

Teaching Art to Diverse Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

The arts are a fundamental component of the human experience and have a role in the development of students' cultural awareness and acceptance. Students with disabilities are likely to be included in arts education, however access to education in the arts has decreased disproportionately for schools with predominantly at-risk students. This article highlights findings from eight practitioner articles from 2009 to 2019, describing instructional practices of K-12 visual arts education within U.S. schools that address the needs of students with intersecting cultural identity and disability. Empirical studies could not be located. Visual arts education practices addressing various dimensions of culture are described. Implications for research and practice are provided.

Keywords: visual arts education, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD), disabilities, LGBT, intersectionality

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Teaching Art to Diverse Students with Disabilities

The arts are a fundamental component of the human experience and access to the arts has been a human right across cultures and across time (Efland, 1990; Sabol, 2017). For example, Australian indigenous people created rock art more than 10,000 years ago, before written forms of communication were introduced (Layton, 1992). Education in the arts empowers students to respond to societal events and build community (Dewey, 1934). Young people today are the makers of contemporary art and culture yet access to arts education has declined drastically in the United States especially for students from diverse backgrounds (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011).

Arts Access and Educational Equity

Parsad and Spiegelman (2012) reported from the NCES studies conducted, during the 1999–2000 and 2009–2010 school years, to determine student access to arts education and the quality of the instruction. Specifically, they found most public schools offered visual arts but that instruction in visual arts decreased in both elementary and secondary schools over time. In the 1999–2000 school year 87% of elementary and 93% of secondary schools offered instruction in visual arts while in the 2009–2010 school year those percentages changed to 83% and 89%, respectively, indicating a 4% decrease in access for each group. Schools with high a poverty concentration reported lower access to visual arts instruction with 79% of elementary and 84% of secondary schools in the 1999–2000 school year and 80% of both elementary and secondary schools in the 2009–2010 school year, inequities of poverty are illustrated by this decline in access to visual arts instruction.

Rabkin and Hedberg (2011) described data collected by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) on the Surveys of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPAs) and reported that the percentage of 18 year-olds who accessed any type of arts education in childhood dropped over

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15% between 1982 and 2008 (64.6% and 49.5%, respectively). Access to education in the arts has decreased disproportionately for schools with higher percentages of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) and those who come from families with low incomes (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2009). Black and Latinx students have significantly less access to arts education than their White peers. According to SPPA data, the percentage of 18 to 24 year-olds who accessed any type of arts education in childhood differed based on race/ethnicity and with an increasing divide in access (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). The difference in access to the arts for White students and Latinx students in 1982 was 12% while Black students differed in access from White students by 8.3%. This gap in access widened in 2008 to a 29.8% difference in access between White and Latinx students and 31.7% between Black and White students. White student access to the arts stayed relatively stable between 1982 and 2008 (59.2% and 57.9%, respectively), while Latinx and Black student access to the arts in those years has steadily declined creating a greater racial/ethnic gap in access over the last three decades (47.2% to 28.1% and 50.9% to 26.2%, respectively) (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011).

Decreased access to the arts nationwide may be attributed to the often underrecognized importance the arts play in the overall educational experience of children (Bamford, 2006). The justification of the inclusion of arts education in school curriculums is unfortunately often attributed to contributions the arts make to other types of learning, rather than arts education as an essential part of culture making and cultural awareness (Hamblen, 1993). Extensive research efforts have assessed a variety of variables looking for positive outcomes (e.g., academic, physical, mental, civic) for children engaged in the arts with particular attention to students considered at-risk (Catterall et al., 1999; Catterall, 2012; Eisner, 1998; Hamblen, 1993; LeRoux & Bernadska, 2014). Although arts education has long been recognized by art educators as vital,

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research is inconclusive on the effects of arts education on ipso facto academic achievement and educational performance (Darts, 2006; GAO, 2009; Hamblen, 1993). The recent passage and implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) has given promise to increased access to arts education through the explicit inclusion of the arts in the definition of a well-rounded education and dedicated funding in arts education.

