

The H.E.R.O. Project
Helping Everyone Realize Opportunities

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Mary Jane Coker
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Social and Emotional Learning in an Inclusive Art Program

- Over the past ten years I have come to realize that my special needs students are a source of passion for me and I have a desire to see them connect more fully with their peers.
- This is an inclusive program designed to pair 5th grade students without disabilities with K-5th grade elementary students with disabilities to foster mentoring relationships through the arts, known as The H.E.R.O. Project.
- The partnership with a local non-profit organization was essential to the development of this program and was the catalyst for the funding of this project. Visual examples of student work, character education lesson plans, and parental permission forms are also included.

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How can the visual arts help students with and without disabilities learn together?

What does inclusion look like when you remove an adult aide and let the exceptional student partner with a typically developing peer in the art room? What are elementary students capable of teaching each other through the process of art? Is social and emotional learning important? As educators, are we working to eliminate ableism in education or are we continuing to foster the idea that it is “better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with non-disabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids?” (Hehir, 2002). I wondered how we could embrace the disabilities of every child and celebrate the abilities of every child. These are some of the questions and ideas that kept coming up for me as I worked with my elementary art students in Birmingham, Alabama, and as I entered my third year of graduate school at Bank Street College of Education in New York, New York.

As I was observing interaction between the students and their aides during my regular art classes, I noticed that the aides choosing where and with whom the students were sitting was stifling peer social inclusion. I wondered what would happen if you removed the aide from the equation and engaged the peers in a mentoring role? Being the art teacher, I chose to make this a project that involved the visual arts so that I would be better able to monitor the progress and it would tie into our character education program.

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What does the H.E.R.O. Project look like?

In my weekly art schedule I have time on Friday mornings from 8:30 a.m.-9:20 a.m. every week to host an art club. In the past this has been strictly for the 5th grade students. With permission from the principal, parents, and classroom teachers, I was able to invite 1st -5th grade students to be a part of the art club. The 5th graders would be the general education students in the club. The 5th grade special needs students would have a choice of clubs just like their peers; they would not be forced to join the art club. The majority of the special needs students were invited to join from the younger student population, but my 5th graders got first choice. The first day of class set the tone for the rest of the year. As students made their way into the classroom, they were immediately aware that this would be a different experience than their regular art class. I was sitting on top of the table and encouraged the students to do the same.

Once everyone was comfortable, I welcomed them to The H.E.R.O. Project and talked about the idea that we all have certain areas of abilities in which we excel and that we also have areas of disabilities. After giving examples of what I consider to be my abilities and disabilities, the students went around the circle and did the same. This helped to break the ice; they learned a lot and were able to find commonalities within the group. I used “clear positives” (Charney, 1995) which are ways to explain to children what we are doing in our classroom and why. Clear positives provide a sense of conviction and challenge but do not moralize or lecture the students. Once they understood their goals for the day, I then encouraged them to move around the room and

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just talk to each other, to find people that had similar interests and talk about what kind of art project they would like to collaborate on.

I let them know that the art room was their studio; they were responsible for the upkeep of the supplies as well as the room. Once they had formed their partnerships they were instructed to come up with a list of supplies that they would need the following week and turn it into me before they left for the day. I stressed that they were allowed to do any type of art they were interested in and could use any supplies they preferred. It was very interesting to watch the students mix, mingle and form their partnerships. At the end of the first session each group had turned in a list of supplies that were needed for the next session. One group in particular stood out with their request, they put a wooden door on their list. When I inquired about their idea, they explained to me that they have a student in their group whose wheelchair is too high to fit under the table. They thought that if they could separate two tables and bridge them with a door, that she would be able to get underneath it enough to have a hands-on experience, and they thought it would be cool to paint a door. Witnessing this kind of thought, on the first day, confirmed that The H.E.R.O. Project was right on target with the needs and concerns of my students.

My main role in The H.E.R.O. project was to make the time and space available for my students to be able to come together and create art. I made sure the correct supplies were on hand as needed and maintained an atmosphere of “this is your art studio, come in, interact, and create.” Another role I filled was that of observer. By moving around the room and “eavesdropping” on conversations I was able to assess how the students were interacting with one another; I was able to listen to conversations that let

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me know if true collaboration was taking place, and I was awarded the honor of witnessing true social inclusion taking place within the classroom.

