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Kara Lynch

University of Nebraska at Kearney

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**Elementary Art and the PRIDE Program:
Discovering Effective Practices for Enhancing Accessibility to Curriculum and Instruction
for Students Who Are Severely Impacted by Autism**

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate Program of the Department of Art and Design at the University at Kearney

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

Major: Art Education
Under the Supervision of Dr. Ross Schlemmer

By
Kara Lynch
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Abstract

In this case study, I use my position as the school's art teacher to examine the challenges faced, while in the art room, by students who are severely impacted by autism. Our elementary campus has created a *PRIDE program* that comprises students in grades K-5 who are severely impacted by Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other disabilities. This case study considers how educators can provide better access to curriculum and instruction for students who are severely impacted by autism. It also examines the importance of understanding this population's needs to achieve a higher rate of success in the art room setting.

Keywords: PRIDE program, elementary art education, autism spectrum disorder (ASD),
access to the curriculum

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Elementary Art and the PRIDE Program: Discovering Effective Practices for Teaching Art to
Students Who Are Severely Impacted by Autism

Chapter 1

Introduction

It can be difficult for educators to meet the needs of the diverse population of students in their classroom. Every student is different and brings their own unique background, personality, perspective, and abilities with them to the art room. For some students, disorders and disabilities greatly impact their ability to access the curriculum in the typical ways. Basic communication and restricted repetitive behaviors and interests, among other things, are challenges faced by students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). At my elementary school in Glastonbury, Connecticut, they have created the *PRIDE program*, which comprises students in grades K-5 who are severely impacted by ASD and other disabilities. The program was designed so that these students from across the district can be housed in one location, at one school. Students access the general education classroom and the “PRIDE” room which serves as a homebase.

Even though it is not the least restrictive environment, the PRIDE program allows for consolidation of resources, which then increases access to the resources that are most beneficial to these students. These resources include teachers with specialized training, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and a more experienced and centrally-located network of paraprofessionals. All the resources in one place creates greater access because the collaborative network that works together for these students has a smaller and more manageable footprint along with the ability to easily share resources because of proximity. Many students in this program require specific medical equipment and trained nurses and staff who can attend to various medical needs such as feeding tubes and toileting or diapering. Additionally, resources

like adapted materials, furniture, and modes of transportation are accessible and easily shared among students.

As a result of this district-wide program being housed within one elementary school, it creates a higher population of special needs students in one location and in the art classroom setting. This can be challenging. The PRIDE program's roster fluctuates every year as new kindergarteners join our school and fifth graders move on to middle school, but typically the program consists of five to ten students in our district who are the most affected by their disorders or disabilities. Given the need to create the least restrictive environment, these students participate in as much or as many of the regular classroom events and procedures as possible, including attending specials such as art.

As educators, our job is to meet the needs of every student. We should provide a learning environment that promotes students' success and self-efficacy. Each student requires a unique approach from their teachers, and especially in the art room, to meet their individual needs. When I joined the faculty of this school in 2018, I had very little experience working with this particular population of students. The head teachers of the PRIDE program and my art department director did not suggest any specific accommodations for students when participating in the art room. Working with the students of the PRIDE program for the last six years has made evident the importance of preparing art lessons that are designed, planned, and strategized appropriately to facilitate each students' access to the curriculum. Teaching students in this program, over time, has informed the approaches and practices I implement when working with students who are severely impacted with autism and other disorders.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to review and compare my work with the PRIDE program to the best practices and recommended accommodations for working with students with special needs, specifically Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 3. I identify some of the unique challenges of teaching students who are severely impacted by autism and discuss how best to support their needs. Additionally, I analyze the significance of understanding students who are severely impacted by autism and how it contributes to their success. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- What are some of the challenges that are experienced by students who are severely impacted by autism accessing the curriculum in the art room?
- How can educators who work with students who are severely impacted by autism best support their needs, in the art room?
- Why is understanding of students who are severely impacted by autism important to their success?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will improve understanding of best practices and recommended accommodations to be used in the art room with students who are severely impacted by autism, like those in the PRIDE program, so that they may best access the curriculum and instruction. Additionally, findings of this study will offer suggestions for approaching the work that is done in the art room with students of the PRIDE program, as well as assisting other populations of students affected by ASD, recognizing there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Chapter 2

Methodology

Study Overview

In this case study, I will examine the challenges faced by students who are severely impacted by autism and how to best support them in the art room. I conduct a literature review of several scholarly publications to enhance my understanding of students with special needs and best practices, and I interviewed the head teacher of the PRIDE program to learn from her expertise working with these students. Using this as a lens, I then reflect on my personal experiences working with this population of PRIDE students, as their art teacher.

Case Study Research

Case study is a comprehensive investigation of a present-day phenomenon or issue within a real-life context. It involves thorough observation and description of an individual (person or entity) or limited set of individuals. Specificity of the case -what is being examined, and clear boundaries of place and time are defining characteristics of case study. It is not necessarily a methodology but a selection of what exactly is to be studied (Schoch, 2019).

Why is a Case Study Methodology Appropriate for My Study of the PRIDE Program?

Case study research is conducted in the present and seeks to explore a contemporary phenomenon. Schoch (2019) said, “Embark on a case study as your research methodology when you want to better explore, understand, or explain ‘how’ or ‘why’ a phenomenon, within a particular context, is what it is” (p. 255). Case studies are used so that targeted data can be collected, not to show a cause and effect, but rather to offer a means by which understanding of the phenomenon is improved. Consequently, I chose a case study methodology to conduct an investigation of how and why students in the PRIDE program need specific modifications and

accommodations. Case study methodology is logical as it applies to this research because my goal is to review and reflect upon my experience with this particular group of students. Doing so will help me, and possibly others, to understand their students better and the best practices that we can employ, as educators, to benefit our students.

