

Learning Together Through the Arts

Through Arts Partners, special education and gifted students in a Brooklyn school district are learning from, and about, each other.

Photographs by Amy Kargman

An unlikely combination—gifted and special education children learning together—is at the heart of an unusual arts program in New York City. The gifted children learn spontaneity from the special education children, who express their ideas freely, unhampered by the need to find the one right answer. The special education children, who are learning the appropriate behaviors to earn the group's respect, benefit from the opportunity for socialization. Most important, however, two groups of children who would not otherwise meet have developed mutual appreciation and an understanding of individual differences.

The Arts Partners program—a collaboration of the New York City Board of Education, the Department of Cultural Affairs, the Youth Bureau, and the Office of the Mayor—enriches the quality of education for public school children by bringing local artists into their classrooms. After submitting a proposal to Arts Partners, followed by a detailed plan for combining gifted and special education classes, New York Community School District 18 was accepted to participate in the program.

A Visit to District 18

Now in its third year, District 18's program includes six schools and in-



For 10 weeks, a workshop in puppetry every morning and one in drama every afternoon provides Arts Partners students hands-on creativity and self-expression; here a student's concentration on creating his own puppet shows clearly.



The arts provide a common meeting ground for students of differing intellectual abilities; here, artist Bill Kasuli from the Studio-In-A-School Association shows mixed-ability students the specifics of puppet construction.



Practicing different actions and adopting different voices, students enjoy the results of their work, especially when it's time for the puppets to dance.

volves a special education and a gifted class at each site. The special education classes are mostly self-contained, noncategorical placements for mildly handicapped students; and the gifted classes include children identified by the district as intellectually gifted. The two cooperating arts agencies, the Studio-In-A-School Association and the Creative Arts Team, work with students on puppetry and participatory dramatics, respectively. The special education and gifted students are combined into two mixed groups, each including one of the two participating classroom teachers. Each group works with one of the arts agencies for a one-hour workshop in the morning; in the afternoon, the groups switch places so that every student works with all the artists every week for the program's 10-week duration.

The success of the program is vividly demonstrated by a visit to Curtis

Estabrook Elementary School (P.S. 272) in Brooklyn. You enter the first classroom: special education and gifted students are indistinguishable. All children are actively engaged in bringing to life the puppets created during last week's workshop. Artist Bill Kasuli from the Studio-In-A-School Association exudes contagious energy as he encourages the students to practice different voices and actions with their puppets. He and the classroom teacher, Maureen Powell, work effectively as a team as she channels the children's excitement. Later on, sounds of snoring fill the room as Kasuli calms the group after an energetic dance activity by putting the puppets to sleep.

In another classroom, the other half of each class is working with Jacqueline Sawyer and Rhonda Bondie, two artists on the Creative Arts Team from New York University. The students and the teacher, Sharon Noodelman, are animatedly acting in

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an open-ended story called "Lion Hunt." As the workshop concludes, the children are encouraged to think of an ending for the story, to be acted out during next week's workshop.

Individual Successes

Collaborative planning at each school enables the children to benefit simultaneously from the expertise of the teachers and the artists. Each school's gifted teacher and special education teacher work together, and the teachers foster friendships among the members of the two classes. Administrative support keeps the teachers' and the artists' enthusiasm and commitment alive.

Although formal evaluations have not been completed, the interim report, prepared in March 1988 from questionnaire responses and systematic observations, documents positive results from the program. But the small personal triumphs that occur every day are even more exciting.

- One of the gifted students, feeling pressure from home, had not smiled during class well into November: he smiled for the first time during an Arts Partners' workshop.

- Joining a baseball team skit already in progress, a special education student felt left out. His peers promptly rewrote their skit to include the position of team manager for their additional actor.

- To demonstrate how his puppet could gallop, a gifted student enlisted the assistance of a special education child. While one moved the puppet, the other made sound effects with his hands. Together these students showed the true triumph of the program: a gifted student and a special education student spontaneously cooperating for mutual success. □

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