Because I spend time in the regular art classes discussing and modeling the importance of taking proper care of the supplies and have the students take out and put away supplies, this was a natural habit for the H.E.R.O. participants. The students understood that part of their job was to maintain the supplies and make sure the room was left in a readied state for the next class. This allowed me the freedom to truly observe what was taking place within the walls of the art room. I was able to witness students working together who would not normally be in the same classroom. When faced with the challenge of a student unable to hold a paintbrush and paint with control, I saw students problem-solving ways to get the goal accomplished. This truly was a student-based learning experience.

The reality of how well my students were doing in their efforts to maintain their studio came during the time when the students were gone but my next class had not come in yet. I had a videographer visiting and documenting the class, and he commented on how impressed he was with the students and how well they cleaned everything up. He mentioned that as soon as I gave them the time signal to let them know our club time was ending, the students went into serious clean up mode, helping each other put away wet surfaces, washing paintbrushes, returning supplies and wiping down the tables. It was helpful to have this extra pair of eyes because I was so used to the procedure that I wasn't really giving the students the credit they deserved for doing such a great job!

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How do you prepare students for the H.E.R.O. Project?

Why did I feel like my students were prepared for a club such as The H.E.R.O. Project? Shades Cahaba Elementary School has won numerous awards as a top public school in Homewood, Alabama, including being awarded the Character Education Partnership and being recognized as a National School of Character. The Shades Cahaba Way (SCW) was first developed and implemented in our Extended Day Program (EDP). Due to its success in EDP, the Character Education Committee (CEC), of which I was a member, introduced the SCW to the entire staff in the Fall of 2002. In 2005, our SCW initiative earned a Promising Practices award from the Character Education Partnership.

The Shades Cahaba Way is six life lessons, which include:

1. Speak for yourself, not for anyone else;
2. Listen to others and they will listen to you;
3. Avoid put-downs, who needs them;
4. Take charge of yourself, you are responsible for you;
5. Show respect, every person is important;
6. Have fun. Life is a gift.

Over the years, our counselor and teachers have integrated the SCW with programs such as *Character Counts!* and the *Eleven Principles*. Our efforts to establish a school-wide vocabulary have blossomed. Asking the student, “Which SCW lesson are you not following,” precedes every discipline reprimand or referral. Today, the SCW is heard not only in the halls of Shades Cahaba, but also at the community pool, in Scout

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meetings, on the ball fields, at Homewood Middle School, at family dinner tables, and this year the Homewood High School Valedictorian referenced the SCW in his commencement speech.

The students of The H.E.R.O. Project learned the Shades Cahaba Way in kindergarten and have been encouraged to live and learn the SCW since Day One. It is my belief that a strong Character Education Program was essential to the success of this program.



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Where did the idea for the H.E.R.O. Project originate?

I am a volunteer for VSA of Alabama. VSA of Alabama is a statewide, 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to serving children and adults with disabilities and chronic illnesses through the arts (<http://vsaalabama.org/>). One of the programs at VSA is ArtPartners, a program that provides people living with disabilities and chronic illnesses the chance to develop meaningful relationships with artists in our community while creating collaborative masterpieces (<http://vsaalabama.org/programs/artpartners>). Working with VSA, we were able to develop the same idea for elementary students.

VSA of Alabama acted as a consultant on this project. Through VSA International, we were able to apply for an Innovative Programming Grant and were one of ten groups awarded the full grant money, \$20,000. This grant money was just what we needed to really bring this project to its full potential. Part of the funding requires that the program include a teacher-training component. With a portion of the money, as I mentioned, I was able to hire a professional videographer to capture the essence of The H.E.R.O. Project and produce a high quality video to use in professional development venues (DVD). VSA Alabama and I are in the process of developing a curriculum to be used to train classroom teachers, special education teachers/aides, and parents how to use the arts to encourage peer collaboration in an inclusive environment and how to replicate The H.E.R.O. Project. The training will include video documentation of the progress of the students during the program as well as arts education and character development curriculum.

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The curriculum will include information on social inclusion and will describe specific challenges experienced by persons with disabilities when participating in the arts as well as the steps necessary to recruit both students with and without disabilities for a program such as this.



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Here are some comments from teachers, directors and parents about the

H.E.R.O. Project:

“The H.E.R.O. professional development workshop was so moving and enlightening! Observing the interaction among the various age groups, learning styles and challenges has motivated me to look at my Third Grade Honors Art Club and begin the meshing of special needs students with the honors art program at my school.”