Approaches and Steps in Case Study Research

The first step in case study research is establishing a problem statement and research purpose. The researcher acknowledges a lack of specific knowledge about an issue or phenomena and seeks to increase their understanding. Research questions are then developed that focus on “how” and/or “why” to provide “an extensive and ‘in-depth’ description of some social phenomenon” (Schoch, 2019, p. 255). Case study is an appropriate approach if “how” and/or “why” research questions are being used. Once the purpose and research questions have been determined, the actual case must be selected -the specific what or who that will be studied to better understand the *how* or *why*. A small sample size is selected, and then data collection types are designated. These may include interviews, document analysis, observations, or surveys etc. The research questions should help the researcher determine “the kinds of questions to be asked in interviews, what to observe, what documents to review, and what artifacts to examine” (Schoch, 2019, p. 250). Next, analyze the data. The process of reviewing data multiple times, interacting with the data repeatedly, allows for patterns, categories, and themes to appear. Steps for data analysis will look something like this: describe, findings emerge, and comparison. “Collecting new data to better conceptualize themes is common in qualitative research” (Schoch, 2019, p. 253). Lastly, it is time to report findings. When reporting a case study, the following should be considered: describe the case in a way that states the facts and is free from bias or interpretation; outline methods and literature review and how the literature review helped inform

your research questions; there should be a clear line running through the report that starts with the original problem and follows a natural path to the conclusions of your analysis; information and conclusions gathered should be clear as well as an indication of how future studies can be built upon these findings; ensure that the report is written in such a way that someone who was “not involved in the case can understand it” (Schoch, 2019, p. 255). The product of the case study is a comprehensive understanding of the subject or case which can then be examined and learned from and then transferred to other cases or situations (Schoch, 2019).

Boundaries of the Case

The primary subject of this study is the students of the PRIDE program who are severely impacted by autism and other disorders. This study looks back at my involvement with this group of students in my role as art educator. I have worked with students in the PRIDE program since 2018 when I began working at the elementary school in Glastonbury, Connecticut, where this program is housed. My research focuses primarily on the challenges of teaching students who are severely impacted by autism and how best to support their needs as well as the significance of understanding students who are severely impacted by autism and how it contributes to their success.

Data Collection Tools

1. **Document analysis.** To enrich my understanding of students with special needs and best practices I reviewed several scholarly publications.
2. **Interview.** I share findings from my interview with the leader of the PRIDE program who shares their expertise from time spent working with this population of students.
3. **Reflections.** My critical reflections from time spent working with students of the PRIDE program from 2018 to present.

For the duration of this case study, to maintain its credibility, I have reviewed and debriefed my work with colleagues and peers. Through triangulation of the various data collection methods, I have sought multiple perspectives when considering the guiding research questions (Miraglia & Smilan, 2014).

Data Analysis Procedures

The first step in data analysis is to describe and become familiar with the data. To do this, I will establish a thick description of the PRIDE program and their participation in the art room, review available literature, and conduct an interview with the head special education teacher for the PRIDE program. In doing so, I am establishing a foundational understanding of individuals with ASD Level 3, the history of access to the curriculum and instruction for students with special needs, the benefits of art education for students with special needs and especially ASD Level 3, and best practices for working with students who have ASD Level 3. Then, through the process of reviewing the data multiple times and interacting with it repeatedly, patterns, categories, and themes appear. After which, I critically reflect upon the data, conceptualize themes, and make comparisons between best practices and my current practices as well as recommendations for future instruction. .

Protection of Participants

As a child protective measure, I do not use any student names or identifying characteristics. Any mention of students captured in field notes do not include names or identifiers. Quotes and summaries from participating adults have been included with their consent.

Limitations and Biases of Study

This study is written as a reflective piece, looking back at my time working with students in the PRIDE program at the elementary school in Glastonbury, Connecticut where I have been an art teacher for the past six years. This research study is subject to limitations, as are the majority of most studies. My personal involvement with this program and my students carries with it an inherent bias of possibly wanting to recognize only the positive aspects of the work being done that I evaluate in this study. Another limitation to consider is selective memory or the ability to accurately remember experiences that occurred in the past. I have chosen to regard my connection to this program as a unique strength. To avoid bias, I have conducted my research ethically, with fidelity, and have aimed to make this case study relatable. I demonstrate my first-hand knowledge of the participants and this program and frame my reflections and insights into a highly contextualized re-telling of my experiences.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

My work with the PRIDE program for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Level 3 and other disorders has motivated me to research ways in which I can better serve this population and compare best practices to my current practices. The review of available resources has helped me develop a knowledge base for my research of the PRIDE program. Autism Spectrum Disorder is defined and specifically, Autism Level 3. Then, the history of legislation that has led to various changes in the educational structure for students with special needs is chronicled. The literature suggests benefits of art education for students with ASD Level 3 and highlights information regarding best practices for working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition. Every individual with ASD is different, but typically, ASD is characterized by moderate to significant challenges with communication and social interaction as well as restricted repetitive behaviors and interests. Autism Spectrum Disorder, as its name implies, is a condition with ranging degrees of presentations of the typical symptoms and characteristics (Al Jaffal, 2022; Autism Speaks,n.d.).

Communication

A diagnosis of ASD is specified according to criteria outlined by The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, or DSM-5. Sustained “deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts” are a key feature of ASD. This can present as limited verbal and nonverbal communication, including the ability to meet or

maintain eye contact or a complete lack of facial expression. The ability to understand social cues and nuance is challenged by ASD making it difficult to make and maintain reciprocal relationships. Individuals with ASD have varying communication deficits ranging from minimal communication impairment to severe impairment where individuals are completely non-verbal.

Restricted Repetitive Behaviors and Interests

Restricted repetitive behaviors and interests are another key characteristic of ASD. The group Autism Speaks (n.d.) states that the DSM-5 diagnosis of ASD is contingent on the presence of at least two of the following criteria, occurring presently or historically:

- Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
- Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take the same route or eat food every day).
- Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interest).
- Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement). (DSM-5 Autism Diagnostic Criteria, para. 2)

The examples presented in the DSM-5 are not comprehensive, rather a means to illustrate this particular characteristic of behavior.

Additional Considerations for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Diagnosis

Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), according to the DSM-5, is contingent on the aforementioned deficits in communication and restricted repetitive behaviors and interests as well as several other qualifications. Symptoms are exhibited during the individual's early developmental period. Additionally, "symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning" (Autism Speaks, n.d., para. 3). Finally, the DSM-5 notes that often, Autism Spectrum Disorder exists simultaneously with an intellectual disability or intellectual developmental disorder and it is important to specify that all previous characteristics and symptoms "are not better explained by" (Autism Speaks, n.d., para. 3) the presence of the intellectual development disorder. This final diagnostic indicator should be taken into account along with the individuals below-average social communication (Autism Speaks, n.d.).

