

# Art for All Children: A Conversation About Inclusion

by Nancie Tonner West

*Conversation is the way we discover  
how to transform our world, together.*  
— Margaret Wheatley

## The value of conversation

*Maria organizes her notes as she prepares to join KidTalk, a time set aside for teachers' conversation about children. Today, a special educator and therapist will help the teachers prepare for welcoming Peter, a child identified with special needs. Maria has several questions she wants to explore and looks forward to exchanging some ideas that may be useful in planning appropriate art experiences for the new child.*

A regularly scheduled conversation about including all children of differing abilities in art experiences provides teachers with time for reflection on child learning. Our discussions focus on ways we can support children as they engage in thinking, talking, and creating. During this time we analyze and interpret our observations and ask specific questions that draw upon the experience of each person engaged in supporting the child (Jones, 1986). It is in dialogue with each other and as a group that we create a shared framework for working together. As we listen, explore our questions, share our ideas and feelings we reflect the image of ourselves as teacher learners. (Rinaldi, 2001). These intentional conversations build the foundation necessary to ensure children of differing abilities benefit from art experiences.

Try this:

- Engage in "intentional talks" about inclusion of all children in art experiences.
- Discuss observations of what children do with materials, what they say and teachers' hypotheses of what children might be thinking.

- Develop thoughtful questions to guide discussion.

## Conversation about children with differing abilities

*Maria is observing children's investigations at the light table. During a recent trip to the teacher supply store, Maria discovered translucent round shapes used for mathematic counters in the primary grades. Peter has joined the children turning the glasses upside down. The children alternate mirrors and glasses, rearranging the multi-colored counters. Peter follows their lead and adds three counters to the design, remaining engaged for several minutes. Maria reviews Peter's individualized education goals. She wonders if there is a way she can incorporate his interest in organizing "things we see through." She plans to discuss her ideas with her director.*

We all want to feel welcomed, to belong and be accepted in our family, our neighborhood, and by our peers. Being a part of a community is the right of all children. If we are to create a welcoming early education community for all children including those with special needs, we must ask ourselves some difficult questions: What is my bias? What stereotypes



Nancie Tonner West, M.S., stimulates learning through art with children and adults in various settings including early education programs and art centers. She is an instructor and coach for the Colorado Expanding Quality for Infants and Toddlers initiative at Family Resources and Child Care Education; Red Rocks Community College. West received her B.A. degree in art education from Montclair University, New Jersey and M.S. degree in Supervision and Administration from the Bank Street College Early Education Leadership Program. She has coordinated and directed early education inclusion programs and conducts seminars on the creative process involved in art experiences. West credits her appreciation of human diversity to her childhood experiences with Peter, a sibling with developmental disabilities who continues to amaze and delight her.

# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

influence us and interfere with our belief in the competence of every child? According to Carla Rinaldi (2001), "Dealing with differences is difficult and requires commitment and hard work." Sandy Peterson, author of *When Children Soar With the Wind: Including Children with Special Needs* (2004), affirms this when she writes, "Our attitudes and beliefs about disability may be invisible to us, and yet they will determine our decisions and actions toward children with disabilities."

## Try this:

- Reflect on the feelings and attitudes we bring to inclusion.
- Examine the language used to describe or discuss a child with differing abilities and avoid out-dated or pejorative words.

## Create a culture affirming the value of diversity

*Maria has brought in a box of glass beads from Africa. The children select beads to examine and the group talks about their characteristics. Lorene has a limited vocabulary and communicates with gestures. She places the beads in a line on the table. Cyrus, Jackson, and Libby invent complex designs on swatches of fabric. Maria offers the suggestion: "You can draw your designs and I will take photographs." The children comment as they review the photographs and drawings. Although Lorene does not draw her design, she enjoys seeing pictures and hearing the description of her "bead story." Maria shares this story at KidTalk. With the assistance of the special education consultant, teachers explore ideas to build on Lorene's strengths.*

The concept of universal design — the design of experiences and environments to allow all people participation without the need for adaptation or specialized design — guides Maria's art planning. Utilizing these principles can make programs more welcoming to children with special needs and decrease the need for specialized equipment. We do this by choosing, adapting, and using everyday materials in ways that enhance children's opportunities to participate, play, and learn (Haugen, 2005).

