

## **2011 NAEA Lowenfeld Lecture**

### **Art Education and Special Education: A Promising Partnership**

**Beverly Levett Gerber**

It is most humbling and gratifying to receive the Lowenfeld Award. As an art educator who also became a special educator, this Lowenfeld Award demonstrates NAEA's caring and educational responsibility for all our students. It validates what many have known for so long – that art education and special education can transform the lives of people with special needs.

Before I begin, I would like to thank Peter Geisser, President of our NAEA Special Needs Issues Group, for nominating me. I would also like to thank Judy Burton, my teacher and mentor, and Peter London, who are both recipients of the Lowenfeld Award, for their leadership, encouragement, and support.

My topic for the Lowenfeld lecture is near and dear to my heart - *Art Education and Special Education: A Promising Partnership*. Building bridges between art education and special education has long been an interest of mine because both find non-traditional ways to reach and teach each child. I believe a partnership between art educators and special educators is essential in the lives of our students. To demonstrate this, I will share some stories, describe how a partnership with special educators benefits art educators, and tell you about a home grown partnership.

#### **Art Education and Special Education: My Own Blend**

First, I'd like to share some of my own background and events that shaped my teaching. My undergraduate art education training was at Southern Connecticut State University. It was my son, Larry, who introduced me to special education. Later, when I became the first art education major to student teach at Southbury Training School, a residential school for people with special needs, I introduced our art education department to special education.

When Larry was born with Down syndrome, over 50 years ago, public school classes were not available for him. There were no federal laws that mandated special education programs for all children. When special education classes did begin for students like Larry, they were often in the basement, right next to the boiler room.

Through Larry, I have experienced the growth of special education. Special education was not always part of the educational framework. Special education slowly developed a *continuum* of educational choices – from the least restrictive public school classroom to separate classrooms in special education schools. A goal of special education was to place the child in the most appropriate educational setting, one that met his or her learning and behavior needs. In recent years, I have seen the continuum of placement options rapidly replaced by one with limited educational options.

Before teaching in the special education department at Southern, I taught elementary to high school age students in public and private day and residential schools. My students had many different special needs and they ranged in ability levels from students with severe mental retardation to students who were gifted. Many had multiple disabilities.

I received my doctorate at Teachers College, Columbia University where I was privileged to study with Judy Burton in Art Education and Leonard Blackman in Special Education. My graduate work and professional background have combined art education and special education and they are a comfortable blend for me. Both fields try to focus on students' abilities and to find creative ways around students' limitations. I have learned from the students and teachers in art education and special education.

### **Viktor Lowenfeld: My First Teacher of Special Education.**

I never met Viktor Lowenfeld, yet he became my first teacher of special education. His third edition of *Creative & Mental Growth* was my educational bible while student teaching at Southbury. Lowenfeld wrote, "To start on the level of the individual is indeed an educational principle which should always be kept in mind" (p. 437). The stages of

development and sample drawings in *Creative & Mental Growth* helped me understand the *actual* functioning levels of my students at Southbury Training School. I saw that the students' drawings were better indicators of their current educational levels than information about their chronological ages or grade levels. I later learned that, in special education, those levels were called the child's "mental age."

Lowenfeld's teachings have shaped my special education beliefs then and today. For example, I am vehemently opposed to a "one size fits all" teaching approach that fits no one. I disagree with high stakes testing that only frustrates and demoralizes students with special needs. I believe that a child's own learning and behavioral needs should determine the most appropriate educational program, pace, and setting.

Lowenfeld's 1957 wisdom about student evaluations resonates today.

. . . These "standards," well known to classroom teachers, encourage the child who lacks confidence in his own work to copy the preferred one. Unable to compete with it he will give up his work. The result of such practices is discouragement, lack of confidence and inhibition of the one group and a go-ahead signal to a selected few. This is in contradiction to any basic philosophy which intends to help the child in his creative and mental growth (p. 44).

Viktor Lowenfeld shaped my special education teaching from the very beginning. I learned to plan my teaching based on the educational needs of the students. I learned that each student was different and did not match all the characteristics of a category. I learned that I could reach and teach students who had a variety of learning differences through open-ended art lessons that had no "right" or "wrong" outcome. And conversely, I learned that behavior problems were easily created by closed-ended art lessons. These valued lessons have remained at the core of my teaching. Thank you, Viktor Lowenfeld.