Level 3 Autism/Severe Autism/Profound Autism/Autism Requiring Very Substantial Support

As its name suggests, Autism is a spectrum disorder. The spectrum refers to the varying degrees of symptoms and characteristics and to what extent support is necessary. Three levels of ASD exist, Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 –with Level 1 requiring the least amount of support and Level 3 requiring a very substantial need for support. The students I work with in the PRIDE program have ASD Level 3 and require a significant level of support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The DSM-5 describes that deficits in communication and restricted, repetitive behaviors are the most significant to a diagnosis of Autism – in regards to these factors, a severity Level of 3 would be dependent on severe deficits in these areas:

Severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills cause severe impairments in functioning, very limited initiation of social interactions, and minimal response to social overtures from others. For example, a person with few words of intelligible speech who rarely initiates interaction and, when he or she does, makes unusual approaches to meet needs only and responds to only very direct social approaches. (Autism Speaks, n.d., Severity Levels for Autism Spectrum Disorder section)

Regarding a severe degree of restricted, repetitive behaviors, individuals with Level 3 Autism exhibit, “inflexibility of behavior, extreme difficulty coping with change, or other restricted/repetitive behaviors markedly interfere with functioning in all spheres” (Autism Speaks, n.d., Table: Severity levels for autism spectrum disorder, para. 1). Transitions and change of focus or action are also extremely agitating for individuals with Level 3 Autism (Autism Speaks, n.d.).

Level 3 Autism/Severe Autism/Profound Autism/Autism Requiring Very Substantial Support

In 2023, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a report, based on their own data collection, regarding findings and statistics associated with their study of Level 3 Autism. In this report the CDC chose to use the verbiage “profound autism” to clearly delineate and substantiate Level 3 Autism because of the significant nature of its symptoms in comparison, on the spectrum, to the common understanding of the disorder. The term was first used in a report by The Lancet Commission on the Future of Care and Clinical Research in Autism. It was reported by the CDC that, “26.7 percent of people with autism spectrum disorder have profound autism” (Autism Science Foundation, 2023, para. 1). In their research, the CDC applied this definition of profound autism: “being nonverbal, being minimally verbal, or having an

intelligence quotient <50” (Autism Science Foundation, 2023, para. 2). Profound Autism and Autism Level 3 can be used interchangeably. Each indicates a high degree of dependency that is different from other populations of people with Autism. “Children with profound autism often require round-the-clock care to assist with daily living activities and to keep them safe from self-injurious behaviors, wandering, and seizures” (Autism Science Foundation, 2023, para. 5).

As the report from the CDC suggests, my students in the PRIDE program also have a higher level of medical needs and the need for services that people with milder symptoms of Autism do not require. These aspects of their diagnosis make it challenging to attend art class regularly and access the curriculum in a typical way.

Understanding Access to Curriculum and the History of Special Education Law

All students are entitled to an education and the right to learn alongside their peers. How students learn and achieve an education varies depending on each and every individual student based on their needs. *Access to the curriculum* means that supports and accommodations are utilized for students to successfully reach the curriculum to their full potential alongside their peers.

Before any law would be written regarding students’ rights to a fair education, the field of psychology made various contributions to the positive movement forward. Advances in psychology increased understanding of mental illness, mental deficiencies, and other disabilities as differences. Research in the field of psychology helped educators to understand that individuals can learn social behaviors and academic skills and an emphasis was placed on what the student *can* do (Burnette & Lokerson, 2006).

In 1973, The Rehabilitation Act prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted or funded by federal agencies. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

established that a student with a physical or mental impairment which substantially limited one or more major life activities, such as thinking, learning, reading, concentrating, walking/standing, seeing, or speaking was considered disabled under this provision. It also required that educational and related aids and services be provided to meet the individual needs of the student (Burnette & Lokerson, 2006). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (and revised in 1997) states that students with disabilities should participate in the general education curriculum as much as possible –the *least restrictive environment*. The least restrictive environment is a guiding principle of IDEA. This law also establishes that the earlier students with disabilities receive intervention, the more successful they will be (Burnette & Lokerson, 2006). Mazur and Doran (2010) explain:

This law guarantees the right of students with disabilities to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), which is provided through coordination of appropriate services among general educators, special educators, related services personnel (such as speech and language personnel) and other professionals as appropriate. (p. 19)

These stipulations extend to specials like art where the services and supports needed for students to be successful must also be in place.

Benefits of Art Education for Students with Special Needs and Specifically with Autism Spectrum Disorder

In today's educational landscape, the art room is a place where individuality is honored and recognized. "In art class, children are often praised for the uniqueness of their work, rather than its conformity to a predetermined standard or response" (Day & Hurwitz, 2012, p. 26). Other subjects feature sequenced lessons, tightly organized to be completed by the end of the school year. Their curriculum is organized in an ever-escalating upward spiral. Students' past

failures can also impede progress and make it very hard to catch up. The art room can be a refuge, a place for students with special needs to demonstrate their skills and abilities. The art studio curriculum uses a variety of art media that encourage students to approach problems anew, without a history of failure because there are many different ways to solve art problems and be creative (Guay, 2006).

Art and the artistic process are more open-ended than other subject areas, which makes it possible to explore various avenues to success. For this reason, the art-making experience can easily be customized to meet individual students' needs. Guay (2006) as well as Mazur and Doran (2010) discuss how art-making is an inherently sensory experience which can be beneficial to some students. Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, specifically Level 3, can be very sensory-seeking. Kneading clay and spreading paint are very sensory stimulating activities that are inherently part of an art class. Conversely, individuals with ASD Level 3 may be sensory-avoidant, in which case specific materials can easily be eliminated, modified, or added to an art project. Many individuals with ASD Level 3 have challenges with fine motor skills and art can provide an opportunity to improve these functional skills –giving them an access point to meet more global objectives that they may be working toward, for example, with their occupational therapist. Activities like using a pincer grasp to select adornments such as pom-poms and buttons or using various tools can help students progress these abilities (Guay, 2006; Mazur & Doran, 2010).

Best Art Room Practices for Students with Disabilities and Specifically with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The job of an art educator is to ensure positive meaningful outcomes for all students by providing the supports necessary for them to access curriculum and instruction. Understanding

students with ASD Level 3, how they function in their daily lives, how they learn, their strengths and challenges, can help educators to better support their needs in the art room which facilitates greater access to the curriculum. “In order for all students to find the art learning environment welcoming, teachers must be confident in their ability to teach all children” (Dorff, 2012, p. 10). Beginning with pre-service educational training, there are several best practices that art educators should adopt to support the needs of students including willingness to collaborate with colleagues, modifying objectives, understanding students’ communication devices, encouraging students’ choices and decision making, troubleshooting the art lesson, and utilizing visual aids.

