

ABSTRACT

A special education teacher with long experience in arts integration talks about how her roots inform her practice and how the arts can shatter myths about special education.

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Stepping Into America: An Educator's Journey to the Intersection of Special Education and the Arts

A Dream of Special Ed Progress

I flew into America from the southeast Asian continent, the Pearl of the Orient—the Philippines—the land where I was born, with my eyes wide open and my mouth closed. I walked into a new world beyond my motherland, excited about the fact that I was in America—the land where special education was born; the land where, I was taught when growing up, *everything* was born. I was excited and enthusiastic about formulating individualized education programs for each of my students. I looked forward to fully practicing prescriptive and diagnostic teaching and assessment in my very own special education classroom in an inner-city public elementary school. I was all set to make my university professors proud and let my Philippine special education training shine through.

I have always found it fascinating to learn about education trends, research, and practice in the American setting. When I first arrived in the United States, I thought that in American public schools, school-wide and district-wide collaboration existed, special education and allied medical professions were closely interrelated, research projects were funded, and research findings were made public. The Philippine educational system as a whole was centered on nation-building, fostering patriotism, honor, and academic excellence. Education was our passport to realizing our dreams, either locally or off-shore. In America, I have realized that success in education is seen through continuous change. I am delighted by the fact I've been able to merge the traditional and more static beliefs of the Philippine education system with the constant changes that are typical of the American education system. Change and tradition combined result in progress.

I didn't really plan to end up in Chicago. I was afraid of the big city. I was offered a temporary teaching job in a little town in North



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Arnold April

Projectionists.

Carolina, but I wanted a place where I could stay. I visited my uncle Bong in Flossmoor (a suburb of Chicago) and he told me he had met somebody who worked at the Chicago Board of Education when he was returning some books at the public library. She had told him that there was a program recruiting international faculty in three (and only three) areas: science, math, and special ed. That was it; and the program was taking applications for only one more week. I made a phone call to the Board of Ed, I applied, I was herded into a room in a hotel with 50 other international applicants, and I completed a lot of paperwork. Then I traveled back to the Philippines, hopeful and anxious, uncertain when my visa would be processed or when, or if, I would return.

Almost two years went by. I would hunt through the mail every day for any form of correspondence from Chicago. Pretty soon, even before I asked, the mailman would say, "Wala pa po [It's not here yet]," and he would ride off on his noisy, rickety motorbike. I almost gave up on my dream. I did give up on the postal system. I started e-mailing the recruitment officer in the United States, and this was much more effective. I was becoming electronic. I was being Americanized, even before coming to America.

And finally I met my principal in Chicago—through a phone call. She told me that I was "on board." I didn't know what "on board" meant. I was expecting her to say, "You're hired"—no metaphors.

Roots in the Arts, Roots in Learning

Both of my parents had worked in the United States to fill a shortage of health care professionals, but they had decided to raise their daughter in their homeland. I had a wonderful education as a Filipina girl. We had rigorous instruction in all subjects; we had rich and varied experiences with the arts. I fondly recall all the summers that I (along with my sister and my brother) had spent at the University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts, in mixed media art courses facilitated by the land's best artists. My father was an art aficionado. He made it a point to take us to places and exposed us, daily, to activities that broadened our interest, and later on fostered a deep love for the arts.

My father was also a painter, a cross-stitcher, and the editor of a prestigious journal for plastic surgeons. He created handmade leather bags, step-by-step, until the wee hours of the morning while I sat beside him, mesmerized. I grew up watching my father hone his artistry. Instead of listening to bedtime stories, I was lulled to sleep listening to my dad's narrations of his process-oriented art making. On the weekends, he would end up entertaining us with a piano concerto on his grand piano in our family living room. He also invested a lot of money on wind instruments such as the clarinet and the saxophone, which he played so well. Dad also took us to his out-of-town photography competitions.