### **Art Education and Special Education: A Promising Partnership**

I would like to focus now on my topic, *Art Education and Special Education: A Promising Partnership*, and my reasons for choosing it. A partnership between art educators and special educators is needed today to combat a “one size fits all” approach to education. Test-driven schools and classrooms just frustrate students who learn differently and only draw attention to those learning differences. When general education teachers and typical students are stressed, students with special needs face even more anxiety and more potential failure. Art education is different. Learning differences are not a negative – in fact, they generate more creative possibilities.

Studio art lessons have encouraged individual creativity and problem solving and allowed students to tell their own stories through art. Art is relevant to them. Children (and adults) learn best when a subject is relevant to them. Art teachers have provided a personal and educational oasis for students with special needs for as long as art teachers have been teaching. Moreover, art education reached students with special needs before federal special education laws were passed in 1975 and long before we heard the words “mainstreaming” and “inclusion.”

Art educators have long been the unsung heroes for students with special needs. To verify this, I’d like to share some stories about famous artists whose studio art experiences transformed their lives. Art helped them survive the demands of a school curriculum that all but ignored their individual learning needs.

### **Dale Chihuly and Paul J. Stankard**

When you think of glass art, it is natural to think of Seattle, the city for our NAEA National Convention. I would like to tell you about a glass artist. . . . No, not that one, although Dale Chihuly’s talents have established the Seattle area as an international center for innovative glass art. In fact, Chihuly, once among the “temporarily-abled,” continually demonstrates that a vision disability, due to an accident, requires adaptations and modifications but does not stop his prolific creativity.

Here in Seattle, we are surrounded by his glass innovations and those of students he has inspired. Chihuly's glass sculptures vary in size and shape from small basket-like forms to huge, multi-piece constructions. They provide stunning visual focal points in railroad station rotundas, among arboretum floral displays, suspended from museum ceilings and underfoot below glass floors, and, in temporary displays that forever change one's views, over Venetian canals. Some of Chihuly's displays contain hundreds of glass pieces and require the careful assembly of his associates and staff. The loss of his binocular vision has redirected, but not impeded Chihuly's imaginative vision and prodigious creativity.

I would like to describe another glass artist who lives on the east coast, in Mantua, New Jersey. Paul J. Stankard is a flameworker who creates tiny, super-realistic glass sculptures using a torch and rods of glass. He has "always been attracted to native flowers" and intricately recreates and combines their forms into life-like roses, berries, pinecones, prickly weeds, beetles or honeybees in his small sculptures, "suspended" in the center of crystal glass cubes. For Stankard,

Glass has color, translucence. I can work it . . . , shape it . . . I love how mysterious it is. . . . I enjoy taking colored glasses and adding all sorts of visual detail to the material, overlapping and mixing, so that when I sculpt it out, there's a lot of visual complexity in a blossom.

Stankard's sculptures require a very close look to see how all the glass parts fit and work together. When you take a closer look, more unfolds - the realistic-looking plant root systems often contain human figures in a variety of poses. Stankard describes his figures as "referencing sex, spirituality, life cycles, and death." There is much more to see and interpret - Stankard has captured the viewer. Paul Stankard drew my attention for another reason, one he remembers from his school years.

I was a poor student. I went to school as an undiagnosed dyslexic. I actually graduated at the bottom of my class. I can remember coming home from Pippin High School and I had a brochure from Salem Community College. They were

offering scientific glass blowing.

I saw the kids at Salem standing in front of torches bending tubing and I thought, ‘Wow! That looks fantastic!’ I sensed as a student that I was embarking on something exciting.

As a kid, not being able to read, failing school, just having a constant struggle, this [flameworking] has defined my sense of self-worth (2009, PBS).

Jean Lokerson, a special educator, and Amelia Joynes, an art educator, wrote (2006): “Students with learning disabilities can be outstanding and unique members of an art class. They often demonstrate high levels of artistic creativity and an eagerness to perform. The art room is a place where learning disabilities can turn into learning assets.”

### **Chuck Close and Robert Rauschenberg**

School experiences affected other artists, too. Chuck Close and Robert Rauschenberg described their own learning disabilities, undiagnosed during their school years, and spoke of the importance of art education in their lives. Both artists attended school before our national law P.L. 94-142 brought special education laws into the schools in 1975.