Many states require pre-service training for art educators regarding students with special needs and specifically, ASD is an important step in the process of understanding students and their individual needs. Better understanding equals better support for students to access curriculum and instruction. Pre-service art educators should have some knowledge and experience with these students before entering the classroom setting. Specific pre-service training and experiences for art educators going into the field establishes best practices early in their career (Dorff, 2012).

The diagnostic requirements for ASD Level 3 are important for understanding the student that teachers have in front of them. The DSM-5 (Autism Speaks, n.d.) outlines several factors that contribute to the picture of the whole-person who has ASD Level 3. Knowing that these students have deficits in communication, and restricted repetitive behaviors can help teachers to provide the supports necessary to meet these students where they are and establish appropriate goals. What are their sensory needs? How can I best communicate with them? What are their specific and overarching goals? How can I facilitate those goals? These are all questions that can be better answered after understanding the common characteristics of the students’ diagnosis.

To successfully meet the diverse needs of all students, and make the curriculum and instruction more accessible for them, it is important that there be close collaboration between the art educator, intervention specialist, and planning and support staff (Dorff, 2012). The success of the student goes hand in hand with the expertise and understanding of this group of individuals. Knowing the strengths of each member of the team and how they can facilitate in a particular aspect of an activity or help reach a goal or objective makes the limited amount of time students spend in the art room that much more effective. As stated by Guay (2006), “Art teachers who need information or assistance should seek out peers and special education teachers willing to share their expertise and visit each other’s classrooms, gather for discussion and support, and learn from each other” (p. 11). Additionally, it is imperative that art educators maintain a positive, guiding relationship with specialists and support staff who have little to no background in the visual arts.

To ensure success in the art room, it may be appropriate to make *accommodations* vs. making *modifications* to reach objectives for a student with special needs. Accommodations are adjustments to how students learn the content. Modifications change the content that students are learning. Making accommodations for students in the art room is an important piece of the success puzzle because it necessitates a focus on the most important aspects of the task. What do we really want students to get out of a particular activity? What is the most effective way to achieve that? Vize (2005) argued that these questions are imperative for designing lesson activities that will most effectively accomplish positive learning outcomes for students. “It may be possible to use generalized objectives across a number of curriculum areas, or to modify the lesson objectives that you have written for the rest of your class” (Vize, 2005, para. 2). Vize (2005) said keep it

simple, one or two objectives can relate to the activity itself and one or two objectives may be more generalized. When addressing lesson objectives, Vize (2005) suggested art teachers consider:

- Length of time able to be spent on a single activity.
- Ability to make choices between objects or tasks.
- Mastery of new skills or sub skills.
- Effective communication of ideas and thoughts.
- Ability to manage behavior in the art room. (para. 2).

These accommodations suggested by Vize are an important part of the support puzzle that guides students with ASD Level 3 to success.

For students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 3, all forms of verbal and non-verbal communication are a challenge and educators need to be prepared to meet that challenge head on. For these individuals, the ability to communicate as a means to relate and understand is limited, therefore communication regarding directions and lesson objectives is exceedingly difficult. To make any kind of impact on a student with deficits in verbal and written communication, educators have to accustom themselves to the different ways in which these students communicate. For these reasons, Loesl (2012) states it is imperative that the art teacher capitalize on the limited verbal and non-verbal communications of their students. On the Autism spectrum, individuals with ASD Level 3 have the most significant language deficit and are sometimes completely non-verbal. They may utilize a VOCA, or voice output communication aid, that teachers should be aware of and have some understanding of its functionality. Loesl (2012) suggested familiarizing oneself with students' communication devices. This does not

imply mastery, but a general understanding of how the device works so that directions and questions can be communicated to the student. This support device may be programmed for simple yes/no communication, or have a more complex interface (i.e., “I want”, “lunch”, “art class”, “time to leave”) depending on the student’s needs and ability (Loesl, 2012). Art educators need not possess technology genius –rather a genuine and heartfelt desire to understand and communicate with students as best they can. Again, putting effort into the different ways in which these students achieve and caring about them is a significant factor in their success as students and people.

Any individual, no matter their circumstances, should be able to make choices and decisions about their art work and art educators can act as a guide in this process, said Vize (2005). Choice and voice is what makes art an authentic and personal experience. “The ability to make choices and decisions is a powerful and effective part of daily communication for students with special needs” (Vize, 2005). Vize explained that complex decision and choice-making can be difficult for students with ASD Level 3, however, this lack of ability should not be dismissed. Simple choices can and should be made by the student themselves. For example, displaying two or three colored markers and prompting a student to “choose a color”. The same can be done with any exercise. When painting, offer students a choice of tools, then colors, breaking down each step into a simple choice-making process while still adhering to the objectives of the lesson. Being able to make personal choices about their artwork, no matter how long it may take due to communication barriers, and as opposed to a paraprofessional making choices for them, means that students are involved in the learning process and are accessing the curriculum and instruction.

According to Gerber (2006), troubleshooting the lesson is a strategy that art educators can

utilize to create a successful art-making experience for all students and especially those with ASD Level 3. Troubleshooting the lesson can help educators anticipate any accommodations or adaptations that may be necessary for students with ASD level 3 to access the lesson activities. When troubleshooting a lesson, expect that things will go wrong and try to prevent or minimize potential problems. Work through the steps of the lesson and do it yourself. Did the lesson go the way you planned in your head? Did you forget something? If you can't do a particular step, will your students be able to? Anticipating problems with a lesson ensures that those issues are reconciled before a student with special needs is sitting in the art room and attempting the same task, leading to a much more successful experience (Gerber, 2006).

Another strategy that specifically benefits students with ASD Level 3 and their ability to access the curriculum is the use of visual aids. "Students with autism have a number of strengths, including visual-spatial skills and sustained attention (Quill, 1997). Visual strategies can help students who have difficulty with language comprehension understand what is expected of them in the activity (Stokes, 2004)" (Loesl, 2012, p. 57).

