

Integrating People Experiencing Disabilities into Community Arts Events:

Model Projects and Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

People experiencing disabilities, and their advocates, are actively demanding the right to live, work, and recreate in integrated and normalized community settings. Community based art education events will be impacted by this in-process civil rights movement. This article focuses on the means through which art educators can make community art events accessible to people experiencing disabilities. Segregated community events, like the Very Special Arts Festivals, are discussed as they are able to accommodate community integration. Guidelines for creating barrier-free environments are included.

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People experiencing disabilities, and their advocates, are actively demanding the right to live, work, and recreate in integrated and normalized community settings.¹ Evidence of this could be seen during the months preceding the passage of the civil rights legislation known as the "Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990" as tens of thousands of people with disabilities and their advocates converged on Washington, D.C. to lobby and demonstrate for the passage of this public law. The demand for community integration is being supported in special education literature, community forums, human service agencies, and in all branches of local, state, and national government. Representatives of the forty-three million Americans experiencing auditory, visual, communication, emotional, behavioral, intellectual and health-related disabilities are insisting that support services be made available so that this constituency can participate in the widest possible range of integrated and normalized community activities. It is likely that the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 will provide the legal means through which this aspiration can be realized. This legislation is designed to encourage community integration by protecting people with disabilities from being discriminated against in terms of equal access to housing, transportation, communication services, employment, and public and private buildings. This act assumes that disability is not necessarily inherent in people but is more likely due to human-made environments that are physically and programmatically inaccessible by design.

Art education will be profoundly affected by this in-process civil rights movement. The buildings in which we provide services, the curricula that we write, the art activities that we design, the teaching methods that we use, and the arts events that we organize will need to be physically and programmatically congruent with the wishes, aspirations, and abilities of children, youth, and adults experiencing disabilities. A three-year study by Schleien, Rynders, and Mustonen (1988) of

community recreation and art opportunities for people with disabilities confirms that the responsibility for making arts programs accessible rests, to a great extent, with art educators and other arts service providers.

The purpose of this article will be to focus on the means through which art educators can make community-based arts events, with an arts education orientation, accessible to people experiencing disabilities. We will speculate on how segregated community arts events such as the "Very Special Arts Festivals" (VSAF) can be used to accommodate this purpose. Our position will be that segregated events are counter-productive to the current disability rights movement and should be eliminated in favor of integrated events. We recognize the important contribution that VSAFs have made to creating barrier-free² arts education environments and recommend that their elimination be achieved by merging them with appropriate existing community events. Guidelines for this endeavor will be presented in the context of the merger of the Eugene, Oregon VSAF with the Eugene Imagination Celebration in the Spring of 1989 and the ongoing integration of Central Florida Very Special Arts Programs with other festivals and community organizations in the area.

Very Special Arts and Very Special Arts Festivals

Very Special Arts (VSA) was founded in 1974 by Jean Kennedy Smith. The United States Congress has directed this educational affiliate of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts to coordinate arts programs for people experiencing disabilities within the United States. Promotional materials from VSA indicate that VSA-sponsored events take place in fifteen thousand communities in the United States and in fifty countries throughout the world (Very Special Arts, n.d.). More than one million people are reportedly served by VSA-sponsored programs (Very Special Arts Education Office, n.d.). VSA, in response to its congressional mandate, has developed several strategies for meeting its goals. These include the sponsorship of international programs, the development of workshops and resource materials, special projects involving arts and human

service organizations, and VSAFs. VSA is governed by a Board of Directors that includes, or has included, such notable individuals as Vivienne Anderson, Ernest Boyer, Romare Bearden, George Will, and Itzhak Perlman. People experiencing disabilities or the parents of children with disabilities are represented on the Board.

VSA considers the VSAF program to be an important component of its on-going public relations and arts education program. VSAFs are intended to promote the value of arts programming for children, youth, and adults with disabilities to the general public as they simultaneously provide an environment in which people experiencing disabilities can learn about the arts and display their accomplishments. VSAFs are described by VSA as "non-competitive forums" in which people experiencing disabilities can "celebrate and share creative accomplishments" (Very Special Arts Education Office, n.d., p. 2). VSA reports that 650 VSAFs are held across the United States. Many states host multiple local and regional festivals. These festivals are designed to "eloquently express the full range of year-round 'Very Special Arts activities'" (Very Special Arts Education Office, n.d., p. 2). Art educators from school districts across the country submit student work and donate time to these festivals.