In the preceding illustration Maria relies on her knowledge of children's artistic development to appropriately modify her responses to the age and stage of each child (Goldhawk, 1998). Lorene's behavior is typical of the way an older toddler approaches materials; she is enchanted with one aspect of action — standing the beads up. Maria celebrates the unique expressions and learning process of each child. Similarly, Ellen Daniels, a special educator in Conifer, Colorado, describes the

many ways that art experiences enhance children's development:

- Painting at the easel promotes gross motor development of the upper body.
- Drawing, clay, and bead stringing develop fine motor and pre-writing skills.
- Talking about art and the art process encourages speech and language development.
- Engagement in visual art stimulates cognitive learning.
- Children learn cooperative skills when working together on an art project.

## Try this:

- Introduce children to new experiences through guided exploration.
- Demonstrate how to use art tools and provide explanations of art media.
- Adapt or modify your responses, expectations, and language to match the developmental age and stage of each child.
- Allow children daily uninterrupted blocks of time for art experiences.
- Support children's desire to revisit a media or endeavor for many days, weeks.
- When adaptive tools and equipment are necessary, seek out designs that appeal to all children (i.e., brushes with round handles).
- Deepen your understanding of children with differing abilities.
- Evaluate the art space: look at organization; accessibility; attractiveness; reflections of children and adults of differing ability.

## Conversation about art for all children

*When children visit the art area the next day, Maria introduces the term "sculpture" and invites the children to create lines in space with wire and beads. The children twist their designs into various snake-like shapes as they string translucent beads. Peter holds the wire between his fingers flipping it back and forth. Adam recalls how he attached Styrofoam® with toothpicks and Maria encourages Adam to pursue this idea. Adam sticks the wire into the Styrofoam® pieces. He forms a mental picture of a "train" and selects several pieces for the cars. Jackson initiates a construction with the same materials, naming it a front loader. Peter is interested in the Styrofoam® and breaks it into small sections. Maria encourages Adam and Jackson to work together on a group project and invites Peter to contribute his collection of Styrofoam® to this endeavor. "We*

*discovered many ways to use our materials today," says Maria. Maria engages the children in talking about how their art is the same and different. The group generates a list to share during community time.*

We can think of art as an integrated component of all children's educational experiences. What are the outcomes for *all* children when we include children with differing abilities in art experiences? How do art experiences develop an appreciation for diversity? How can art activities be designed to allow children to participate without the need for specialized equipment?

Ursula Kolbe, author of *Rapunzel's Supermarket — All About Young Children and Their Art* (2001), describes the development of children's social understanding when she writes, "As children listen to other's ideas and see each other's work, they have opportunities to learn that there are different points of view." Young children continually categorize, arrange, match, and transform the objects and materials in their environment. According to Deb Curtis and Margie Carter (2003), children have a natural eye for design and "can make good use of diverse, attractively displayed open-ended materials. As they explore textures, shapes, colors, and sizes, they notice how things are alike and how they are different." Teachers and special education staff at the Arvada West Preschool in Colorado maintain, "Children learn they can show the world who they are inside and what they are thinking, even though they can't say it in words. We need to believe in and be comfortable with all children exploring materials and experiencing art in their own way whether through total immersion or simply touching the materials."

#### Try this:

- Help children discover the ways their art and art process is similar and different.
- Facilitate open-ended art experiences with potential for variation and discovery.
- Build on children's interests when planning art experiences.
- Promote **inquiry**, problem solving, and creative thinking.
- Encourage children to talk and **collaborate** together on group projects doing sculpture, murals, weaving, printmaking, **and clay work**.
- Offer invitations to create with natural and found materials (Curtis, 2004; Weisman & Gandini, 1999).

