

# The Arts and Special Education: A Map for Research



Published by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Office of VSA and Accessibility.  
*A Jean Kennedy Smith Arts and Disability Program.*

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## Growing a Field of Study: Arts and Special Education

In 2012, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts hosted 49 thought leaders from the arts education and special education fields at a National Forum entitled, *Examining the Intersections of Arts Education and Special Education*. A paper generated from this convening provides a summary of the gathering, a brief literature review, and a set of recommendations to name and grow a new field—the arts and special education (Silverstein, 2012<sup>1</sup>; Malley & Silverstein, 2014<sup>2</sup>). Participants recommended that the field of arts and special education be advanced by: (1) Creating a dynamic information hub/technical assistance center; and (2) Establishing a consortium of arts education and disability organizations to advance a shared national agenda (Silverstein, 2012). In response to these recommendations, the Kennedy Center established the *VSA Intersections: Arts and Special Education Conference*, which since 2013 has annually convened 250 professionals for professional development, networking, and knowledge-sharing. In addition, the Kennedy Center has published comprehensive bibliographies, resources, and *Exemplary Programs and Approaches*, a series of professional papers with three volumes currently in print.

Although much progress has been made, the following needs remain:

- To explore the development of more targeted research questions that focus on the arts and learning for all students, including those with disabilities (Silverstein, 2012);
- To develop and test new research methodologies which are more compatible with inquiry in arts education and special education (Silverstein, 2012);
- To shift from the current national emphasis on short-term program evaluation to more long-term research (Silverstein, 2012);
- To produce and disseminate more peer reviewed articles and information on specific topics involving art and special education (Gerber & Horoschak, 2012<sup>3</sup>);
- To develop a databank of reputable research that aligns with quality criteria for research, and with resources for practitioners (Gerber & Horoschak, 2012)

In 2016, in response to these needs, the Kennedy Center invited and convened two groups of scholars, researchers, and practitioners to envision how an action plan for research in the arts and special education might advance the work over the course of the next several years. To articulate a plan of this nature is an ambitious goal. The research map outlined in this booklet represents our progress in the developing collaborative conversation, and suggests next steps in realizing our goals and recommendations for this growing field.

<sup>1</sup> Silverstein, L.B. (2012). *Proceedings report: Examining the intersections of arts education and special education: A national forum*. Washington, DC: The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

<sup>2</sup> Malley, S.M. & Silverstein, L.B. (2014). Examining the intersections of arts education and special education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 115(2), 39-43.

<sup>3</sup> Gerber, B.L. & Horoschak, L. (2012) An attack on the tower of babel: Creating a national arts/special education resource center. In S. Malley (Ed.) *The Intersection of Arts Education and Special Education: Exemplary Programs and Approaches* (pp 113-128). Washington, DC: The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

“” THERE IS A NEED

and test new research methodologies which are more compatible with inquiry in arts education and special education.



## Context

The current research at the intersection of arts education and special education is in a nascent state with a limited number of studies at a high evidence level. There is also a limited number of high-quality research articles on arts education and special education in peer-reviewed academic and professional journals.

Many arts education studies are generated out of external program evaluations and conducted on a small scale with low to moderate levels of evidence. Few arts education studies have met the established educational design and evidence standards like those of the Institute of Education Science’s *t* (WWC). Of the 35 arts education studies submitted to the WWC as of July 2017, 24 were not reviewed because they had ineligible research designs. Seven studies did not meet the WWC standards due to sample attrition, and/or non-equivalent comparison groups. The remaining 4 studies were random controlled trials that met the WWC standards without reservation. One

of these grants had at least one statistically significant positive finding.

Special education research has fared much better. Of the 9969 research studies submitted to the WWC, 2168 (21.7%) were focused on the topical area of “Children and Youth with Disabilities.” 42 Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT), 2 Quasi-Experimental, and 32 Single-Case design studies met the WWC standards. Nine of the RCT studies had at least one statistically significant positive finding. 90% of the Single-Case design studies that meet the standards in the WWC come from the “Children and Youth with Disabilities” topic area, demonstrating a high level of methodological expertise that could be shared and applied to arts education research.