VSA can be commended for its advocacy on behalf of people experiencing disabilities. Its work to provide workshops and resource materials may provide much of the necessary information that allows arts educators to serve children, youth, and adults with disabilities in integrated and barrier-free settings. However, the VSAF program, as it now exists in most places, does not provide arts programs to people experiencing disabilities in integrated and normalized settings. As such, VSAFs in their present form cannot be considered adequate or appropriate models for providing integrated arts education programs. VSA is not alone in its promotion of segregated events. The Special Olympics program is currently being criticized for its inability to provide for integration. It has been suggested that this program may encourage negative perceptions of people experiencing disabilities among the general population (Rice & Fleck, 1988; Roper, 1990; Storey, Stern & Parker, 1990). Like the

Special Olympics, VSAFs tend to put people with disabilities on public display with an emphasis on the fact that they are experiencing a disability. Although people not experiencing disabilities attend VSAFs, they do so primarily as spectators or facilitators. In addition, the ratio of people experiencing disabilities to those who are not is far from the naturally occurring ratio. Attendees not experiencing disabilities are in many cases in a "helping relationship" to those participants experiencing disabilities. People not experiencing disabilities do not typically participate to any great extent in festival exhibitions. Additionally, the use of the word "special" in the festival's title is problematic as it is incongruent with the recommendations on the use of labeling by disability rights groups. It is generally recommended that the term "special" not be used to describe people with disabilities. It should only be used when describing what is "different or uncommon about *any* person" (The Research and Training Center on Independent Living, 1984, p. 4). Given these attributes, there is the possibility that, like the Special Olympics, VSAFs may also be influencing the development of some negative perceptions of people with disabilities.

Given the current goals of the disability rights movement, the dictates of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the possibility that VSAFs in their present form are contributing to negative perceptions of people experiencing disabilities, it seems necessary that other options be explored. There is a growing body of research that clearly demonstrates that individuals experiencing even the severest of disabilities can be integrated into community arts and recreation programs. These studies also suggest that this integration positively influences perceptions of people experiencing disabilities by members of the general population. (Ray, Schleien, Larson, Rutten, & Slick, 1986; Schleien, Krotee, Mustonen, Kelterborn, & Schermer, 1987; Schleien, Soderman-Olson, Ray, & McMahon, 1987). While we acknowledge the important contribution that VSAFs may have once made in attracting attention to the arts abilities of people with disabilities, we believe that VSAFs now need to be merged with existing community arts festivals. Two models for this possibility follow.

Eugene, Oregon 1989 VSAF/Imagination Celebration Merger

Beginning in 1983, VSAF-Eugene has shared the same festival dates and facilities with the Eugene Imagination Celebration (EIC). Although facilities were shared, the two festivals remained distinct. This occurred because not all facilities shared were accessible to people experiencing mobility, auditory, and visual disabilities. Promotion was handled separately, performances were labeled VSAF or EIC, and artists exhibiting and performing as part of the VSAF were labeled "disabled." Planning committees for each festival were different. The VSAF included programming for adults; the EIC did not.

For the 1989 VSAF/EIC Festivals, it was decided by EIC and VSAF organizers to determine if participants experiencing disabilities could be more effectively integrated into EIC events by diminishing the distinctions between the two festivals. It was anticipated that VSAF funding could be used to support EIC goals and objectives. It was decided that the festival would be children and youth centered and that the title, "VSAF," would be greatly de-emphasized in favor of EIC. The EIC included Doug Blandy on its advisory board as an advisor on art education and people experiencing disabilities. Linna Muschlitz was the local VSAF consultant.³ In turn, the EIC agreed to include performers and artists experiencing disabilities in its schedule of events without drawing attention to their disabilities. All facilities connected with the EIC would be made as barrier-free as possible. The site of the festival would be evaluated for its success in this area, and recommendations to future EIC coordinators would be made. In addition, the EIC would include a volunteer advisory panel of people experiencing disabilities to work with festival organizers in creating a barrier-free environment. Festival promotion was handled by the EIC with input from Blandy and Muschlitz.