Chuck Close learned about his learning disabilities during a school conference about his daughter. In fact, he has “suffered from various learning and physical disabilities, including face blindness, medically known as Prosopagnosia. While it seems that Close would avoid painting faces, he shared that he is “absolutely positive that he is driven to make them.” Close described his drive to “build” portraits from 2-dimensional photographs of his subjects. He reflected that a viewer scanning his portraits follows a process similar to the one he uses when painting and calls a “seeing journey.”

Close found refuge in art and eventually graduated from Yale Graduate School of Art. Noting the importance of art and music in his school experiences, Close shared, “If I hadn’t had exposure to art and music and something that I could excel at, and something that I could feel good about – I always said, if I hadn’t gone to Yale, I could have gone to jail” (PBS, 2010).

Like Close, Robert Rauschenberg's dyslexia was not diagnosed during his school years. In an interview for LD Online (2010), a national website about learning disabilities, Rauschenberg shared that his reading problems caused him great difficulty in school. "I was considered slow. While my classmates were reading their textbooks, I drew in the margins." Rauschenberg turned his reading disability into his unique style of painting, often misspelling words, using palindromes, or combining two and three-dimensions in his art.

Rauschenberg's dyslexia actually helps him in his art. He likes to create prints that combine several different pictures. He stated, "I got hooked. Also, because I am dyslexic, I was very good at the print workshop economically, because I can see backwards and forwards at the same time. I don't have to proof it, I can already see it."

Robert Rauschenberg's learning disabilities led to a close collaboration with Sally Smith and the Lab School in Washington, D.C. Rauschenberg's Foundation, now led by his son, teamed with Sally Smith and offers training each summer to a group of art educators to help them understand the power of art in the education of students with learning disabilities.

### **Sally L. Smith and the Lab School**

Sally Smith, the parent of a son with learning disabilities, founded the Lab School, an arts-based school for students with learning disabilities in 1967. It was not unusual for parents to begin a school or program for students with special needs, but this school was and still is unique in its approach to teaching - the arts are central to the Lab School's curriculum. Sally Smith (1979) described the value of the arts for students with learning disabilities.

. . . The arts lend themselves to the imaginative use of concrete materials and experiences to teach abstract ideas. Neural immaturity makes it very hard for the learning disabled child to grasp abstractions. He has to be introduced to them

through his body, through objects and pictures, and then through symbols. The arts offer opportunities to strengthen visual, auditory, tactile, and motor areas. Through the arts, a child can order his world, make sense of what he knows, relate past experience to the present, and turn muscular activity into thought and ideas into action (p. 130).

None of the artists described above had access to a school like the Lab School. Special education was not federally mandated when these artists were children. Sadly, the Lab School is still a unique school in this country. To my knowledge, there is only one other school, the Port Phillip Specialist School in Melbourne, Australia, that focuses on the arts to teach students with special needs.

Artists Stankard, Close, and Rauschenberg all managed to work around their disabilities and to develop their own accommodations. As they did so, they also invented their unique styles and creations. There are no statistics to tell us how many other students with special needs survived their school years because of their art classes.

Lowenfeld challenged us to provide opportunities for all our students to feel special. Their opportunities should not be limited to “Yale or jail.” In 1957, Lowenfeld wrote:

It is one of my deepest innermost convictions that wherever there is a spark of human spirit-no matter how dim it may be-it is our sacred responsibility as humans, teachers, and educators to fan it into whatever flame it conceivably may develop. I venture to say that the ethical standard of a society can be measured by its relationships to the handicapped. We as human beings have no right whatsoever to determine where to stop in our endeavors to use all our power to develop the uppermost potential abilities in each individual (p. 430).

Chuck Close adds, “Especially for those of us who are learning disabled or for those of us who learn differently . . . we had a chance to feel special. Every child should have the chance to feel special (PBS, 2010).



## **A Beneficial Partnership**

We already have exemplars of educators working together. Their students are the beneficiaries. Adrienne Hunter (Hunter & Johns, 2006), an art educator and special educator of students with severe social and emotional problems, worked with her history and language arts department colleagues to develop a unit on the WPA. They also involved senior citizens who shared their depression era experiences and university students who videotaped them.