Arts Access and Inclusion

The perceptions of the benefits of arts education for students with disabilities has changed over time with shifting beliefs in purpose. The intersections of arts education and disability first entered the literature in the 1930s and coincided with the rise of custodial institutions for people with disabilities (Blandy, 1991). The purpose of arts education within institutions was largely to document the influence of disability on art-making. At the time it was believed that people with severe disabilities could not benefit from arts education and were excluded (Blandy, 1991). A major shift in the inclusion of students with disabilities in public school arts education happened in the early 1970s with the passage of key legislation; the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Public Law 94-142 in 1975 (Blandy, 1991). The inclusion of students with disabilities in K-12 education was mandated and ushered in the mainstreaming movement in which arts educators were among the first to include students with disabilities in the general education setting (Gabriel, 2018; Wexler, 2005). The purpose of arts education at this time focused on art as improving quality of life and social inclusion. Literature focused on strategies for inclusion and including the artwork of people with disabilities or “outsider” artists into the curriculum. In her seminal work, Guay (1994) found that large numbers of art teachers (70%) felt unprepared or underprepared to teach students with disabilities while at the same time, 85% of those teachers reported teaching students with mild disabilities. During the inclusive

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school movement, the integration of students with severe disabilities in art education was reconsidered. According to Coleman et al. (2015), contemporary art teachers who teach students with significant disabilities continued to have limited knowledge about their needs and inclusive practices. Beginning in the 1970s and continuing into the present, the disability rights' movement, disability arts movement and discourse in the area of disability studies has affected art education by reframing disability identity, culture, aesthetic, and oppression with the purpose of empowerment through the arts (Derby, 2016).

Students do not experience inclusion and exclusion in the abstract, but through actual experience. According to the 40th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], 2018), in 2016, 94.9% of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA were educated in general education classrooms for at least some portion of the school day. For many students with disabilities, the first general education setting where they were included with their peers was in the arts (Guay, 1995).

Changing Culture

The student population within U.S. public schools is shifting in demographics. The majority of students receiving special education in the 2017-18 schoolyear did not identify as White (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). New approaches must be considered to meet the needs of the new diverse collective majority of students receiving special education. Diverse students with disabilities require accessible and meaningful instructional approaches in the arts (Anderson & Gabriel, 2019). NCES reported, from 2000 to 2015, a significant decrease in White (-12%) and Black (-2%) students and an increase in Latinx (+10%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (+1%) students enrolled in public schools (NCES, 2019). The English

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language learner (ELL) student population has grown from 8.1% of the population in 2000 to 9.6% in 2016, with variation among the states (NCES, 2019).

The CDC (2017) reported in the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) that 2.4% of high school students identified as gay or lesbian, 8.0% as bisexual, and 4.2% as not sure of sexual identity. Additionally the 2017 YRBS piloted questions about gender identity and reported that 1.8% of high school students identified as transgender, 1.6% said they were not sure of their gender identity and 2.1% did not know what the gender identity question was asking (CDC, 2017). Gallup's Daily Tracking survey (2017) reported a steady rise in the percentage of LGBT adults among all race/ethnic groups between 2012 and 2017, with the greatest increase in younger generations (Newport, 2018). Projected enrollment trends for 2027 reflect a growing student body with even greater diversity (NCES, 2019).

Culture and Disability Culture

The population of students with disabilities served under IDEA rose from 13% in the 2000-2001 schoolyear to 14% in 2017-2018. Of those students receiving special education services, 79% did not identify as White (NCES, 2019). The percentage of students served under IDEA by race/ethnicity was highest for American Indian/Alaska Native (18%), followed by Black students (16%), White students and students of two or more races (14% each), Latinx students (13%), Pacific Islander students (11%), and Asian students (7%). ELL students also identified as students with disabilities, represent 14.2% of the total ELL population (NCES, 2019). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) students are an under-researched group within special education. Little evidence exists describing the special education services LGBT youth receive or their representation within special education (Richmond, 2012). LGBT students with disabilities are “virtually ignored” in the literature (Kosciw, 2004, p. 2) even though they

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are more likely than the general population to have a disability (Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2019).