Reflections on Literature Review

To effectively meet the needs of students with ASD Level 3, like the students in the PRIDE program at my school, it is important to understand who they are. When we as educators have these students in our classroom, it is also imperative to understand the laws that encourage these students to learn in the least restrictive environment. Becoming familiar with the deficits that impact learning as well as the special ways in which their brains work can help educators to formulate strategies and lesson plans that best support them as learners to meet their goals for learning.

Chapter 4

Discussion

In this discussion, I use thick descriptions to illustrate the classroom environment and my interactions in the art room with students of the PRIDE program. I detail an interview with the head special education teacher of the PRIDE program and discoveries I made during this process. Then, critically reflecting, I compare my current practices to best practices for working with students who have special needs, specifically Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 3, as well as make recommendations for future practice.

Thick Description of the PRIDE Program

The suburban elementary school where I teach is one of four elementary schools in the district and is among eight total schools. The population of our school is approximately 550 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Within the school are several programs for students with specific needs, one of them being the PRIDE Program for students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 3, along with other disorders, and require the most significant support throughout the school day. Currently there are twelve students who spend the majority of their school day in the PRIDE program's classroom and these students have exceptional speech and language, cognitive, and physical deficits. Most are non-verbal and use an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device –which they do not use independently– they require significant prompting from a para or teacher to communicate using the device. Every student requires a one-to-one paraprofessional.

The PRIDE Program was strategically designed in 2009 to accommodate the considerable need of students who have Level 3 ASD from around the district –the thought being

that these students would be best served with resources organized under one roof. So, students and their families have a choice to attend their “home school” –being the school in their neighborhood– or to attend our school and be a part of the PRIDE Program. It is a self-contained program in a classroom like a “homeroom” where students can access the specialized services of various professionals and integrate into the mainstream educational setting at various times throughout the day. In the PRIDE program’s “homeroom” classroom, students are taught multiple subjects throughout the day by the same group of teachers. This classroom is special because it is a place where students can interact or be among their peers who also have special needs and participate in a differentiated curriculum with guidance and support from multiple specialists.

The program utilizes a modified curriculum. The focus is on real life experience to teach skills that will be helpful throughout the students’ lives and mitigate the amount of support they will need into adulthood. These students meet with occupational and physical therapists to work on their individual goals for gross and fine motor skills, and for some, general mobility.

Interview with PRIDE Head Special Education Teacher Erica Martino: Findings

To enhance my understanding of the PRIDE program and my students who are currently being served by it, I wanted to talk to someone who knows the program, is an expert in the field of special education, and someone who has worked with students who have ASD Level 3 and other disorders that keep them from accessing the curriculum in typical ways. This led me to Erica Martino who is the head special educator for the PRIDE program. She has been a special education teacher for nine years and has held the title of head teacher of the PRIDE program for two years. Martino holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Special Education/Elementary Education and received a Master’s Degree in Autism and ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis). She is also a

Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA).

I started by asking her to describe the PRIDE program in her own words. She explained that the PRIDE program is a self-contained program for individuals in the district with some of the most severe and impactful disabilities. Some of these disabilities include but are not limited to cognitive, physical, and speech and language deficits.

I then asked Martino about specific language, if any, that I should be using in terms of the students and situations presented in this research. She responded that in this program it is understood that all of the students have Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 3, but on a daily basis, conversationally, that designation is not often used. “Autism” is most often used. If asking about how to describe the level of impact to the child’s daily life, words like “severely impacted” may be used. Autism Level 3 may be used. We do not say “profound Autism” but that is not to say that that terminology is incorrect or offensive.

I also asked her to describe common characteristics of individuals with ASD Level 3, like she experiences in the PRIDE program. She described that many students are sensory-seeking and require certain physical sensations throughout the day like “pressure” breaks where a para gives squeezes to their arms or legs, students wear a compression vest, or move their body instead of staying seated. On the contrary, some students are sensory-aversive, meaning things like loud noises, bright lights, certain sounds, and certain smells can agitate them. They have a significant deficit in social interaction, have trouble engaging in activities outside of their restricted interests, and have difficulty with joint attention. Cognitively, she would anticipate that a majority of these students are two grade levels below average. Some have gross motor deficits which can impede mobility and limit their access to P.E. and the playground. Some have fine motor deficits, limiting their use of certain materials. Transitions are a challenge for these

students, whether from task to task or physically getting from one place in the building to another.

Later, I asked Martino to describe which aspects of ASD and ASD Level 3 make accessing the typical classroom challenging for students with Autism. For these students, she said, the biggest hurdle is the pace. They need more processing time for auditory, verbal, and visual communication. So for things like directions, directions are given and then we move on. Or a question is asked and answered quickly by a neurotypical student and then the class moves on to the next question, topic, or task. The noise of a regular classroom makes it difficult for students to process. “They have to process out all the unwanted or unnecessary sounds and sights to attend to the task at-hand. This is why it may sound weird, but when we are talking to these students, simple one-three word phrases help to get the message across much more clearly than a longer sentence,” she explained. Also, the use of visuals for multi-step directions is very helpful.

I asked Martino to explain situations that teachers working with these students should be most sensitive to. She detailed that transitions to the classroom and within the room are difficult—from floor (rug where we gather) to table. These students are also easily distracted by outside stimuli. Materials that can be used as a weapon should be stored out of reach. Proximity to peers should be minded because it can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on the student. Adults working with these students should use language that is short and sweet. “And remember that behavior is a form of communication,” she said.

I asked her, to help enhance my understanding of the whole picture, aside from ASD, what additional disorders do students in this program have? She said that along with ASD, some students have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Anxiety, and Attention Deficit Disorder. There are also a few students in the program who do not have ASD Level 3 but have significant

physical and medical needs due to genetic disorders, Cerebral Palsy, Neurofibromatosis, and Down Syndrome.

I asked Martino what some of the overarching goals for students in the art room are, and in general. Addressing the fine motor deficit –in the art room there is so much to do fine motor-wise and sensory-wise like using clay, spreading paint, and using scissors. “Also, just being a part of the classroom,” she said.

Knowing that she spends a limited amount of time in my classroom, I asked for her opinion on which of my approaches/practices help students in the PRIDE program? She said, “Having something ready for them –or available– that is similar to what the rest of the class is doing –to the greatest extent possible– is helpful.” She also explained that having an open mind and the welcoming attitude that I display is helpful for the success of students in the art room. Accepting these students as a part of the regular classroom shows that I care. She said that “sometimes these students are in situations around the building where it is accepted that they are just there, or will just sit there.” My effort, in general, to engage with students and adapt to what they need is very important to students’ success.

