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The Arts and Creativity in Schools

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Please Stop Sacrificing Arts Classes for Skills Intervention!

Lee Ann Jung and Maisie Jung

For students with learning disabilities, art class is often the best part of the day. Why take it away from them?

Maisie, now a senior in high school, thinks back on her 8th grade year. She remembers the excitement of starting a new school, the pleasure of making new friends, and the exhilaration she felt running on the cross country team. She recalls fondly the amazing teachers who helped her finally find her love of reading after years of hard work to gain reading fluency. She loved her reading interventionist who worked with her to continue gaining fluency as she learned to cope with the challenges of dyslexia.

But Maisie also remembers starting out most days of that year with a feeling of dread and anxiety. She was afraid of English class, afraid of being called on to read, and afraid of having all her classmates listen to her stumble over words. She was terrified she'd be called on in history class to recall a fact from the reading for the night before. There's no doubt about it: Anxiety was a key player in Maisie's life that year—as it is for many students with dyslexia.

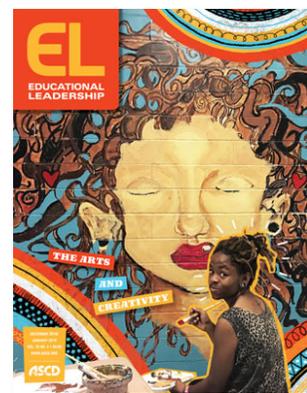
But there was one class where she never felt anxiety: art. In art class, unlike in all her other courses, she felt smart and knew she could be herself and succeed. What a wonderful refuge art provided!

But art class was an elective, or a "special," as schools often call non-core classes. And because it was a special, her school decided it was the one place in her schedule that could be sacrificed so that she could be pulled out to work on reading fluency.

We were grateful, of course, that Maisie's school at least *had* reading intervention in middle and high school. Many do not. For many students at the secondary level, the opportunity for targeted reading instruction has passed. These students slip farther and farther behind as the content complexity swells.

So Maisie's school was on the right track. They knew that students who are behind in reading level need evidence-based instruction in reading to catch up. And this changed Maisie's life. She is now a voracious reader, always eagerly awaiting new releases by her favorite authors.

But in the process, unfortunately, Maisie also missed out on an important opportunity—the chance to attend the one class where she felt the most successful and the most at home. In her case, this didn't necessarily



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compromise her long-term success—but, as with many "pull-out" students, it took away something she enjoyed doing and took pride in. Such opportunities are important, especially for students who struggle in traditional academic courses.

Difficult Decisions

Pulling students out of enrichment courses for supplemental instruction is not an uncommon practice, as Lee Ann has seen in her work in schools. Ranking classes from most to least important academically can seem to be administrators' only option. After all, we need to pull the student out of *something*, right?

Maybe. But school leaders should be careful in designating certain parts of the school schedule more important or essential than others. It's all relative, and what a particular student needs in order to thrive is not always so easily compartmentalized.

Consider the student who loves art and may have an art-related career, or the student who only feels successful in the art room, or the student who has a nurturing relationship with the art teacher. For these students, art class may be the most important class of the day—the one that gives them strength to get through the others. We aren't suggesting that a student should miss language arts class instead of art class to have reading intervention—this would be completely in conflict with best practice. What we *are* suggesting is that it can be just as detrimental—perhaps more so—to pull students from art class.

The Success Factor

We know from the work of many researchers, as synthesized by John Hattie's (2009) work, that a student's expectations for their own success is one of the greatest predictors of that student's outcomes. Robert Merton hit on this same concept in the 1940s when he coined the term "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Merton, 1948). And we know that students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are at risk for lacking expectations of success. Hughes and Dawson (1995), for example, found that students with learning disabilities often feel less intelligent than their peers and carry feelings of negative self-worth because of their difficulties in school. This is not an isolated finding.

But how do we counteract this tendency and instead promote feelings of competence and confidence in students who have learning disabilities? Obviously, we don't want to construct opportunities that simply inflate students' academic grades to make them *feel* successful. This doesn't work. You can't trick students—they know their relative strengths. Inflating academic grades for this purpose actually backfires and demotivates students (Ring & Reetz, 2000).

What we need is to find the *authentic* opportunities that allow each student's strengths to shine—in school. Schools just need to be open-minded about the many possible routes to excellence. Todd Rose, in *The Myth of Average* (2016), presents what he describes as the "jagged learner profile" (p. 77). This is what we all have. If you think about your own skill sets, you'll see that there are some areas where you excel and others that you would not describe as your strengths. Even that student in our school who is celebrated for having the highest grades has areas that are not relative strengths. For every student, the profile of skills is jagged.

In our effort to sort and simplify data, school systems tend to segment students in categories of "good at school" or "good students," and "not great at school" or "bad students." We need to rethink this way of describing our students, remembering the jagged profile. *All* students have strengths that can be cultivated at school. And every student has areas to work on. Even saying "general education student" and "special education student" contributes to the fallacy that this is not so. *All* students are general education students, first and foremost.