## Conversation on art education

*Maria explains the changes in her thinking about art. "When I first started teaching, I was not creative. I gave children shapes for pasting to resemble the model I prepared. Then I attended workshops and*

*learned ways to provide children with open-ended art experiences. I was still frustrated because so much of their work looked 'ugly' or did not have meaning. An art specialist offered suggestions and helped me think about the value of art experiences for young children. This exchange increased my confidence. Now that I know more about art, I feel better prepared to respond to children with differing abilities."*

Through ongoing conversation we can challenge our assumptions about art, artists, and art education and redefine our practice.

- How important are art experiences for young children?
- What is our purpose in offering art to young children?
- What do children learn from art experiences?
- What are the roles of an art specialist, special educator, and therapist and how can they help us in our work?
- Can we provide a meaningful art program if we do not have training in art education and do not feel creative?
- How do we move from teacher-directed art activities to facilitating meaningful art experiences planned in collaboration with children?
- How can we engage parents in our arts partnership?
- What community resources can support us in our work?

Through art we:

- Experience the joy of creating ("making and doing")
- Represent ideas and feelings using the "language of art"
- Develop creative and critical thinking ability
- Reflect on our learning and our thinking
- Collaborate with others to solve problems
- Invent unique products
- Decode visual communication
- Enjoy the qualities of materials
- Explore art processes
- Appreciate the art of artists and peers
- See the value of difference
- Understand how we are the same
- Learn math and literacy concepts
- Form a disposition for artistic experiences

Dewey (1956) believed that construction with art materials ("built up" work) draws upon the child's natural motivation to explore materials. The process of constructing develops observation skills and sharpens the senses. Art experiences increase children's personal responsibility for their work, which emerges through many actions and decisions.

#### Try this:

- Write and display a statement about the value of art for all children.

# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

- Document observations of children and use the information for planning art experiences and guiding the teaching process.
- Exhibit art by children and artists including art by individuals with differing abilities.
- Invite artists with differing abilities to talk with children.
- Read children's books about art and artists with and without disabilities.
- Do your own art with different media, and reflect on the creative process.
- Encourage representing through drawing, sculpture, and other art "languages" as part of science and project investigations.
- Become familiar with national, state, and local art standards.

## Conversation on collaboration

Angela talks with Maria about her hopes and dreams for her daughter Tenisha. "I would like you to assume she is competent and encourage her to participate even if it is only for fleeting moments. It takes extra effort to engage her. She enjoys physical movement such as getting her hands and feet into the paint and messing around. I would like you to meet her where she is developmentally. Most important, I want Tenisha to learn how to be with other children."

Jonathan describes his son to Maria. "Michael started drawing before age two. He covered the kitchen floor, refrigerator, and even the washing machine with drawings. Michael has many challenges and uses art as an outlet to express himself. The fine motor action helps him close off what he sees as the chaos of the world. When he goes into his world of drawing he feels a semblance of control over his world. Drawing brings beauty to his life."

Partnerships with parents of children with differing abilities are necessary to achieve the goal of successful inclusionary art experiences and may include the following questions:

- What do you see as important outcomes for your child?
- What special education goals can we support through art?
- How does your child feel about "getting messy"?
- What modifications (if any) do you make for your child?
- Will the specialists supporting your child provide staff training or technical assistance?
- Does the child have any health or other needs that impact his participation in art activities?
- What do you see as our role in your child's art experience?

Successful collaboration requires time and the commitment to ongoing conversation and planning, opportunities to learn

from specialists, discuss what has worked, and develop our understanding of each child's needs and growth.

### Try this:

- Commit to collaboration between staff, parents, art specialists, special educators, and, therapists.
- Seek out community, state, and national resources for training and technical assistance.