As in years past, the 1989 EIC was held in and around Eugene's Hult Center for the Performing Arts. This center houses two theaters, a large public meeting room, a visual arts gallery, a large lobby space, and an outdoor plaza. An elevator and rest

rooms are accessible to people with mobility impairments. As anticipated, the 1989 EIC included performers and exhibitors experiencing disabilities. As was recommended, the fact that these artists experienced disabilities was not promoted by festival organizers. The festival site was made accessible to participants with disabilities by using *The Arts and 504 Guidelines* (National Endowment for the Arts, n.d.) to design the exhibits of artwork and the preparation of explanatory materials. This included the use of audio tapes, Braille, and large print. A Braille map of the EIC was available at the information center. Furniture and other obstacles were removed from common areas, interactive art activities were barrier-free, American Sign Language interpreters were available at performances, routes for people using wheelchairs were clearly marked, and festival signage was in large print, Braille, and raised pictographs. These modifications were guided by an advisory panel of adults experiencing mobility, auditory, visual, and/or learning disabilities. All performers were advised that the EIC audience would be composed of children and youth with disabilities and that performance formats should be adjusted according to recommendations from *The Arts and 504* and the advisory panel. In addition to its established methods of promotion, EIC organizers also sent promotional materials to all local special education teachers and to selected agencies and organizations serving children and youth experiencing disabilities.

Coordinators of the EIC, planning committee members and the advisory panel of people experiencing disabilities concluded that the EIC/VSAF merger was a success. Disability was de-emphasized in favor of a festival that was to a great extent accessible to all children and youth in the local community. The festival site was modified so that participants experiencing disabilities could enjoy a largely barrier-free environment. However, questions did arise concerning the number of modifications needed to make the Hult Center accessible. Some organizers suggested that future EICs be held elsewhere. It is impossible to state the numbers of children and youth experiencing disabilities who attended. To have conducted a census at the festival site was seen by EIC and VSAF organizers as an infringement on the personal rights of all of those attending. Festival organizers were aware, however, that promotional materials did reach people with disabilities and that several organizations and institutions

serving these people did facilitate attendance of some of their members. Festival coordinators did observe numerous members of the local community who experience disabilities at the EIC. However, disabilities are rarely identifiable by sight, so it was impossible to judge the ratio of people experiencing disabilities to people not experiencing disabilities. Some disabilities ceased to matter, because of the environmental accessibility achieved by EIC coordinators and planners.

Two noteworthy problems were encountered by EIC coordinators. It was determined that publicity efforts did not reach all potential participants. The advisory panel indicated that networks of distribution were not efficient or successful in reaching all advocacy groups or individuals with disabilities. This panel also concluded that more personal contact between EIC coordinators and potential participants prior to the event would have insured more significant members of attendees with disabilities. In addition, EIC coordinators discovered that perceptions of environments that are accessible vary. It was not uncommon to encounter administrators who claimed that their sites or programs were accessible. However, after analysis, these sites or programs were found to be inaccessible. Claims of accessibility could not be relied upon. Some last minute less than adequate alterations had to be initiated.

Central Florida VSA

In 1989 Kristin Congdon joined the Central Florida VSA committee, which is coordinated through Crealde Arts, Inc., an art school in Winter Park, a nearby suburb of Orlando. Karen Branen became a VSA member shortly thereafter. Traditionally, this VSA program had held teacher workshops and coordinated a large spring or early summer festival which was basically a segregated event. In recent years, the festival had taken place in the Education Building on the University of Central Florida campus during the University's spring break. Children and youth were bussed in from three county areas, and approximately 1,000 to 1,500 participants in special education classes engaged in art workshops and performance activities. An exhibit of their work was displayed on the day of the event.

The Central Florida VSA committee was not satisfied with this arrangement and in early 1990 decided that a major refocusing effort was needed. The committee wanted the exhibitions to be integrated, not only with the work of people not experiencing disabilities, but integrated into the community where it could be seen by the general public for longer periods than one day. The committee also agreed that the festival workshops needed to be more actively educational and age appropriate. It was ultimately decided that a segregated event at the University of Central Florida, or at any location was not acceptable. Because of Florida's wonderful weather, its engaging landscape and its citizens' pervasive interests in the arts, festivals are commonplace. It was clear that the community festival resources currently available had not been adequately explored. Consequently, the VSA committee set three goals: 1) Four festivals were identified for modification to make them more accessible to all people. 2) A new, integrated festival would be created at the University of Central Florida in the art studio areas. This festival would be smaller (400 to 425 students) than previous years. It would focus (for the one year) on junior high and high school children with age appropriate workshop activities designed to give the young adults new and art educationally meaningful experiences. 3) Exhibits would be planned that would be more fully integrated in regard to both population and space.