Overrepresentation of CLD students in special education has been a persistent issue (see Brown, Dennis, & Matute-Chavarria, 2019; Kincaid & Sullivan, 2017; Whitford & Carrero, 2019). For example, the overrepresentation of Black students in categories with more subjective identification criteria such as developmental delay, specific learning disability, emotional disability, and intellectual disabilities has been comprehensively discussed (see Sullivan & Bal, 2013). According to Haager and Aceves (2017), "...Schools are increasingly encountering children whose primary language is different from that of the majority and who also experience learning difficulties or disabilities..." (p. 184). Sullivan (2011) reported disproportionate identification and placement of CLD students identified as English language learners in high incidence categories for special education, mirroring a long-standing issue in the field. Disproportionate numbers of non-White students are receiving special education and culturally responsive teaching strategies are needed (Gay, 2002).

Disability as a cultural category is not frequently acknowledged in arts education as demonstrated by its absence in major surveys of social issues and curricular content (Derby, 2011; La Porte et al., 2008; Milbrandt, 2002). Professional interests in the synergy between arts education and disability have grown in recent years as evidenced by the formation of special interest groups, such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Division of Visual and Performing Arts Education in 2015 (DARTS), National Art Education Association (NAEA) Special Needs in Art Education (SNAE) in 2001, and Disability Studies, Arts and Education (DSAE) in 2017. A significant number of students' identities intersect at the cultural crossroads of disability, race, ethnicity, and/or language, as well as an unknown number of LGBT students

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who also have disabilities. Professionals are recognizing this growing need to be inclusive and responsive to intersecting student identities. Gay (2002) suggested that "...the educational quality of students of color in both special and regular education can be improved significantly by using instructional programs and practices that reflect their cultural heritages, experiences, and perspectives" (p. 613).

It is necessary when considering art education supports for students with disabilities to also consider culturally responsive teaching strategies. Art is situated in a temporal and cultural context. Inclusive practices in art education should be responsive to the culture of the learner. Arts education that is not culturally responsive runs the risk of reflecting a narrow, Eurocentric middle class culture reinforcing White privilege ideology and discrimination (Baglieri et al., 2011; Hamblen, 1993; Linton, 2010; Nochlin, 1971; Slee, 2004). An arts education curriculum grounded in culturally relevant teaching practices recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all that is taught, including the experiences of those with disabilities (Jackson et al., 2009, Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to review the literature and identify existing practices in K-12 visual arts education that address the needs of students with intersecting cultural identity and disability. In previous surveys of the literature, authors described the intersections of arts education and a dimension of identity. For example, Crockett et al. (2104) reviewed literature from 2002 to 2012 on arts integration and special education, Penketh (2014) reviewed literature from 1982 to 2012 on visual arts education in the *International Journal of Art and Design Education* with explicit mentions of disability, and Kraehe et al. (2016) reviewed arts equity in urban education. Despite the growing population of CLD students receiving special education,

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prior research has not yet reviewed the literature on visual arts practices for those with intersecting identities. Efforts in making arts instruction more accessible through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Assistive Technology (AT) are evidenced in the literature (Coleman & Cramer, 2015; Wexler & Luethi-Garreht, 2015) but few studies concentrate on making instruction more meaningful and accessible for diverse students with disabilities. References to CLD students in this article inclusively defines culture to incorporate discussions of historically marginalized racial/ethnic, linguistic, sexual, and gender minority students as well as those with disabilities.

Therefore to address this weakness in the literature, the focus of this article is on specifically designed instruction in K-12 visual arts education within U.S. schools, examining the instructional materials, strategies, and activities presented in the literature within the last 10 years that address this growing need for attention to intersecting identities in inclusive visual arts settings. Additionally, attention was given to cultural representation and recognition within the practices including the voice and visibility of artists with disabilities.