Hunter's belief that, "Art should be meaningful" was demonstrated in another collaborative unit. This time Hunter and a science teacher integrated science and art to teach color and visual illusion. Their students incorporated both in the quilt they designed and completed (this alone can be an achievement). Then, students diagnosed with severe social and emotional problems donated their quilt to a child with AIDS (p. 53).

Is a partnership between art educators and special educators needed? Yes! A working partnership like Hunter's and her general education colleagues benefits everyone. Both professional fields have much to share with each other. Here are some of the reasons a partnership benefits art educators.

### **Information about Special Education Laws and Art Teachers' Rights**

Many art teachers are unaware of their rights to special education information and classroom supports. Beverley Johns (Hunter & Johns, 2006), a special education administrator, describes some of those rights. Johns focuses on students with social and/or emotional problems, but this information applies across all areas of special needs

All who teach students with emotional and/or behavior disorders have the right to have these students identified to them and to access information about them. As an art teacher, you have the right to have a copy of the student's IEP and the right to be given as much information as possible to enable you to provide a student

with an appropriate education within your classroom. . . . If there are accommodations or modifications to be made for a student, teachers have the right to know what they are and to be provided with assistance (support) to make those accommodations or modifications (p. 48).

### **In-service Professional Development Training**

Art administrators seeking in-service training about students with special needs need look no farther than their own school or district. Experienced special educators already present in-service training for district professional days. Special education supervisors can recommend those teachers with expertise in different area of special education. Their topics can include behavior management, specific learning strategies, student pairing, autism spectrum disorders, and contributing to the IEP. In-service collaborations are natural bridges between art and special education teaching staffs.

### **Information That Can Make Your Day**

Classroom teachers who drop their students off at the art room and disappear have established a whole category of horror stories. In contrast, a special education partner who shares timely information can improve everyone's lives. For example, an art educator informed of a student's meltdown in a previous class, or that a student had a bad day at home or on the bus, can head off potential problems and provide additional support. Information that prevents a behavioral outburst makes everyone's day.

Sharing information about a student's positive behavior, special interests, or talents can bring a student the helpful attention that may be lacking in other classrooms. A partnership between art educators and special educators - working together, planning together, and sharing information with each other - can prevent the negative experiences described by Chuck Close, Robert Rauschenberg, and Paul Stankard.

### **Guidelines for Paraeducators (Paraprofessionals)**

Many art teachers have paraeducators (paraprofessionals) in their classrooms, but may be unaware of their roles, responsibilities, and the national guidelines for both. There is no

need to reinvent the wheel! Art teachers already have partners in Doris Guay, an art educator, and Kent Gerlach, a special educator. They have combined their experience and perspectives to bring role descriptions, recommendations, practical suggestions, and national guidelines for working with paraprofessionals to the art teacher (Guay, 2010, Guay & Gerlach, 2006).

### **Parents as Art Partners and Advocates**

Don't underestimate the power of parents. Special education schools and laws began with the parents of students with special needs. Parents are still establishing new schools and programs, particularly for students on the autism spectrum (CEC SmartBrief). Working with parents, special educators have gained considerable community support (Gerber, 2010, 2006). Parents are the strongest advocates for the education of their children. In these times of financial stress, art teachers can only benefit from this partnership.

Special education and art education teachers are shaped by their experiences. There is no instant magic pill or quickie course that can teach about students with special needs. The teaching experiences themselves become the best training program (Gerber, 2009). There are endless possibilities for partnering with your special education colleague/s. Email our NAEA Special Needs Issues Group and tell us about your own partnership experiences. Let's share those ideas.

### **A Homegrown Partnership**

Thirteen years ago, an art professor, a state education consultant, an administrator, an adaptive art specialist, an art teacher of the deaf, and a special education professor formed a partnership at NAEA. Barb Suplee, MaryLou Dallam, Jan Fedorenko, Sue Loesl, Peter Geisser, and I wanted to create a special needs issues group. We wanted to learn how our colleagues were teaching and managing students with special needs in their art rooms and to share that information with others. We collected signatures at other presentations, in hallways, in the NAEA exhibition hall, and at the Binney & Smith reception. For two years, it was hard not to meet someone from our small group carrying those petitions.

With the support of NAEA's Eastern Region, the Delegates Assembly, and the NAEA Board of Directors, an NAEA Special Needs Issues Group was established at the 2000 NAEA convention. The Special Needs Issues Group (SNAE) now provides presentations, meetings, and a chance to interact with colleagues during NAEA annual conventions.