I asked if there is anything about the structure of the PRIDE program, it being centrally located, that can possibly impede student learning outcomes? She said, “there are pros and cons to any self-contained program.” She made all her own curriculum aside from the UNIQUE curriculum that they employ which is a curriculum targeted toward students with the most significant special needs. Our school is also, physically, a big school which makes the hard transition to the much larger middle school a bit easier.

I asked Martino to talk a little bit about the paras who work daily, one-on-one with the students of the PRIDE program. “They are angels on earth,” she said. However, it is hard to give

them good training because Martino herself is being pulled simultaneously in many different directions- attending meetings, covering other special education teachers, teaching in her own classroom. Staff absenteeism is also a challenge, but they need the people so she feels there is not much that can be done about it. There is also a high turnover rate. People get hired and then will leave for unknown reasons after one or two days on the job.

Finally, I asked Martino to name a few things that I , or we, could do differently to help these students better access the curriculum. She explained that “in a lot of districts these kids get outplaced so they don’t even get access to typically developing peers. So that’s a gift that we have here. So to say that I wish the curriculum could be [a little] slower or a little more multi-sensory –which is funny to say in art because art is so multi-sensory. But at the same time, I’m just grateful that my students are welcome here. First and foremost that is what’s most important. In a perfect world I think that we could have an adaptive art class.” What she means is an art class designed specifically for the pace and objectives of a particular group of students –in this case the students in the PRIDE program.

Interview with PRIDE Head Special Education Teacher Erica Martino: Reflections

Students in the PRIDE program who have Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 3 learn and receive information about the world in ways that are not typical for the average elementary student. This significantly impacts their day to day lives and their school day. With certain supports in place, the educational team at our school, myself included, can make accessibility to learning easier for these students.

Best Practices According to PRIDE Head Special Education Teacher Erica Martino

Having a positive attitude and a willingness to engage with students as much as possible and include them in classroom activities is an impactful first step. Motivation to support these

students is a requirement for them to succeed. During the interview, Martino went on a tangent and recalled a story of a former teacher asking her to have one of her students not come to class that day because she was being observed –something that I would view as unthinkable.

Processing, or wait time is important for students to succeed in the art room and in any situation. Knowing that students with ASD Level 3 process all forms of communication differently than typically developing students will help teachers to increase the effectiveness of their communication. Visual aids can also support this need. Additionally, while visual-spatial skills are an advantage, transitions and sequencing can be a challenge, so having a visual map of an activity can help students to better self-regulate making the task more manageable.

Additionally, students with ASD Level 3 struggle with transitioning. A typical day for elementary students consists of many transitions that can be overwhelming and sometimes paralyzing if your brain works differently. A classroom of students may move around their room from their desks to the carpet for direct instruction, then back to their desks, a while later they line up for lunch, they walk down the hall and eat lunch in the noisy cafeteria, then they line up again and go outside to the expanse of the playground –and the day is only half over. For this reason, a lot of time is spent in their PRIDE classroom, and just getting to the art room or other specials is considered a success. However, understanding that transitions are an area of difficulty, can help teachers, like me, who work with these students to manage the amount and degree of transitions that they expect from these students. Also considering the challenge of transitioning for these students, and the fact that they may come late and leave early, the time they spend in the room engaging in an activity should be maximized. For that reason, having something ready that they can engage with without immediate teacher-directed instruction is helpful.

Paraprofessionals are a significant asset to the success of students with ASD Level 3.

They are a key ingredient in student-art teacher interaction. However, there are certain systematic problems that lead to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the paras who work with our students. Special education teachers' busy schedules keep them from being able to train paraprofessionals properly. There is also a high degree of absenteeism, lack of substitutes, and a high turnover rate. These factors make it difficult to maintain a constant daily standard of trained professionals on-hand.

Martino makes an interesting point when she discusses the concept of an "adaptive art class". An adaptive art class is one designed specifically for the pace and objectives of a particular group of students, in this case those with ASD Level 3. Neuro-typical peer role models may attend the class as well, but direct instruction and learning activities are individualized to promote positive learning outcomes for the students with ASD Level 3. As Martino states, it is fantastic that students in the PRIDE program are able to attend art with their neuro-typical peers, however, a class that is specifically designed for these students with their multiple needs in mind could be beneficial. She said that students would benefit from classes that are slower paced and, outside of art, classes that are more multi-sensory. By law, these students participate in an adapted Physical Education class. They attend P.E. with their regular class of typically developing peers, but they have a separate class that they attend once per week that is designed specifically for them and their multiple needs; the pace is slower, more attention is paid to their limited mobility and gross motor deficits, outside stimuli like noise and light are also considered. A program like this that incorporates visual art and is targeted to meet the needs of these students is an idea worth exploring.

Art itself is a beneficial experience and endeavor for students with ASD Level 3. The sensory component of art is advantageous for students who use their senses more than the

average person to understand their environment. The different tools and materials that students naturally use in the art room are helpful to address students' fine motor deficits.

Thick Description of the PRIDE Program in My Art Room Community

While students in this program typically spend a majority of their day in the "PRIDE" classroom, each student is also assigned to a regular general education classroom and they take part in activities with their peers at certain times throughout the day –including art class. They transition from the PRIDE room to be with their peers for specials, lunch, and recess. My teaching schedule is the same every week meaning that I have the same students at the same time every day, every week. This also means that there is some dependability for all students attending art. However, students in the PRIDE program will come to art with their para, often arriving later than the rest of the class, and leaving earlier than the designated time. When I know a student from the PRIDE program is coming to art that day, I have a tray set out at their table with the materials for that day's activity and a note to them and their para with a quick description of the activity process. Although every school year, I see students once per week, I also see them throughout the years, starting from kindergarten, until they reach fifth grade. This gives me more time to get to know them. Students with ASD have limited or restricted interests. Knowing this, I take mental notes along the way of their likes and dislikes and what they respond well to as far as materials and art-making processes and techniques.

When students from the PRIDE program are in the art room with their general education class, they are typically one of 20-24 children in the room at a time. While they are receiving one-to-one attention from their para, there are no paras currently serving the program who have a certification in visual art, or even a basic background in visual art. In our 45-minute once-per-week lessons, I am tasked with direct instruction, one-on-one coaching and timely feedback,

behavior management, and clean up for up to 24 students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade –all with their own individual needs, interests, and backgrounds. I do this 27 times per week, for approximately 550 students. While doing my best, this schedule, and the number of students I see per week, make it challenging to spend significant time working with each and every student.