Artistic Leanings

Approximately 34 percent of students who qualify for an IEP fall into the category of specific learning disability (SLD), making this the most common category of learning difference (NCES, 2018). Interestingly, students with SLD choose art careers much more frequently than other students, with some estimates saying that as many as 30 percent of higher education art majors have an SLD (Wolff & Lundberg, 2002). For this group of students, art is the path to equity in outcomes. It's where they have their greatest expectations for success.

Some have hypothesized that this is because students with an SLD, such as dyslexia, have superior spatial and visual skills. Others attribute the choice of the arts to a reliance on visual and spatial skills, owing to a preference to avoid language-processing skills. The research isn't completely convincing either way. What we *do* know is that art is the path that many students who have IEPs take. And although we are focusing on the category of SLD, we could make similar connections for students who fall on the autism spectrum and students with intellectual disabilities. For many students who have IEPs, the arts are their source of joy and success in school. This is reason enough to ensure that opportunities for art study are not disrupted.

Alternative Scheduling Options

But how do we preserve the opportunities for participation in the arts *and* deliver evidence-based intervention when needed?

In fact, making draconian scheduling decisions that force students to give up courses they may love is not the only way for secondary schools to provide research-based interventions for students who need them. Here are some other proven options:

Infused Skills. Before schools do any pulling of students for supplemental instruction outside the classroom, they first need to seek out natural opportunities to target these skills within the general education classroom. An "infused skills grid" (Castagnera et al., 2003) is one framework that educator teams can use for planning these opportunities. This grid lets educators chart a student's priority skill-needs against the settings where the student spends time each day. This can help schools maximize *existing* opportunities for targeted intervention. (Figure 1 shows an example grid for an elementary student.)

Figure 1. Example of an Infused-Skills Grid

Settings	Writing	Reading Fluency	Persistence
Shared Reading		X	X
Learning Centers	X	X	X
Art	X	X	X
Independent Reading		X	X
Writing	X		X
Mathematics			X

Science	X		X
Social Studies	X	X	X

Flexible grouping. Teachers can also leverage small-group instruction opportunities for supplemental teaching. Following a mini-lecture, for example, students could move into small groups to work with the content and on developing skills. There may be four small groups engaged during that time, with one of those groups designated for supplemental instruction. Students in that group receive an evidence-based intervention on a specific skill—this is not a time for assignment or homework help. Of course, teachers need to take care not to stigmatize or segment this group; don't put at these students same table in the back of the room every time, for example. And the supplemental-skills help should be available to any student who needs it at the time, regardless of whether they have an IEP.

Of course, this model only works if teachers don't spend full class periods talking at students. All faculty in the school must be on board with the idea of flexible grouping and spending less time talking and more time facilitating students' "doing." When schools employ this important tier-1 intervention strategy, they open up wonderful new opportunities for both personalization and differentiation.

Flex Blocks. Some students may still require additional supplemental instruction beyond what can be accomplished in small groups in the classroom. But this doesn't mean schools have to start ranking classes and deciding what a student can miss. An alternative scheduling solution that has worked for many schools is the institution of a "flex block" during the middle of the school day.

During the flex block, which could range in time from 45 minutes to over an hour, any student can seek support from any teacher or counselor, including an intervention specialist. Students who don't need help or supplemental instruction can work independently during this time. With the use of an online scheduling system, school leaders can also assign students to see a specific person during the flex time. ([Rebentify](#), an intervention-scheduling program developed by two high schoolers, is one helpful tool).

It's important that intervention time that is delivered during flex block be protected for just that—intervention. That is, a student who happens to have an IEP shouldn't go to a literacy interventionist or special education teacher for help with a science project—he should go to the science teacher. But if the student is having persistent difficulty with a writing skill, for example, a temporary, evidence-based intervention may be what is needed. That student and others having the same difficulty can be assigned to see the interventionist to gain strategies for developing this skill. Once a student gains the targeted skill, the intervention concludes.

Opportunities to Excel

By the time 9th grade rolled around for Maisie, her amazing reading interventionist had helped her to such an extent that she was able to read more than 200 books that year. More important, her reading was finally up to grade level! She still received individual intervention to master certain skills. But in her high school, the supplemental help took place during flex block instead of disrupting her class schedule. With this change in scheduling, she was able to attend art class throughout her 9th grade year.

Art quickly became Maisie's favorite class once again and has played a significant role in her academic career thus far. In fact, beginning early in Maisie's junior year, she started teaching an art class to middle schoolers—a class that many of the students enthusiastically claim is *their* favorite class at school.

Maisie feels that if she had been forced to miss half the days in her 9th grade art room to receive intervention, she would have been distressed and discouraged by school. Her developing deeper understanding of color

theory and how lines affect shape made her feel intelligent and adept at a time when every other class made her feel inferior to her classmates.

Yes, critical skills such as reading deserve educators' most serious consideration when designing systems and structures for intervention. But in this process, let's not forget how incredibly important the arts and other enrichment courses are to many students. All students need authentic opportunities to excel in school in content that is engaging and exciting to them. For some students, there are times in their lives when the arts pose the *only* time in the day they feel excitement instead of struggle or anxiety. For others, the arts are the spark that ignites a career or a lifelong passion. They should not be removed from a student's schedule just because she struggles in another area.

Indeed, that may only compound the student's problems.

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