Method

Search Procedures

Articles were identified through a comprehensive search of the literature in the following electronic databases; Art Full Text (H.W. Wilson), Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson), ERIC, PsycINFO and Google Scholar. An initial search for studies was limited to peer-reviewed articles in English with a publication year between 2009 and 2019, to reflect the most current research. To yield the maximum number of potentially relevant articles, the following Boolean searches for key populations of students were conducted: *disabilities* or *disability* or *disabled* or *impairment* or *special education* or *special needs*, and *CLD* or *culturally and linguistically*

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diverse or *culturally diverse* or *race* or *ethnicity* or *minority*, or *Black*, or *American Indian* or *Alaskan Native* or *indigenous* or *Native American*, or *Latinx* or *Latino* or *LGBTQ* or *LGBT* or *lesbian* or *gay* or *homosexual* or *bisexual* or *transgender* or *queer* or *sexual minority*. The following Boolean phrase was used in combination with population phrases for specific contexts: “arts education not language arts, art education, art, visual arts, visual arts instruction, and art education in schools”. The following Boolean phrase was used in combination with population and context phrases for to search the literature for teaching practices: “culturally responsive teaching or culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusion or inclusive education or mainstreaming”. Keywords identified many off topic abstracts (e.g., art center, art therapy, language arts, state of the art, art activities, attending art class, art of..., clip art, lost art of...) related to the term art. We disqualified articles based on abstract information. Publications from the largest and oldest art education and special education professional organizations the National Art Education Association (NAEA) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) were specifically searched including *Exceptional Children (EC)*, *TEACHING Exceptional Children (TEC)*, *Studies in Art Education* and *Art Education*. Additionally the *International Journal of Art & Design Education (iJADE)* was searched. The four volumes of professional papers produced by the VSA (Department of VSA and Accessibility at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts) on the topic of intersections of the arts and special education published by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts were searched for practices addressing intersectional identities in visual arts education. A dedicated peer-reviewed journal emerged from the field of arts education and special education in 2019, thus volume 1, number 1 of the *Journal of the Arts and Special Education* was also searched. The VSA annotated bibliography of journal articles and books pertaining to work at the intersection of the arts and special education including publication dates

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up to November of 2012 was also searched for related peer-reviewed articles (VSA, 2012).

Lastly, *ArtsEdSearch* (<https://www.artsedsearch.org>), an online clearinghouse of research focused on the outcomes of arts education, was searched for the above Boolean phrases within the population categories of special needs, low SES, and underserved.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Arts education is an umbrella term inclusive of various individual arts disciplines (i.e., music, visual arts, dance, and theatre) and artistic approaches that combine disciplines (Bresler, 2007). The focus of this review of the literature was on specifically designed instruction in visual arts for the purpose of teaching visual arts education standards and content in K-12 schools.

Teaching through the arts, *embedded arts education*, and the term *arts integration* all refer to using the arts to enhance instruction in another content area, these articles were omitted. Articles related to art therapy in the schools were also omitted.

To be included in this review, each article was evaluated using two inclusion criteria. Criteria were selected to produce a collection of studies that had the features required to address the research question. First, articles had to include a K-12 visual arts education instructional strategy for students with disabilities in the United States. Second, the article had to include reference to a dimension of culture defined by race, ethnicity, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, or intersecting identities.

Findings

Intersecting Identity and Visual Arts Instruction

The extensive search of articles from 2009 to 2019 produced no peer-reviewed articles focused on the instructional practices of art educators addressing the needs of CLD students with disabilities. At the time of writing this article, only 8 peer-reviewed practitioner articles were

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located that addressed the instructional needs of culturally diverse students or students with disabilities in a K-12 visual arts education context. Three of those articles included instructional strategies, materials, or activities that were responsive to the race or ethnicity of students (Eldridge, 2013; Lopez, 2009; Martinez, 2012) and the other 5 articles addressed instructional strategies, materials, or activities responsive to disability (Alter-Muri, 2017; Burdick & Causton-Theoharis, 2012; Coleman & Cramer, 2015; Seidler, 2011; Wexler & Luethi-Garrecht, 2015). Furniss (2009) described her experience teaching art to a student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that summarized the sentiment found in many of the reviewed articles, “I was not familiar with teaching methods for young artists with ASD. Therefore, it was necessary for me to improvise and develop an approach by trial and error.” (p. 19)