Critical Reflections: Comparing My Current Practices to Best Practices

Based on my conversation with head special education teacher Erica Martino and the review of literature, several of my current practices, which I outline below, align with what are considered by these sources to be best practices. However, there is always room for improvement, and these sources have also outlined best practices that should be implemented. Here I will outline several ways in which my practices are meeting the needs of students with ASD Level 3. Then, I will discuss areas in which my practices should improve to offer greater support for these students' needs.

Best Practices Currently Employed in my Art Room

One of the ways in which my current practices are helping students, according to Erica Martino, head special education teacher for the PRIDE program, is my open mind and welcoming attitude. She explained that accepting these students as a part of the regular classroom shows that I care. My effort, in general, to engage with students and adapt to what they need is very important to students' success. It is challenging to connect with these students because of their limited communication skills and restricted social interests. I try to move my body down to their physical level and talk in a patient, gentle tone. Being on their level helps me to gain insight into the nuance of their needs, the way they move, where they direct their gaze etc. –anything I can do to learn more about these children who are so complex.

Another practice I currently utilize that helps students to be successful in the art room, are the mental notes that I take about each student regarding their likes and dislikes and what they respond well to as far as materials and art-making processes and techniques. Because these students have restricted repetitive behaviors and interests, according to the DSM-5 (Autism Speaks, n.d.), it is important to discover what engages them. As with all students, to create art that is meaningful to them, I should know their likes and dislikes. I can't just ask these students what they like or are interested in, like I would a neuro-typical student. Sometimes I have to find out on my own. For example, I observed that a kindergarten student in the PRIDE program is very focused on text and written words. She is mostly non-verbal except for her repetitive reading of signs, book covers, badges, labels etc. So, during a color mixing unit, I wrote some words on her paper related to the activity to encourage her to paint her paper. By locating, reading, and painting over the words, she was able to successfully engage in the lesson about mixing primary colors to make secondary colors.

A willingness to try anything is also important, as it took me several attempts throughout the year to get to know this new kindergarten student and I "trial and errored" until I found materials and activities that she enjoyed. For another student in the PRIDE program, I struggled for a long time to find an appropriate material or technique he could use to make art because he puts everything in his mouth. This can be dangerous, and all but eliminate most materials. One day, after my own children finished a container of pretzel rods and I was about to throw the clear plastic cylindrical container into the recycling bin, I realized that it may be an interesting tool to try with this student. I thought, I could squirt paint inside, ask the P.E. teacher for some small balls, and this student could "paint" safely by rolling or shaking the container to spread the paint. This idea could have failed, but it didn't, and I am so glad that I tried something unusual because it supported this students' access to art-making alongside his peers.

Creating accommodations for students to meet objectives is paramount, however, according to Vize (2005), modifying the objectives can support students' achievement as well. These are practices that I currently use in the art room. When planning activities for these students, I do ask myself– What do students really need to learn and what are the essential elements of the task? Identifying the most significant elements of the task helps to prioritize the learning objectives. On this note, when scheduling allows, some students work on their OT goals during art through collaboration between myself and the occupational therapist. For example, a student who has an OT goal of increasing fine motor accuracy can work on tracing lines and shapes that can then be used to create an artwork which aligns with the visual art objectives for the lesson. Combining art and direct guidance from an occupational therapist is a successful win-win for these students. One of my third-grade students in the PRIDE program has significant fine motor deficits. During her Friday morning art time, instead of coming to art with a paraprofessional like most students do, she attends art with the occupational therapist. Together we integrate art goals with her occupational therapy goals.

Additionally, Vize (2005) stated that students' choice and voice should be recognized – which is something I fiercely attend to in my art room, especially for students with special needs. For art to be authentic and personal for students, their art should reflect their background and personal interests. In the limited time I am able to interact with students and their paras, I make it as clear as possible to the paras that students' work should not look like the para's work. It should not look as if an adult completed the project for the student. Rather, at each step, where relevant, the student should choose the color material they are using, for example, or the placement of a mark or line. Paras often need to work hand-over-hand with students to guide them, but I have had paras –who at the time did not know any better– disregard the child entirely, in favor of just doing the art project themselves. As a result, the student's art does not look like

their own –rather like an art project of your mother or grandmother. It is important to honor the authentic work of these students, though different, by allowing them to make choices in their work as much as possible.

On that note, collaboration and the relationship between myself and the paraprofessionals who work with these students every day is very important, according to Dorff (2012) –this is something I currently do and strive to maintain. These students are mostly nonverbal and generally, spend more time with their para than they do with me. For that reason, I feel like the paras can act like the conduit to the student I am working with. The interaction can be smooth and constructive or bumpy and unproductive if I don't make a concerted effort to keep the relationship positive, helpful, and respectful. That realization has helped me to maintain a guiding relationship between myself and that person –one that works *with* the para and aims to help– because they often do not have a background or experience with visual art. By talking with them, professionally and casually, thanking them for their effort, making them feel welcome in the art room, I hope that I am making them feel like a part of a team –a team whose purpose is to learn and have fun while supporting students.

Best Practices That Should be Employed in my Art Room

While I have been doing my best in the art room to meet the specific needs of students in the PRIDE program and facilitate their access to the curriculum, things could be different, and I have discovered several areas of improvement.

One of the best practices suggested by the literature is pre-service training for art educators regarding students with special needs, and specifically ASD, is an important step in the process of understanding students and their individual needs (Dorff, 2012). Better understanding equals better support for students to access the curriculum. Pre-service art educators should have some knowledge and experience with these students before entering the classroom setting.

Specific pre-service training and experiences for art educators going into the field establishes best practices early in their career (Dorff, 2012). These recommendations from Dorff are not something I can go back and change. My path to art teaching was not typical. I do not hold a degree in art education, rather I have two separate certifications, one in elementary education, and one in visual arts with a concentration in drawing and painting. I hold a teaching certification in elementary education and a second teaching certification in art education (K-12). My journey to art teaching did not involve receiving a degree in elementary art, so I did not receive the specific training for art accommodations for students with special needs. I had to learn it all myself and synthesize what I learned in each area to provide the necessary supports for students. Is this a good thing or a bad thing? I don't know. Do we learn more by doing things hands-on and figuring them out on our own? Could I have learned more earlier and have developed my craft further by now if I had that training sooner? I think both can be true and have contributed to my positive attitude and willingness to try anything, while at the same time, knowing when to seek help or outside guidance.