My first art teacher was my father. Indeed, I am fortunate. Through his inspiration and support, I learned to play the piano, the violin, and the flute. I also

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received formal classical voice and pop singing lessons while growing up. With my dad as my mentor, I wrote my first short story at age eight, "Ufuagan," which spoke of the life of an Ifugao man from the Mountain Province (more popularly known as Baguio City—the City of Pines), the place where my father spent his childhood. We spent numerous Christmas breaks in Baguio, writing together. In fact, I vividly recall my father asking me to "draw what came to mind" as he was narrating, and then to write about what I drew.

We had teachers that came in all different of shapes and sizes, and teachers from all different kinds of teaching ideologies. There was a high level of parent involvement. My father wanted me to be a doctor like him, but I became interested in teaching students with special needs. I had dreamed of teaching in the United States, but little did I know that my travels would not just take me to a city, Chicago. I was embarking on a journey that would change me, as an educator and, more importantly, as a learner.

Chicago Reality

I received a warm welcome from my school principal and was exposed to the various norms expected from a certified Chicago Public School teacher. Everything that was presented sounded good to me, but I was wondered, where are the ideals? I saw lots of standards, benchmarks, and goals, but not many ideals. I came to live my dream, but it wasn't too dreamy at first. Later, when I incorporated the arts into my teaching, teaching *would* become dreamy. And not just dreamy but downright surreal. *Good* surreal. Fantastical. Standards,



Arnold April

Process documentation.

benchmarks, and goals were not enough for me. I was searching for a voice beyond what I was hearing. I wanted to hear the student voice behind all of these standards, benchmarks, and goals. As the days went by, I realized that it was not enough for me to merely keep my eyes open to the realities that I had to face on a daily basis.

I found myself trying out new strategies, like singing a song with a relaxing melody to my students for transitioning into new activities. Instead of simply calling out their names in a loud voice, I sang out tunes to fit into the syllables in each of my students' names. I observed that doing so was calming for my students and for me as well. Once I had calmed down, here is what I learned: There are myths that I had internalized, which stood in the way of teaching these students, these kids whose gifts and talents are real, but were waiting to be tapped.

Let me paint a picture of my sphere of reality where I practice arts integrated instruction in a special education setting. I teach in a primary cross-categorical special education classroom in an urban inner-city



Arnold April

Original opera.

elementary school on the west side of Chicago. My class is composed of 18 students with various disabilities from kindergarten through fifth grade with learning disabilities, mild cognitive impairments, speech-language disorders, emotional disorders, and other health impairments. With support from the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), we integrate the arts into our teaching.

In the midst of standards-based teaching and meeting benchmarks and measurable annual goals on each of my students' individualized education programs, it dawned on me that I had to merge the art and the science of teaching. There had to be a balance and appreciation for both.

I realized that without striking a balance between the art and science of teaching, I would end up superficially entertaining my students, and not providing them the quality of education they deserve.

Arts Integration: Shattering Myths and Revealing Student-Artist-Thinkers

It has been through work in the arts that my students have been exposed to creative and collaborative thinking and decision-making opportunities. They have also learned to ask questions and patiently seek for answers, not just within themselves, but around them. Similarly, arts integration has deepened the questions I ask and has radically changed the way I think about and practice my work. Together with my special education colleague Jack Kono and working closely with the artist Robert Possehl, we have been working to articulate and shatter many of the myths that underlie institutional thinking about special education. What follows is a discussion of a few of these myths and the ways in which our work in

arts integration has helped us go beyond internalizing these myths.

Myth 1: These Kids Can't Do Analytical Work

Special ed students can do craft activities, but art activities that require analytical and poetic thinking are beyond them.

We see the arts as a way for students to think about their thinking. Challenging our students with much more than craft activities, we investigate complex subjects. We have researched the history of the Americans with Disabilities Act and designed a monument to honor that history. We have

explored texture and shape through complex experiments with sand painting. We have composed an original opera, created an installation based on the story "Stone Soup." We have designed and stage-managed intricate projections, performances, and process documentation.

Myth 2: Art Is Nice

Art is good for special ed students because art is nice. Nice art activities help these challenged kids make nice.

Art is not nice. Art is exciting, confusing, passionate, angry, loving, funny, and mysterious, just like our students.