## Conclusion

Adequate support is necessary to make inclusive environments work. In addition to conversation, support includes training, planning time, and ongoing consultation with specialists (Schwartz, Odom, & Sandall, 1999). Our journey towards successful inclusion of all young children in art involves:

- Constructing meaningful art curriculum with children
- Scaffolding learning for children with differing abilities
- Matching art experiences to individualized education plans
- Learning different art media and processes, and
- Adapting activities to the age and stage of individual children

Communication among adults paves the way for effective collaboration among teachers, parents, and the support team. Ongoing dialogue in a collegial atmosphere forms the foundation for ensuring all children with differing abilities in our programs experience the wonder and joy of art.

## References

- Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2003) *Designs for living and learning: Transforming early childhood environments*. St. Paul, MN: RedLeaf Press.
- Curtis, D. (2004, May/June). "Environments to engage children." *Exchange*, 157, 38-40.
- Dewey, J. (1956). *The child and the curriculum and the school and society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Goldhawk, S., & The Task Force on Children's Learning and the Arts: Birth to Age Eight. (1998). *Making creative connections*. Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership.
- Haugen, K. (2005). "Learning materials for children of all abilities." *Exchange*, Out of the Box Training Kits.
- Jones, E. (1986). *Teaching adults: An active learning approach*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Kolbe, U. (2001). *Rapunzel's supermarket: All about young children and their art*. Paddington, Australia: Peppinot Press.

Peterson, S. (2004). "When children soar with the wind: Including children with special needs." In Colorado Department of Education Early Childhood Initiatives *Expanding quality in infant toddler care curriculum*, pp. 1-28. Denver, CO: Colorado Department of Education.

Rinaldi, C. (2001). "Documentation and assessment: What is the relationship?" In Project Zero; Reggio Children, pp. 78-89. *Making learning visible: Children as individual and group learners*. Cambridge, MA: Reggio Children.

Rinaldi, C. (2001). "Infant-toddler centers and preschools as places of culture." In Project Zero: Reggio Children, pp. 38-47. *Making learning visible: Children as individual and group learners*. Cambridge, MA: Reggio Children.

Schwartz, I., Odom, S., & Sandall, S. (1999, November). "Including young children with special needs." *Exchange*, 130, 74-78.

Wheatley, M. J. (2002). *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Weisman C. T., & Gandini, L. (1999). *Beautiful stuff: Learning with found materials*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications, Inc.

## Resources

**Circle of Inclusion:** [www.circleofinclusion.org](http://www.circleofinclusion.org)

**Child Care plus+:** <http://ruralinstitute.umn.edu/childcareplus>

**Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education:** <http://ericee.org>

**National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC):** [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)

**National Child Care Information Center:** <http://nccic.org>

**National Head Start Disabilities Services Training Center:** <http://ccf.edc.org//ntcl>

**Special Education Resources on the Internet (SERI):** <http://seriweb.com>

**The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC):** [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org)

**Very Special Arts:** [www.VSA.org](http://www.VSA.org)

**VSA Start with the Arts Curriculum.** [www.VSA.org](http://www.VSA.org)

**Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families:** [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

## Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

**Do you believe in conversation?:** What a wonderful question! Find out if your teachers believe using the three suggestions listed on page 47.

**Creating a culture affirming the value of diversity:** Try the list on page 48 to tackle the challenge to create a culture that affirms the value of diversity.

**Conversations about art of all children:** Challenged to find ways to include all children in art activities? Discuss the suggestions on page 49 with teachers and make plans to implement the ones that each teacher finds most intriguing.

**Worth doing:** Challenge your teachers' assumptions about art, artists, and art education by asking teachers to individually answer the questions posed on page 49. Then, convene small groups to share and discuss their responses. End with action planning to redefine practices.

**Extend the conversation:** West's conversation on collaboration could easily be expanded beyond art experiences to other kinds of experiences in your school. Extend the conversation by tackling other types of learning experiences children have in your program.

**Library resources:** The great list of printed and Internet resources provides a perfect starting place. Identify two or three teachers who are willing to see what they can find that might be worth adding to the program's professional library.