On that note, and per the suggestion of Dorff (2012), better collaboration with specialists and colleagues would benefit PRIDE students and their participation in art. Although I highlighted an anecdote of a third grade student who works with the occupational therapist during art, that is an isolated example, and should be the norm, not the exception. The art room is a great place for students to access their OT goals, alongside art objectives, and I should work to facilitate that collaboration.

As a result of my own reflections, and my interview with Erica Martino, it is clear to me that several issues regarding paraprofessionals currently exist. First, better training for these individuals should exist as part of their hiring process and afterward, additional ongoing training in art-specific philosophies and approaches. This would benefit the paras efficaciousness, and as

a result, the students with whom they work would be more successful in the art room. This endeavor would take time and planning to implement which, currently, is a larger problem in the world of education. Little time exists in the school day outside of instructional time to adequately plan and collaborate with colleagues.

It is hard to find time in the school day to do the things that need to be done, and often I find myself working well outside of the school day to accomplish necessary tasks. It is not an excuse, but some things that I should have done sooner, but have yet to do, are to seek out specific training on students' AAC devices to assist with better communication and establish a better system of visual aids for use with students who have ASD Level 3 in the art room. These students have such difficulty communicating. I do my best to talk directly to the student and not just to their para (as if the student is not sitting right there, as some adults and students sometimes do). However, this is not enough. My goals for the future are to use professional learning time to acquire the training necessary to comfortably use students' communication devices. I will also allocate individual planning time or perhaps, seek out collaboration among my art colleagues or special education colleagues (or both) to create art room-related visuals to support these students.

Adapted art for students with ASD Level 3, is a topic that arose in my interview with Erica Martino and is something that I think should be explored. Designated, individualized time for students to work at a slower pace with a lower student-teacher ratio would be beneficial for PRIDE program students to meet art learning objectives. Although as educators we organize lessons to support students' independence, they still need coaching and guidance from the teacher, and in the regular classroom, approximately 24 students are competing for teacher-attention. Obstacles that would impede an initiative to establish this program include time (planning), scheduling (my teaching schedule is already full), and money (additional teacher's

salary). It is worth bringing to the attention of administration so that students have the same opportunities as their typically-developing peers.

Another consideration that arose during my personal reflections is an insufficient collaboration among teachers and families of students in the PRIDE program. Collaborating with all invested parties helps to create a more comprehensive picture of students we work with – especially these students who have a difficult time communicating, advocating for themselves, and establishing relationships. For these reasons, I should be working more formally with their special education teachers and their families to support their needs. I have several ideas to support this work going forward. I will establish communication between myself and families including sending home a “getting to know you”/interest inventory for these students, since communication time is so limited during a regular class period –having information ahead of time in collaboration with families would be a great strategy to achieve student engagement and success. Having a document on-hand of their favorite colors, animals, characters, etc... can help me to design lesson activities that connect to the regular objectives and connect to their personal interests in a more meaningful way.

Closing Thoughts

This work is challenging and takes time, but this research seeks to accelerate the process for those who work with students like those in the PRIDE program or who have ASD Level 3 and to support the needs of all students takes a sizable amount of time and effort. As an educator, to do what is best for students, starts with a positive, inclusive, collaborative, innovative attitude. This is a great jumping off point for some things that are currently out of my control –like time, funding, current laws. My schedule will never be less; less classes or less students. I have a limited amount of planning time -which affects my ability to attend to each students’ individual needs. Current laws make this work difficult. Adaptive P.E. is required by law, but not other

special areas like art or music. Administrators are required to schedule for adaptive P.E., they don't have to schedule/hire for/pay someone to teach adapted art –so they don't.

Before starting my work at this school and with the PRIDE program, I wish that I had more guidance or training instead of learning on the fly. I had to figure out a lot of things on my own and hope that I was doing them right. I thought, and still think, that my positive attitude and setting a high standard for myself and my students would carry us toward success. Even today, I may still struggle to help students access teaching and learning. However, the information I have gathered, conversations I've had, and reflections I have considered as a part of this research process have increased my knowledge base and confidence moving forward. Maybe this research will help others form the foundational skills I wish I had.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Having the PRIDE program housed at my school creates a significant challenge to meet the needs of all students, that would not otherwise be present if this program did not exist or was located elsewhere. Working within these circumstances, it is necessary to understand the unique needs of these students, how to best support them, and additionally, to ask ourselves why is understanding of students who are severely impacted by autism important to their success?

Working with the students of the PRIDE program in my art room means that I am teaching individuals who face some of the greatest obstacles as students. The challenges they experience in accessing the curriculum in typical ways are many: deficits in oral and written language, and basic communication skills, longer processing time for oral and written directions, limited social interest, and restricted repetitive behaviors and interests.

Educators, like me, who work with these students should consider several best practices that support students' access to the curriculum. Close collaboration between the art teacher and colleagues like specialists, OT/PT, and paraprofessionals helps to support students as a team. Communication with students who have ASD Level 3 can be difficult, so teachers should utilize students' AAC devices as well as visual learning aids. These students need longer wait times than their typically-developing peers to process oral and visual information. Students with ASD Level 3 are less engaged with learning tasks that are outside of their limited and restricted preferences. The art room is a great place to utilize personal interests to engage in art-making in an authentic way –like all artists! Getting to know students' likes and dislikes can also help with trial and error. Art teachers, like me, may have to try many different materials and processes before finding something that engages a student with special needs. Understanding that, when

teaching students with special needs, great planning and preparation does not always lead to positive or expected outcomes. Willingness to try new things and be flexible are important to help engage students and achieve their goals.

All students have a right to a free and appropriate public education. For this reason, and because of basic human respect and responsibility, it is important that we as educators understand our students so that we can best serve them. It is our job to provide all students with an education that empowers them to achieve their highest potential.

This program was designed to be of greater service to the many needs of these students. While there are various resources, supports, and accommodations available to these students, there is still more work to be done. A specialized program to house these students does not necessarily mean that what takes place inside the specialized classroom is ideal for student learning outcomes. While we as educators work within the confines of what we can control, and aim to do better through professional learning of best practices and critical reflection, we can also advocate for systematic changes that will improve access to education for all students.

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