Mark Diaz

"Stone Soup" installation.

Myth 3: The Families of Special Education Students Are Not Interested in Participating in What We Do in the Classroom

Parents are too busy, or just not interested in what we teachers do.

Tell that to Marjerrell's mom, Marilyn; tell that to Diamond's dad, Prince; tell that to Tonya Owens. Marilyn always makes it a point to be with us when Robert, our teaching artist, comes to our class on Thursdays at noon. She also brings in artwork created by her older son. In one of our sketching sessions, Marilyn drew a picture of "a house with a wagon, in order to help the person with a disability who lives in that house do some work." She and her son Marjerrell have created a collaboratively stitched cardboard book-page in connection with our unit on the accessibility symbols related to the Americans with Disabilities Act. I see her constantly initiating conversations with our teaching artist.

Another parent volunteer, Tonya Owens, during our field trip to the Book and Paper Arts Center at Columbia College, asked me if she could use my camera to take pictures of Robert while he was working. As Robert was organizing our class into smaller groups, Tonya wanted an opportunity to observe him more closely, and excitedly said, "I am going to join this group." Off she went, ready to take an active part in the documentation of the project.

Diamond's father sat in with us in class to see how his son was doing. He shared with me his hopes and dreams for his child. He had the notion of taking his son to the private school sector. Then I told him how we are collaboratively creating a handmade paper monument reflecting our students' views on the Americans with Disabilities Act. I also mentioned to him that our class will spearhead a school newsletter promoting environmental awareness, called *Earth Alert!* I shared with him that we were creating a mural painting all about renewable and non-renewable energy sources with the artist Juan Carlos Perez. Immediately, I caught a

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glimpse of anticipation in his eyes. "Really? Thank you, Ms. Cruz." I responded by saying, "Let me know when I can invite you to come and join us." He replied, "I sure will." His gratitude was an affirmation for me of his confidence in my leadership role as an educator.

After our conversation, our communication lines have become more open. We have talked about considering part-time regular education services for Diamond, and his excitement over his involvement in exploring options for Diamond's academic and holistic development was evident in his active advocacy for his son. I am proud to have been an instrument to lead Diamond's dad to empowerment. I believe that my students are a collection of precious gems ("Diamonds," so to speak), and I am honored to have parents entrust their children to my care. Diamond's parents, Prince and Tonya, have made it a point to be consistent parent volunteers, and so have Darriel's mother, Betty, Marjerrell's mom, Marilyn, and Simeon's mother, Latrisha. It is an honor to work closely with actively involved parents, in and out of the classroom. It is a joy to be a part of each other's lives. Our monthly parent-teacher collaborative learning workshops have fostered shared leadership and fellowship within a community of learners—a bond that is solid and unbreakable.

Myth 4: Invisibility

Special Ed students should not be seen and should not be heard.

The arts not only make learning visible, they make learners visible. Our students need to go out into the world to see and hear, to be seen and heard.

By taking part in annual curriculum fairs sponsored by Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), our students are transformed into art stars, showcasing what we have all learned, what we have all created, and in the process revealing what we have all become. In addition, for the past few years, our students have performed in front of the entire student body, created their own mini-opera, projected backdrops, and collaboratively formed labyrinths made out of sawdust and river rocks with our teaching artists, Richard Blakeney from the Chicago Opera House and Robert Possehl, our Sir Artist par excellence. Through these, they have emerged as the art stars at our school.

As my students engage in interviews, their responses all reaffirm that they are artists. They believe that artists "make



Jesi Cruz

Sand Art.

things and do things well," an insightful formulation that supports the idea that the arts promote empowerment and creative thinking. And of course positive role-modeling by the teaching artists is a part of the work too.

Myth 5: Special Ed Means Second Class

Special ed teachers should defer to other teachers in the school, just like special ed students should defer to other students in the school. Special ed teachers have nothing to teach other teachers. They can follow, but they can't lead.

