

# The arts help children with special educational needs

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## Summary

This paper looks at the role of arts education in the life of children with special educational needs. The researchers conducted 34 focus groups in 16 states across the US to identify whether or not arts-based education has positive impacts on academic, social, cognitive and artistic abilities. They found that the arts gave students an ability to express themselves, to direct their own learning, and in a way that was on their terms.

## A series of focus groups were conducted with teachers and arts facilitators

The 34 focus groups took place in urban, suburban and rural settings, with educators at schools serving a variety of communities and children at different stages of life. The kinds of arts education discussed included drama, painting, drawing, poetry, story writing, singing and playing music. The transcripts of the discussions were analysed in a systematic manner to reveal recurring themes and findings.

## Three themes emerged from the discussion: arts affected the skills and abilities of students through voice, choice and access

The exploratory, participatory and self-directed nature of the arts experiences allowed children with special education needs to express themselves. They developed their own voice, rather than being instructed or given a particular

approach or style to follow or conform to. The experiences allowed them to author their own script for themselves, demanding that they make choices about what to do and how to do it, and then refining and judging the outputs of those processes. The focus groups identified the fact that the arts allowed students to be on a 'level playing field' and have educational activities take place on terms that suited them as the creative process is self-expressive and its exact outputs are shaped by the abilities and preferences of the individual student.

## Keywords

**special educational needs** **focus group** **USA** **self-expression** **children**

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