Practice-based Evidence

The study of the intersection of arts education and special education is an emergent field of research with only a few studies considered high-quality by *What Works Clearinghouse* (WWC) standards (VSA, 2017). Only 4 of the 35 submitted studies (as of July, 2017) in arts education (arts, music, theatre, dance), and none specifically in visual arts education or arts education and special education, have met the established educational design and evidence standards of WWC (VSA, 2017). Most of the literature reporting outcomes for visual arts education for students with disabilities takes the form of case studies (Malley & Silverstein, 2014). Strategies to include students with disabilities in visual arts instruction are included in textbooks for pre-service teachers, practitioner journals, and art education magazines (Gerber & Guay, 2006). This large base of practitioner driven evidence has historically been recognized as a valid means of understanding and disseminating approaches to teaching diverse learners (Anderson et al., 2018) but a need for evidence-based practices in the arts education and special

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education field has emerged in conjunction with the rise of inclusion. In 2017, the VSA published a map for research in the arts and special education outlining instructional design and innovation as one of the 3 priority areas for research (VSA, 2017). This priority calls for a need to investigate the instructional strategies and curricular approaches specific to the arts that can lead to successful outcomes for students with disabilities. The current literature review illuminates this gap in the research.

Visual Arts Education Responding to an Increasingly Diverse and Growing Population

With the increase of diverse students, students with disabilities, and diverse students with disabilities in visual arts education classes, it is important to examine barriers to learning within the instructional materials, strategies, and activities. The three articles addressing race/ethnicity in visual arts instruction were all case studies in secondary classrooms. Lopez (2009) analyzed the artwork and interviewed three 6th grade female students who identified as dual-cultural to better understand how they understood identity and spoke about culture. Dual-culture was defined by the author as someone who is American born with parents born in another country. The three participants specifically identified as Jamaican-American, Cameroonian-American, and Iranian-American. The author had the participants engage in a self-portrait project as a form of critical multicultural education that consisted of a template to write a poem about themselves and a prompt to create a visual representation of American culture. Lopez (2009) stated that art education should focus on increasing students' knowledge of their own cultures and investigations of other cultures. She also promoted the concept of biculturalism, which is maintaining two identities.

Martinez (2012) described a culturally responsive teaching approach called *culture jamming*, an approach to art-making borrowed from the Avant Garde Situationist International

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group known for radical political cultural sabotage. In Martinez's cultural jam eight students were given blurry pictures of faces from three ethnic groups with three names listed below and were asked to choose which name best fit the person. The activity was followed up with questions about perception. The author found that the activity elicited connections to stereotypes, racial profiling, bi-racial identity, and perceptions about ethnicity. For an activity to be culturally responsive the author believed it should do more than just raise awareness about other cultures, the activity must acknowledge and examine social power structures.

In the third case study, Eldridge (2013) described the inclusion of a graffiti artist from the community, Sentrock, in a 7th and 8th grade visual arts classroom in a predominantly low-income, Latinx school. The author focused the case study on Sentrock's teaching methods and how graffiti art is different from vandalism. The author described the inclusion of graffiti art in the curriculum as fitting into the concept of visual culture education where every day experiences are vital in understanding one's own cultural experience. These three case studies described approaches to responding to culture within visual arts instruction addressing issues of examining self and others.

Visual Arts Education Responding to Disability

Five studies were identified that responded to disability within visual arts instruction; four were general reviews about classroom supports for students with disabilities (Alter-Muri, 2017; Burdick & Causton-Theoharis, 2012; Coleman & Cramer, 2015; Wexler & Luethi-Garrecht, 2015) and one was a project case study about confronting disability stereotypes (Seidler, 2011). Similar in purpose to Martinez (2012), the project "Fighting Disability Stereotypes with Comics," (Seidler, 2011) included students with and without disabilities in examining comics made by artists with disabilities responding to depictions of disability. The

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author made the important distinction between artist with disabilities making art and disabilities artists, the latter includes disability identity as a theme within the artwork. Seidler then had students create their own comic confronting a disability stereotype. Seidler focused on disabilities not represented within the classroom because she did not want to make the students with disabilities uncomfortable.