Existing festivals in the area were evaluated by the VSA committee in order to determine if they were accessible to people experiencing disabilities and if they would be possible events for VSAF integration. Of the already existing arts festivals and area events one was already found to be mainstreamed and generally barrier-free to everyone. This event is the Winter Park Sidewalk Art Festival (WPSAF). Beginning in 1960, the WPSAF has become one of the top outdoor art festivals in the United States. The emphasis is on art and artists. Over the years many artists juried into the art show associated with this festival have been artists experiencing disabilities. School art exhibits have been a part of every festival growing to over 120 participating schools in Orange County. In 1973, an interactive area was incorporated into the festival for all children from 5 to 12 years of age. Volunteers are available to help children who need individualized attention.

A similar festival design is now implemented at Winter Parks Autumn Art Festival. This festival and the children's events associated with the festival are publicized as welcoming individuals with disabilities. Individualized arrangements, if necessary, can be made by contacting one of the coordinating organizations.

The Community Coordinated Child Care (4-C) Children's Festival takes place in an area that is barrier-free. However, it traditionally has not offered an art educational component. They have now welcomed the cooperation of Central Florida's VSA into their event. VSA is now part of the 4-C planning committee and is responsible for an area which invites all festival visitors to participate in workshops and enjoy performances. The 4-C festival focuses on families and children under 12. Consequently, VSA programming has also been directed to this population.

Central Florida's VSA also hosted a mainstreamed festival for middle and high school students at the University of Central Florida's art studios in March 1991. All activities were age appropriate, and educationally challenging for all participants. The National Theatre for the Deaf gave a presentation for all students who attended.

Efforts have also been made in Central Florida to move art work by people experiencing disabilities out into the community in a normalized, integrated manner. In this spirit, the University of Central Florida Community Arts Program coordinated an exhibit that would include art works by students experiencing disabilities who are placed in "regular" art classes. The exhibit was titled, "Challenged: Problem Solving in the Visual Arts" and was co-sponsored by Rollins College and the City of Winter Park. It was decided by the Community Arts Program that VSA sponsorship would not be used because of the word "special" in the name of this potential sponsor. The use of this label was thought to be an infringement on the rights of the students as well as being unnecessary. The feedback from the community on this exhibit was very positive.

Central Florida's committee's goals to work towards more integrative arts programming has not always progressed

smoothly and without conflict. National and state VSA guidelines are being stretched and program reporting is increasingly more difficult. There is concern by the national and state offices over numbers, identification of people served and utilizing the VSA logo. The local committee is being asked if it is not spreading itself too thin amongst festivals and consequently losing effectiveness in terms of national VSA goals. What had been set up with some efficiency for years, is now being reconstructed and questioned. Central Florida VSA's new direction takes more time, more effort, more debate and greater community support.

Since the writing of this article, there have been changes in the Central Florida VSA. The sponsorship of the program has been changed to another group and the program has reverted back, in some ways, to its traditional format. The terminology used is once again debilitating and quotas are being carefully observed. Several members of last year's VSA committee have redirected their mainstreaming efforts by working within other organizational structures. We have been fortunate that the Arts Services Council of Central Florida, Inc. has theoretically embraced the normalization goals we have outlined here. But theory and practice, as we all know, often do not meet. In years of recession, creating massive changes in the ways that people coordinate arts programs may be slow and difficult. Still, we are hopeful that the efforts which have begun in Central Florida will not be lost.

Guidelines for Integrating Community Arts Events

The success of the VSA organizations in Eugene, Oregon and Central Florida in merging their festivals and activities with existing community arts events suggests guidelines that art educators can use to integrate other existing community arts events. These guidelines can also function to integrate school-based arts events. Art educators establishing new community or school arts events should consider the following:

1. Arts events organizers should establish an advisory board of people experiencing disabilities to consult

with on planning. In addition, all planning committees and organizational staff should include people with disabilities. The inclusion of such individuals will help to insure the creation of barrier-free environments.