In just over ten years, the Special Needs Issues Group has grown from 6 members to over 600 members and includes representatives from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the American Art Therapy Association, and Very Special Arts. We also addressed art educators' requests for information about teaching practices and classroom management strategies and for information about students on the autism spectrum.

*Reaching and Teaching Students with Special Needs through Art*, published by NAEA in 2006 is a collaboratively written textbook by leading art educators and special educators from NAEA and CEC. *Reaching and Teaching* brings over 500 years of professional experience to readers. *Understanding Students with Autism through Art*, published by NAEA in 2010, was written in response to art educators' requests for information about autism. It is a collaboration between art educators, special educators, museum educators, and a neuroscientist. Members of the Special Needs Issues Group were contributing authors to both and both books represent groundbreaking, tangible evidence of professional partnerships. Marilyn Friend, describes one aspect of collaboration as follows (Friend & Cook, 2010), "In collaboration, participants know that their strengths can be maximized, their weaknesses minimized, and the result will be better for all (p. 22)."

To recognize outstanding art educators who work with students with special needs, two national awards were established. Both awards recognize the recipients' commitment to art education's important role in the lives of people with special needs. The Special Needs Outstanding Art Educator Award and the Special Needs Lifetime Achievement Awards are recognized by three national organizations, NAEA, CEC, and VSA.

The NAEA Special Needs Issues Group has become both a voice and a forum for the special education concerns of art educators. It continues to interface with related professional organizations and provides special education information both to our members and the NAEA membership at large through the “Special Needs” column in *NAEA news* and its own website.

Another step in our partnership with CEC is just beginning. I am happy to announce that the Council for Exceptional Children will include an “Arts and Special Education” category in the CEC 2012 convention “Call for Papers” form. It also calls for a shout out of thanks to Marilyn Friend, CEC’s President, Anmarie Kallas, CEC Conventions and Conferences Director, and Lynn and Doug Fuchs, Chairpersons of CEC’s Program Advisory Committee. This new arts category topic area will bring arts representation to the CEC Program Committee and encourage those who teach art, music, theatre, and dance to special populations to present their work. And, as we did at NAEA national conventions, they will meet others who combine special education and the arts.

### **A Partnership Reality Check**

It is not surprising that a partnership and professional collaboration has not happened on a wider scale. Stuart Gerber (2006) reminds us that:

Art teachers are still Lone Rangers outside the collaborative round-up, even in settings where special educators and classroom teachers plan, instruct, and team together. The collaborative process should link up a chain of activities from sharing observations, ideas, and materials, to co-planning and co-teaching. The isolation of art teachers is unfortunate at a time when education writers and organizations consistently advocate collaboration (161).

In these times of philosophical and budgetary calamities, a partnership between art educators and special educators can benefit both. Yet, building a partnership with your special education colleagues will not be easy. It will take more time and energy than you

could ever have predicted. It will take much longer than expected and there will be unanticipated complications and roadblocks.

I can promise that there will be more problems than anticipated. It may even help to expect that, when everything seems headed in the right direction, watch out! Someone (or two) will throw a monkey wrench into the mix. Don't let them sidetrack you! Staying the same only maintains the "same old, same old." The "same old, same old" should never refer to art education! Time and energy constraints can be formidable obstacles, but the payoff for you, your students and your colleagues can be enormous.

I would like to share a favorite story of mine that helps me when the odds seem insurmountable. This story is about Dr. David Crespi, a wonderful teacher, friend, and mentor at Southern Connecticut State University. As one of his students, I recall a time when David's ceramics program desperately needed another pottery wheel. When he tried to order the wheel, he was told that there was NO money available for any new equipment. However, he found out that money was available for replacement parts. So . . . , he ordered separate replacement parts and built a new pottery wheel. The lesson I learned was – Don't accept "No" for an answer. There's usually a creative way to get around an obstacle (NAEA, 2010).

Art education for students with special needs is filled with "No's" – "No money, no time, no space, no materials, sorry – never done that before." Special education taught me the value of working with others. Parents and professional groups working together got special education laws passed and educational programs established. They demonstrated that one voice can be ignored, but many caring voices can be heard. Together, art educators and special educators can be a powerful voice.

I'll give Chuck Close the last word. He reminds us, "If you hang in there, you will get somewhere."

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