

# ALL STUDENTS DESERVE Art

**Helen Goren Shafton**

I have been teaching elementary art for nine years in the suburbs of Chicago. This is my second year providing art instruction to a special population of students with a range of disabilities including Down syndrome, autism, cognitive disabilities, dysphasia, and fragile X syndrome.

The challenge I initially faced when planning art lessons for this diverse group of special-needs kids was daunting. I felt completely unprepared and in desperate need of resources. I looked for examples of programs in my community, but there were none. I also looked for graduate classes on the subject, to no avail.

## Researching Resources

Finally, I decided to do what I often do when I need to learn something: I went to the library. I found one interesting book, *Young at Art*, by

Susan Striker, which presents exploratory ideas for working with color, shape, line, and various art concepts in combination with music, games, food, and books. This inspired me to provide students with opportunities to freely explore a wide range of art materials without any rules.

## Special Days

We had “Red Day.” I gave students a variety of red drawing materials to begin their work. We colored, cut, and glued a variety of red papers, ribbons, feathers, stickers, glitter, pom-poms, etc. I gave them red colored glue made by adding tempera paint to glue. We finished the monochromatic collages with rubber stamps and funky paint rollers with glitter paint.

“Red Day” was followed by “Yellow Day” and “Blue Day.” From there we went on to secondary colors, and combined primary-colored modeling compound to make our “new” color. We also had “Black and White Day,” “Metallic Day,” and “Circle and Square Day.”

The routine we established by doing these collages gave students comfort to explore the materials at their own pace. Some kids loved to draw with the colored pencils, crayons, markers, and oil pastels for long periods of

time. Others just wanted to cut and glue—especially glue!

It has been fun and challenging to seek out materials to complement the color or shape we are exploring. Seeing the pleasure in the faces of these kids as they mix modeling compound together and the joy and wonder in their eyes as they spread paint colors or print with real leaves is awe inspiring!

## Assistance Is Needed

It is critical to have adequate instructional assistants to help students work with the materials. Collaborating with the classroom teachers can help avoid les-

son pitfalls that can be predicted by someone who knows the limitations of each student. It is also critical to be prepared, have all materials ready, have a second mini-activity for those who finish early, and most importantly, have patience.

This journey into providing art education to a unique population has made me look at myself and my teaching in new ways because every class has students with special needs of some type. I am no longer searching for an experienced professional in my community as a resource. I have become that art teacher—one who wants to help others on this journey into providing art experiences for everyone. ☺

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