There are currently no combined arts education and special education studies in the What Works Clearinghouse—a potential area for

### Studies Submitted to the What Works Clearinghouse\*

	All	Children and Youth with Disabilities Category	Arts Education
Number of Studies Submitted:	9969	2168	35
Ineligible Design:	7466	1949	24
Did Not Meet the Standards:	1718	146	7

### Number That Met WWC Standards

*(Number with at Least One Statistically Significant Positive Finding)*

	All	Children and Youth with Disabilities Category	Arts Education
Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)	559 (183)	42 (9)	4 (1)
Quasi-Experimental	190 (89)	2 (0)	0 (0)
Regression Discontinuity	4 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Single-Case	32 (0)	29 (0)	0 (0)
	785 (273)	73 (9)	4 (1)

\*Note: “Arts”, “music”, “drama”, “theatre”, and “dance” were used to search on 7/14/2017 [ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/ReviewedStudies](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/ReviewedStudies)



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## The Research Map

This map reflects a shared direction for the arts and special education field and explores questions that may activate the growing field of arts education and special education policy, practice, and research. It aims to spark conversation, providing direction that will:

- Support researchers in connecting their work to relevant research and policy;
- Increase access to allied research, practice and policy communities;
- Support literature reviews focused on arts education and special education;
- Link arts education and special education research with other disciplines; and
- Support evidence-based practices in the arts education and special education.

It is critical to situate the Arts Education and Special Education as an emerging field with respect to current methodologies and innovations in methodological design. In considering where we might focus attention to advance the field, we have identified three priority areas for new research: Access and Equity, Instructional Design and Innovation, and Effectiveness, Efficacy, and Scale-up.

In the pages that follow, we suggest research questions that aim to help frame, but not limit, research within each Priority Area. We then propose ways of moving forward as research communities and colleagues. In conclusion, we lay out a series of milestones that we believe will chart our progress toward a more robust body of research literature, a pathway for early-career researchers pursuing inquiry in the arts and special education, and professional associations that support researchers throughout their careers. We do not intend for future research to focus only on these three Priority Areas, for the research questions we propose to be the only questions considered and investigated, or for the milestones to be exhaustive of all that remains to be achieved. Rather, we consider this map reflective both of where the field is now and where it might evolve in the coming years, and believe it offers an avenue through which to meet important markers in our work.



# Priority Area 1: Access and Equity

Access and Equity are two complex concepts that are often under-specified and poorly defined, with varying meanings based on the resource being accessed and by which population(s). In general, *equitable* access is the fair and impartial distribution of opportunities or resources to various populations. It can also refer to a measure of the *fairness* with which these opportunities are distributed. *Accessibility* can be a measure of *quality* of this access, often defined in terms of freedom from barriers or *ease of use*—a principle of universal design. There is a significant body of work on *cultural accessibility*, which addresses issues relating to how people with disabilities participate in the work of cultural institutions. In the case of this map, a measure of accessibility will refer to the quality of access within educational programs, curricula, and instruction. Research on access and equity is thus in part a matter of explicit attention to intentional inclusion of persons with disabilities, in addition to studies targeted toward students with disabilities specifically. Many collective impact initiatives in the arts and other social sectors are currently interested in learning how to measure, understand, and improve equitable access to meaningful participation for everyone.

## Research Questions

1. What arts learning opportunities exist for students with or without disabilities?
2. How many students with disabilities participate in these programs and at what level?
3. Do students with disabilities have comparable access to arts learning opportunities as their age peers? (Frequency, duration, and intensity)
4. What physical, cognitive, or cultural barriers may exist to access and meaningful participate in arts learning opportunities?
5. Are there correlations between arts access for students and traditional measures of academic “success” like graduation rates and persistence through college?

## Moving Forward

- Make sure students with disabilities are included or at least considered in the design of instruments, item writing, sampling strategies, and the analysis and use of data.
- Advocate for inclusion of data items about students with disabilities on district, state, and national surveys, audits, and assessments.
- Make sure that data is collected in ways that can be disaggregated by priority population types like students with disabilities.
- Develop high quality instruments and assessments that are universally designed, flexible and multi-modal.
- Recognize that students with disabilities are not a homogenous population. There are varying levels of prevalence of different disability types, as well as co-occurrence with other populations like English learners and students living in poverty.



## Priority Area 2: Instructional Design and Innovation

Research in this Priority Area is on how instructional strategies and curricular approaches specific to the arts and/or arts integration may impact successful outcomes for students with disabilities. The effect of professional development on teacher pedagogical content knowledge, and its cascading impact on practice and student learning is also a focus in this Priority Area. Research on instructional design can help us understand how arts teaching and learning works for diverse learners in varying contexts. Although some studies in this area could focus on basic research on learning mechanisms, other studies may be more developmental and applied to iteratively test, measure, and improve interventions in a timely and practical manner.

### Research Questions

1. What arts education/arts integration pedagogies show promise for students with disabilities?
2. Are there links between specific art forms or specific components of arts learning and different disabilities?
3. How do the arts promote learning outcomes for students with disabilities in different subject areas?
4. What does cognitive and linguistic research tell us about learning in and through the arts for students with disabilities?
5. Which instructional strategies and classroom conditions work for whom, and under what conditions?
6. How is learning in and through the arts for individuals with disabilities influenced by specific arts disciplines, creativity, and/or critical disability studies?