Jack and I have come to see ourselves, through our arts integrated action research, as educational leaders in our school, and our students have come to see themselves, through their performances and exhibitions, as arts stars in our school. I see myself turning into an advocate rather than a mere supporter of arts integration, a leader as well as follower, more of a learner rather than a sole source of knowledge, a collaborator rather than an isolated dreamer. I have also realized that I am not working in a field that yields success in a linear fashion, but rather a spiral fashion, where all possibilities are explored, and where solutions are found based on inquiry.



Mark Diaz

Papermaking with Robert.

Arts and Special Education: Some Examples in Practice

As we collaboratively explored various art forms related to book and paper arts, it became obvious that our students were emotionally and intellectually prepared to openly consider possibilities, take responsibilities, and acknowledge the reality that we view things from a myriad of perspectives. More and more opportunities for students to express their voice and choice have emerged over time. For instance, our students have learned to express their thoughts more vividly through graphic representation. Here's a peek into their creative and symbolic lines of thought, drawing on their concepts of gardens:

Why did I put in a tree? Because it reminds me of my family tree. I put in the blue sky because that is where my favorite uncle lies down to watch over me. I also drew birds because they are enjoying their hot summer.

The flowers remind me of Florida. The color of the flowers reminds me of the rainbow. The picture put together reminds me of the world.



Mark Diaz

Jack.

This last quote was handwritten by a student who had completed her writing activity with her own inventive spellings. In the past, she had refused to write. Clearly, drawing before writing is the most effective way for her to be able to put her ideas in written form.

More and more people came to join our class when our teaching artist was around, such as our speech pathologist, our social worker, parents, and students from other classes (who were actually permitted to come to our class as a reward for a job well done). I came to realize that what was going on in our classroom was a welcome change for the entire school—a whiff of fresh air on a weekly basis, a constant source of oxygen (which is good for the hemispheres of our brains)—the creative, socioemotional, and the academic. Oh, and I can't forget Zorran's response when I asked him the reason he was sketching in a particular way. He confidently stated, "That's my style."

Community Outreach and Book and Paper Arts: A Case Study

I am very interested in redefining what community outreach means in terms of promoting arts integration in our public schools. My colleagues Robert and Jack and I made a leap in that direction by taking our children to witness Robert at work at the Book and Paper Arts Center at Columbia College. There were hoops and loops as well as hurdles to overcome, but we made it through. We actually stepped into our teaching artist's world—collaborating with him closely, experiencing what it is like to be in a papermaking artist's workshop; hearing, seeing, touching, and feeling the things Robert goes through as he engages in his art form, as we complete our collaborative work.

There was a lot of dialogue going on between the students and Robert himself. They had a chance to view "Cecile's Garden"—a wall filled with various types of

paper made out of plant fibers. Marjerrell was so fascinated with what he saw that he asked, "Can we make paper out of trees?"—since all he had seen were examples of papers made out of leaves, flowers, and plant fibers. Mark from the Book and Paper Arts Center

validated what Marjerrell had said by responding that we do indeed create paper out of trees. I added, "In order to do so, we have to turn the tree bark into finely shredded pieces." Robert's

demonstration of the actual papermaking process made the art-form so real to our students, especially when they saw the kitchen. ("You cook things in there?" Terrence asked. Robert responded by scooping out a big chunk of plant fiber being boiled in one of the deep metal containers on the stove.) Robert let the children feel some swatches of linen and cotton, which were being refined in the beater. The multi-sensorial aspect of teaching in an arts integrated classroom makes knowledge acquisition more concrete and experiential, and therefore more meaningful.

We explored the letterpress and the bindery section of the Book and Paper Arts Center at Columbia. Robert had shown us some letterpress symbols and reviewed the concept of uppercase and lowercase letters with the class, and made reference to how word processing has evolved from the use of letterpress technology to the present computer age of digital imagery.

Field trips such as visits to Robert's studio and our city parks provide students with opportunities to broaden their realms of experience and perspective. It is also a way of mainstreaming students with special needs, enabling them to practice proactive social skills in the real world.