Nicki Linton

Workshop Participant/Art Teacher/Moody Elementary

“Jackie benefited from the experience tremendously in that she was able to create with other children of different abilities, learned team work and cooperation in getting the projects done. She is very proud of her artwork and of the time she got to spend in the club. I also liked how you paired up children of different ages in a mentoring type of relationship. I am a big believer in art for children so I was very happy that Jackie was chosen to be a part of this experience. For children who spend the school day in many structured situations, Jackie enjoyed the freedom of the art club. I was amazed when I watched the video and saw how the kids had to problem solve in order to make sure everyone could participate in the project without interfering with the work being done by others. I hope you are able to continue this program and I hope other teachers in other schools can use this project as a model for their own H.E.R.O. programs.”

Melanie Bald

Shades Cahaba 2nd Grade Parent

“The video is amazing but watching them work in person is even more amazing. The children working together is incredible and even though our typical ed children are aware that they are leading, they allow for everyone to be equal in their creativity. It's great that each of them has so much freedom in their working together. It's a small glimpse of what heaven will be like. The film makes others more aware of their potential.”

Jackie Sweatt

Special Education Aide/Shades Cahaba Elementary

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"I had the opportunity to drop in a few times on the group. One thing that I noticed was the absence of adults. Many of the special needs students who participated in this program have an aide with them pretty much the entire time that they are at school. This was a time to be adult "aide-less." The other students became the aides of the special needs students. It probably took many of the students out of their comfort zone. But from what I saw, it was a calm, unrestricted "retreat" for these kids to be themselves with other kids their age. A place that others can see what the special needs students can do. It is not what the aides can do, but what they [the students] can do. Another thing neat for my class was that Korey got to share with his classmates about where he went every Friday morning. It was something special that he did, with prompting, he would tell us about art club. As the year progressed, classmates loved to ask him about the art club and what he had been painting or making. I only wish that every student could be involved in the program. I guarantee you that every "regular" ed student has a different view and appreciation for the special population in the school, whether they realize it now or not. I know that Korey made friends with other students who he probably would not have had a chance to know had it not been for this club."

Beth Gladney
3rd Grade Teacher/Shades Cahaba Elementary

"We knew this project was special, but we had no idea how special until we began site visits to meet and observe art classes. The children were so eager to work together and adapt to each other's skills, personalities and abilities! Shades Cahaba Elementary has such a strong character education program, high parent involvement and most importantly--Mary Jane--that the environment was perfect for such an "experiment." Perhaps the people who learned the most were the adults--including other teachers--when the impact of the program was so easily observed in the classroom and documented in the video. Students who were perceived as having low ability or low interest in engaging with others demonstrated enthusiastic desire to participate. In addition, students who were not defined as "special needs" easily integrated socially and through their art making with students with different abilities. Our hope is now to share this project, video and curriculum with other to inspire inclusion of all students in the arts."

Patti Hendrix Lovoy, MBA
Executive Director/VSA Alabama

"I am the H.E.R.O. filmmaker but I am also the father of an "Emerging Artist" at VSA, I am familiar with the dynamics of art as therapy. In my life I have had mentors and have mentored many others. Therefore it did not surprise me to see what I saw happen between the kids in art club as they mentored and were mentored. It was not a great shock to see either, that the older kids stepped into leadership roles, or that they learned a great deal doing so, both from the process and from the very children they were

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teaching. It did not surprise me to see a competitive spirit turn collaborative, and it did not surprise me to see egos step aside for nurturing. What did surprise me was that I thought I had a sense of who Sakaria was, in spite of her limited capacity to communicate through normal channels, and in spite of my “invisible” role, which really involved limited communication with any of the children, other than in the interviews. What surprised me was that when we showed the video to teachers at the school; I saw and heard their reactions to the Sakaria I knew, I realized that their perceptions of her from other surroundings were almost 180 degrees from mine. One woman said she had never seen Sakaria smile. Seeing the difference in peoples’ perceptions of Sakaria drove home the power of art to communicate, and that artistic endeavors can truly enrich any and everyone’s life and soul.”

David Brower
Filmmaker

But I think Jane Nelson stated it best in *Positive Discipline* (1987) when she said, “What good is academic learning if young people don’t learn to become contributing members of society?”.

Please feel free to contact me with questions about the H.E.R.O. Project...I would love to come share the Project with your District!

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