Two of the studies addressed the needs of students with ASD. Wexler and Luethi-Garreht (2015) included narratives by people with autism and discussed ways to make the environment and equipment in an art room accommodating for students with ASD. Whereas Alter-Muri (2017) described visual arts instructional strategies and UDL for students with ASD. Coleman and Cramer (2015) described ways to use AT and modify equipment for students with more intense supports (i.e., visual, severe, and multiple disabilities) to participate in art instruction. Burdick and Causton-Theoharis (2012) also described a support for students with more intense needs, the use of a one-to-one paraprofessional. The authors described the role of the paraprofessional and ways to utilize their support within the art room. While examples were limited, visual arts teachers are adapting tools, using AT, arranging their classrooms for access, and using inclusive practices to address the needs of students with disabilities and, in at least one example, artists with disabilities are included in the curriculum.

Discussion

Voice and Identity

Teaching practices that are responsive to learner identity incorporate aspects of students' culture into the curriculum (Rajagopal, 2011). Students need a curriculum that reflects their identity to affirm their importance in the classroom and the world. A curriculum and teacher that acknowledge cultural experience within a community can shift perceptions about who belongs

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and who can succeed. Equity efforts in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education that intend to close the achievement gap may offer a model for practices that can be applied to accessing arts curricula. Inclusive instructional practices in STEM such as incorporating meaningful representation of the contributions of people from various backgrounds into the curriculum can affirm identity while reducing stereotype threat and implicit bias (Master & Meltzoff, 2017). When the teaching workforce is primarily made up of White women, it is especially important to contextualize the experiences of CLD students in the classroom (NCES, 2019). Art educators can reflect student identities in creating and responding to artwork by using instructional strategies and materials that represent their students.

Three articles included instructional approaches to including diverse or disabilities artists in the curriculum. Eldridge (2013), as discussed above, invited a Latinx graffiti artist from the community into the classroom and incorporated his artwork and process of graffiti art creation. Seidler (2011) included disability artists in the curriculum allowing students with disabilities to have representation when learning about professional artists. The author also made confronting stereotype threat related to disability the focus of all student art-making. Wexler and Luethi-Garreht (2015) gave voice and power to both educators and students on the spectrum in their article by including first-person descriptions of preferred accommodations in the art classroom context.

As already noted, an important finding from this review of the literature is the absence of empirical studies for this topic. This confirms the need and urgency for more research on the instructional strategies and curricular approaches specific to the arts and outcomes for diverse students with disabilities as highlighted in priority area 2 of *The Arts and Special Education: A Map for Research* (John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Office of VSA and

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Accessibility, 2017). This topic is emphasized in the VSA international agenda for research as an area of great need. Thus, the following are suggestions for further research specific to teaching art to diverse students with disabilities. Gain a greater understand of the needs of visual arts teachers and special education teachers in meeting the needs of diverse students with disabilities when teaching art. Identify instructional practices addressing the needs of students with intersecting identities that can be replicated through empirical research design.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Diversity among students with disabilities has increased. Students with intersecting cultural and disability identities require accessible and meaningful visual arts instructional approaches. This review attempted to identify empirically-based instructional approaches appropriate for this population but none were located that were directly related. A major limitation in this study was the general scarcity of literature focusing on visual art instruction for diverse students with disabilities. A number of articles were excluded based on the arts discipline type and a broader scope may have included approaches that could generalize to visual arts instruction. Also, the reliance on peer-reviewed journals in the search methodology excluded practice-based evidence documented in non-peer reviewed sources which may have limited the findings in this emerging area of inquiry. These limitations highlight the need for exploratory research in visual arts education and special education, examining and evaluating the effectiveness of the approaches of contemporary art educators.

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