

ART THERAPY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

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Art therapists who are interested in working in the public schools might find it helpful to understand the special education system and how art therapy services can be utilized in a special education setting. A good place to start with is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a 1990 federal law (reauthorized in 1997 and again in 2004) that ensures a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to all youth regardless of ability. This act allows for the provision of special education services to address deficits or challenges that severely affect a student's classroom performance.

Students who are tested and qualified for special education services have demonstrated educational deficits or challenges in one or more of the following areas: autism, deaf/blind, deafness, hearing impaired, mentally challenged, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, serious emotional disturbance, specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment including blindness, and other health impairment. Due to the nature of these conditions and their adverse effect on the learning process, students who qualify for special education services are provided with an individualized education plan (IEP) to address their specific needs as they relate to the goals of an educational setting. Services that are recommended in a student's IEP both directly or indirectly strive to improve a student's classroom performance and are monitored by the service provider(s) and a committee to ensure that the student is making progress. Related services fall under this category in that they indirectly support a student's educational process by addressing problems that serve as barriers to it; in other words, these services relate to a student's academic performance.

Art therapy as a related service involves the provision of interventive assistance that addresses a particular student's qualifications for special education services (i.e., autism, emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, etc.) in order to promote the student's ability to function effectively in the classroom. Because a student is pulled from the classroom for art therapy sessions, art therapy as a related service is considered restrictive in that it restricts a student's instructional time. For that reason art therapy as a related service is reserved for special education students who are experiencing a long-standing issue that warrants intervention; special education students who are experiencing a short-term need are not appropriate referrals for art therapy as a related service. Before a committee can recommend art therapy as a related service, written parental or guardian consent must be obtained to evaluate the student for this service. The evaluation results yield treatment goals if a student qualifies for art therapy as a related service, and the evaluation and goals are reviewed with the referring committee and parents/guardians/student prior to formally recommending art therapy as a related service in the student's IEP.

Once a service has been formally recommended in the IEP, the school district must provide that service. This is true even if the student moves to a new district; the receiving district is legally required to implement the student's existing IEP until the new district has become familiar with the student and reevaluates/reassesses her or his needs. Student progress toward related service goals are monitored by the service provider at regular intervals and reviewed by a

committee at least once per year to determine their relevance to the student's overall performance. A student who has achieved her or his related services goals may be dismissed from that particular service via committee approval. Otherwise she or he must be reevaluated for that service at least once every three years in order to determine continued eligibility.

On the other hand, enrichment services are for special education students as a means of supplementing or enhancing their educational experience. Enrichment services are not IEP driven and thus do not require an evaluation process or the development and monitoring of treatment goals. However, it is advisable to obtain written parental/guardian consent for each student, as parents and guardians have a right to know—and to object—when a school district is offering an enrichment service to their children. Enrichment services generally are provided at the classroom level; the service provider works with the students as a group in their classroom rather than pulling them for individual or group sessions. As such, enrichment services are worked into the classroom schedule and curriculum. The focus of enrichment services is thus general to the class rather than specific for each student. Art therapy as an enrichment service can address issues that have been noted by the classroom teacher; thus it is a good idea to seek input and feedback from the teacher when proposing or refining session objectives.

Regardless of whether a student receives art therapy as a related service or as an enrichment service, the utmost reason behind the use of these services is the student's educational need. It is important for an art therapist going into a special education setting to be able to articulate this point to administrators, teachers, and parents/guardians. Doing so will facilitate understanding and acceptance of art therapy's applicability to the special education population and ultimately allow for more students to benefit from the important and unique contributions art therapy is well-suited to make in the world of public education. ■

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