2. People experiencing disabilities will not necessarily assume that a community arts event is accessible to them. Their experience in the community may be the opposite. For this reason, it is important to advertise and promote a community arts event as being environmentally and programmatically barrier-free if it is so. In this way, people with disabilities will feel welcome.

3. Evaluate proposed community arts events sites for their accessibility prior to selection. The National Endowment for the Arts' *The Arts and 504* (n.d.) and organizations such as the National Rehabilitation Association can help to determine if a site is barrier-free. In addition, an advisory board of people experiencing disabilities can also be useful for this purpose. This board can travel to the site and make suggestions on needed changes.

4. All community arts events should include artists and performers who are experiencing disabilities. However, it is not recommended that they be promoted as such. To do so denigrates their abilities and communicates tokenism.

5. Community arts events should include volunteers who are experiencing disabilities. These volunteers can be recruited through local disability rights advocacy groups. The presence of such volunteers should not be promoted as in any way special but should occur as a matter of course.

6. All event information should be available in large print and Braille formats. In addition, sign language

interpreters should be available at all events. Information available in these formats helps to insure that people experiencing disabilities feel welcome and communicates to people not experiencing disabilities the "normalcy" of such forms of communication.

7. Promotional materials should be sent to organizations and institutions that serve children, youth, and adults with disabilities. Event organizers cannot assume that their regular methods of promotion reach this constituency.

8. Visual art that can be touched should be included. This will be appreciated by all participants, including those experiencing visual disabilities.

9. All staff, volunteers, and art educators should be prepared to work with participants experiencing disabilities. *A Part of Your General Public is Disabled* (Majewski, 1987), a guide developed for the Smithsonian Institution docent program, is an excellent resource in this regard. Orientation sessions may be warranted in which all event personnel involved in education be introduced to instructional methodologies like task analysis, cue hierarchies, and partial participation plans. Such instructional strategies have proven effective with people experiencing disabilities within art education contexts (Blandy, Pancsofar, & Mockensturm, 1988).

10. The art work of those experiencing disabilities should not be segregated or singled out as "Special." To do so detracts from the artist's abilities.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that the passage of the "Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990" will have a strong impact on arts education programming now and in the future. It will mean that service providers will be mandated to programmatically and

environmentally respond to the needs of all people, including those individuals who are experiencing disabilities. What will hopefully follow will be an increased understanding and acceptance of the talents and abilities of all people, and a move toward a society with more pluralistic values.

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Footnotes

1. Numerous and contested labels have long been associated with people experiencing disabilities. For the purposes of this article we will use the phrases "people experiencing disabilities" and "people with disabilities" interchangeably. Both phrases are congruent with the *Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities* (The Research and Training Center on Independent Living, 1984). We acknowledge that labels can

denigrate and depersonalize individuals. We have chosen these phrases in the belief that they do not. However, we know that some readers may find them objectionable or awkward. We look forward to such times when phrases like these will no longer be warranted or necessary.

Integrated settings are crucial to decreasing perceived differences between people experiencing disabilities and people not experiencing disabilities. Integrated settings assume that activities, settings, and instructional materials will be age appropriate. In addition, the ratio of people with disabilities to people not experiencing disabilities will be no more than the natural occurrence of disabilities within the general population (Sailor, Goetz, Anderson, Hunt, & Gee, 1988).

The normalization principle stresses the "utilization of means which are as culturally normative as possible, in order to establish and/or maintain personal behaviors and characteristics which are as culturally normative as possible" (Wolfensberger, 1972, p.20). For a discussion of the application of this principle to art education, see Blandy, 1989; Blandy & Congdon, 1987, and Congdon, 1990.

2. Barrier-free is a term that is commonly used to describe facilities and programs that are accessible to people experiencing disabilities. Guidelines such as those produced by the National Endowment for the Arts (n.d.), the Smithsonian Institution (Majewski, 1987), The Research and Training Center on Independent Living (1984), and the National Rehabilitation Association (1988) suggest what constitutes a barrier-free environment.

3. See Muschlitz, L. L. (1990). *Everyone is welcome - accessibility for people with disabilities: Integrating the 1990 Very Special Arts Festival with the Lane County, Oregon, Imagination Celebration*. Unpublished Master's project, Department of Art Education, University of Oregon, Eugene, Or. 97403.