. Other symptoms may be excessive talking, running or climbing when not appropriate to be doing so, blurting out answers, difficulty waiting for her turn and interrupting or intruding on conversations or games.

Some studies imply that there is a gender-based difference in the occurrence of symptoms of ADHD. However there is no conclusive data that ADD or ADHD are more prevalent in either gender. Although ADHD is present from birth, some patients are diagnosed much later in life. Girls are often diagnosed later because they have a lower occurrence of disruptive behavior. Other groups with latent diagnoses may include gifted children or children with involved families and those who have developed social skills and coping methods.

Any of these symptoms can be experienced by any child periodically and it is important to consider whether a child is exhibiting persistent symptoms. ADHD is defined by prolonged symptoms that affect a child socially and academically. It also affects a child's abilities for time management, following directions, attention to detail, meeting deadlines and to complete writing assignments or take notes.

It is important to take the correct steps when diagnosing ADHD in children. Many incorrect diagnosis label children unnecessarily, while on the other hand many children with ADHD go undiagnosed. A parent may consider taking to a physician if a child exhibits symptoms that last for a prolonged period of time (e.g. six months). These symptoms may be brought to attention by a teacher or may cause social problems between a child and her peers or other adults. A pediatrician will be able to direct a parent to a specialist, who, through interviews with parents, teachers and the child, coupled with diagnostic tests, including IQ testing and psychological testing. This battery of testing allows a pediatrician or other qualified medical professional to gain a clearer picture of the child's situation and render a diagnosis. ADHD is often diagnosed simultaneously with several disorders including bi-polar disorder, anxiety, conduct disorder and oppositional-defiant disorder.

Treatments for ADHD may include medication, behavior therapy and regular evaluations by a physician. According to Baren (2002), "Long term studies have documented the persistence of ADHD symptoms into adolescence and adulthood. As many as 80% of children with ADHD continue to exhibit symptoms during adolescence, and 60% display symptoms during adulthood" (p. 125). Treatments and medications vary greatly depending on the symptoms and their severity and therefore a course of action is individualized for each patient by a medical professional.

Arts Education Benefits For Students with ADHD

Understanding and demonstrating the best practices of arts education for students with ADHD is a personal passion of mine. Personally, my ADHD was not diagnosed until the age of 19. Having grown up with this disorder, however undiagnosed, the arts were a large part of my success as a

student. It is now, as a teacher and as an adult with a better understanding of my own diagnosis, that I can fully appreciate the benefits I gained from the patience of my teachers and their encouragement to embrace the arts. My hope is that I may offer the same patience and encouragement to my own students. The following activities demonstrate the specific ways in which theater can be used to enhance the learning experience and general quality of life for individuals with ADHD.

ACTIVITY 1: Scripted Role Play: Role playing allows students to actively engage in specific given situations that mimic real-life, providing an active outlet for understanding their own thoughts, feelings and actions in a safe environment. This activity specifically aids children in their development of communication skills and behavior modification. These practices allow students to better their own understanding of social expectations, in turn improving their personal social interactions.

ACTIVITY 2: Improvisation: The act of improvising in a theatrical settings is the art of creating an on-going dialogue between actors, allowing for a forum in which students create a scene spontaneously in an imagined situation. This requires students to work in a collaborative setting, taking turns and actively listening and responding to one another. This act requires the students to not only comprehend the situation at hand, but to also synthesize the situation of their own volition, in order to reinforce the understanding and practice of correct social responses.

ACTIVITY 3: Performance: The act of performing in front of a classroom of peers allow a student to obtain positive reinforcement for the progress they have made. This form of theater allows a student to demonstrate the development of their social interaction skills, acceptable

behavioral adaptations and their talents for creative expression. In addition, this forum provides an opportunity for students to master these skills, allowing them to take pride in the progress they have made and create a sense of internal motivation for students to personally continue to use the arts as a form of expression.

All in all, these exercises share a common theme of educating and empowering children to make positive decisions in their lives on a regular basis. “For the child with special needs, drama provides an especially useful approach to acquiring appropriate means of social interaction while effectively enhancing underdeveloped verbal and non-verbal skills” (Hanson pg.39).

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