After having visited Columbia College, we strolled through Grant Park to show our

students various monuments and sculptures, giving the students the opportunity to experience free sketching. Our first stop was the sculpture of Aaron Montgomery Ward's head. At first, Demetrious said, "I can't draw." Robert responded, "Oh yes, you can."

With my special education teacher's tone I said, "I can help you draw what you think you cannot draw and then you can add to it." In this brief exchange I saw three outstanding frameworks in

action: that of constructivism, positive redirection, and student empowerment.

Off we went to our next stop, an elevated monument of a man riding on a horse. It was a feast for our students' senses. Robert focused on the students' skills of observation and perception.

For our third and final stop, we visited numerous headless metal structures created by a Polish sculptor, and Robert engaged our students in making inferences on the philosophy behind the sculpture's contemporary design. He asked our kids, "What do you see?" An explosion of answers emerged from an initial prompt: "People with no heads," "No arms," "Walking in different directions," "A group of people," ... and last but not the least, observant and sensitive Xyoante stated, "They have no hearts."

From there, we allowed our students to explore the labyrinth layout of this magnificent city sculpture. Originally, they were wondering, "Where's the park, Ms. Cruz?" I responded, "This is the park—an open space park. Not a playground type of park." Of course, they all ended up playing in the open space park, finding their way through a game of hide-and-seek amidst the labyrinth of unbelievably remarkable headless, armless, heartless sculptures, in the city they all call home.

As my students engage in interviews, their responses all reaffirm that they are artists. They believe that artists "make things and do things well," an insightful formulation that supports the idea that the arts promote empowerment and creative thinking. And of course positive role-modeling by the teaching artists is a part of the work too.



Mark Diaz

Involved parents.

Arts Learning and Moving Forward

I came to America to learn more not just about special education but about the importance of nurturing one's love for the quest of discoveries that constantly lead to other revelations, which eventually give rise to more inquiry questions that bring about reflections generated interpersonally or intrapersonally. In the process, I have formulated my own unique definition of collaborative teaching and learning through arts integration. I have seen the importance of multisensorial arts integrated instruction. Learning by doing, seeing, and valuing are nonnegotiables in a learning environment that encourages self-empowerment among all the members in a community of learners.

Most important, I have realized that our students are very keen observers. They express their perceptions in an honest,

truthful, and creative manner. This has made me reflect upon my teaching practice more closely. I find myself asking the question, Have I engaged my students in a question-answer format that encourages divergent thinking, thus encouraging creativity? In other words, have I, myself, modeled creativity in the manner I ask questions, plan, and present activities?

I have grown. My students have grown. I now clearly see them making interpretations and connections—to their emotions, their symbols, their interests, their ideals. I have heard the voices that I had been longing to hear when I first arrived in this country.

In the midst of an academic world where student achievement is based on numbers, it is heartbreaking to face the reality that, as educators, we may be turned into the head slave of slaves. We are left with a choice: maintain a plantation or choose to trust ourselves and our students to become the artists and thinkers we and they actually are.

There are no racial or ethnic boundaries when we speak of teaching and learning. This has been my deepest realization since I stepped into America. I have learned so much by interchanging roles as an educator and as a learner. But I have learned so much more by being a collaborator, and not exclusively as an educator or a learner.

Experience really is the best teacher, regardless of one's cultural and racial background. Exposure, exploration, excitement, and collaborative exchange lead to an exclamatory statement that the arts definitely expand our horizons, both in the realms of teaching and learning. There are still so many questions on my mind and that makes me very happy. It is amazing to teach in America where diversity is widely celebrated and the spirit of inquiry and insight are openly encouraged.

In my quest to seek more answers to the questions I have yet to put into words, my eyes are still wide open, but my mouth is no longer shut.

Jesi Xena Rae Cruz believes that teaching is not a JOB but a JOY. She considers the inner-city Westside of Chicago her home away from home. She has not counted the number of years she has spent teaching in the public school system, but has kept her eye and her heart on cherishing the learning moments she has experienced collaborating with her students, her colleague Jack Kono, and their teaching artist, Robert Possehl.