### Moving Forward

- Measure processes and outcomes valuable to the arts education field (i.e., arts knowledge and skills, engagement) not just the instrumental outcomes (i.e., Math, English Language Arts).
- Utilize the learning sciences to target instructional supports for marginalized students and students with cognitive, physical, and cultural-linguistic variability.
- Understand the learning science mechanisms behind the teaching and learning interactions of diverse learners.
- Leverage the single-case design expertise through collaboration with the special education research field.
- Strongly consider and use the WWC technical documentation.
- Consider methodologies that are focused on practical measurement and data use for improvement (i.e., developmental evaluation, improvement science).
- Coordinate and test instructional designs in multiple contexts or networks to increase the both the “N” and the reliability of implementation.



## Priority Area 3: Effectiveness, Efficacy, and Scale-Up

Arts and special education research is understandably viewed as an emerging field, without a large base of published empirical studies that can influence policy and practice (Malley & Silverstein, 2014). There are very few large-scale studies that attempt to determine or re-examine the effect of an already-tested program in another setting. There are several reasons for a lack of efficacy or effectiveness at scale research in the Arts and Special Education field to date. Arts education itself has often been on the margins of educational policy, and its empirical research has focused on specific educational applications, rather than examining larger educational interventions. Moreover, there is an inherent methodological challenge when constructing a large-scale impact study in a field where the defining element for each child is the Individual Education Plan, which tailors instruction based upon individual needs. This Priority Area builds on the innovations of Priority Area 2 to influence best practice reliably on a larger scale. This Priority Area challenges researchers to design impact studies that have implications and applications across sites and contexts.

### Research Questions

- 1) What are the core characteristics of arts programs for students with disabilities? Who provides instruction? In what setting? In what art form(s)? At what cost?
- 2) What are the educational outcomes of existing arts education/arts integration interventions for students with disabilities?
- 3) What do special educators know about arts education? What do arts educators know about special education? What do general education teachers know about special education and the arts?
- 4) What is the impact of arts education on students with disabilities?
- 5) How is the impact of arts education moderated by art form and by disability type?

### Moving Forward

- Identify and define indicators of potential impact in research designs, as well as the program characteristics that are most likely to support effects of the arts on students with disabilities.
- Resist the constraint to narrowly evaluate only “what works”, and be empowered to investigate basic questions on how the arts support the development of people with disabilities.
- Use approaches in large-scale studies other than Randomized Controlled Trials and Quasi-Experimental designs, especially mixed-methods. The qualitative components of a mixed-method study are especially valuable for identifying and defining the variables that can be employed within an impact study, as well as for developing new assessment instrumentation.
- Develop research partnerships with special education researchers to piggy-back on or add value to existing larger scale studies.

# Directions for Arts Education and Special Education Research

The Priority Areas outlined in this plan represent broad opportunity for arts and special education research. While it is exciting to see the expansiveness of our growing field, we also recognize that no plan can be comprehensive in addressing every possible direction forward. We believe it is critical that new research methods, compatible with arts and special education, be explored; that educators, especially those in the disability community, be empowered to conduct research; and that innovative pre- and in-service teacher training be developed. In the broadest sense, we believe the next generation of researchers, practitioners, and policy makers must work to grow the body of literature, support young researchers in pursuing questions related to the arts and special education, and formalize professional associations for researchers in the field.

Accordingly, we have proposed a series of milestones by which the field might measure its growth. We do not intend for these milestones to prescribe specific actions that are the sole responsibility of any one organization. Instead, we propose them as invitations for associations, organizations, universities, funders, and individuals to join the Kennedy Center in advancing this agenda. It is the hope of the authors that many institutions will join us in this work, identifying milestones suited to their capacities that they can help us reach. Together, these milestones offer avenues to encourage new research, disseminate findings, and build communities in order to translate, interpret, adapt, and apply research and evaluation in diverse contexts. We hope they will serve as a springboard for discussion, research design, and leadership—supporting a shared investment in the ongoing nature of this work.

## Contribute to the Research, Practice, and Policy Literature



## Develop Higher Education Pathways for Early-Career Researchers



## Develop Interest Groups at Professional Organizations



In addition to the core writing team, the below individuals participated in the research convenings hosted by the Kennedy Center in July and September of 2016. Please note that all affiliations are as of convening dates.

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*Funding for the 2017 VSA Intersections: Arts and Special Education Conference is provided by the U.S. Department of Education.*

*Kennedy Center education and related artistic programming is made possible through the generosity of the National Committee for the Performing Arts and the President's Advisory Committee on the Arts.*

*The content of this program may have been developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education but does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education. You should not assume endorsement by the federal government.*