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Right: Theater classes begin with introductions led by the teaching artists.

Making Arts Education Accessible for Deaf Children with Multiple Disabilities: A Partnership

By Michelle A. Veyvoda and Jodi L. Falk

Kaiser's Room, a New York-based theater arts education organization; St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf in Brooklyn, N.Y.; and the New York Deaf Theatre are piloting a theater arts program for deaf students with multiple disabilities. The goal: to develop a school-community partnership that provides culturally responsive, linguistically accessible, and fully inclusive theater classes for deaf and hard of hearing children with multiple disabilities in a school setting.

Educating children in the arts—the expression of human creative skill and imagination, often in the form of painting, sculpture, music, dance, and drama in works of beauty and emotional power—has numerous benefits. According to Americans for the Arts (2013), a nonprofit arts advocacy organization, children who participate in the arts demonstrate improved academic performance and lower school drop-out rates. Further, the use of drama in the classroom has been documented to support teaching and learning in the area of literacy development (Ruppert, 2006).

Specific benefits accrue for students from low-income backgrounds and students with disabilities who are afforded education in the arts (Americans for the Arts, 2013; Dorff, 2012). According to Americans for the Arts (2013), children from low-income families who are highly engaged in arts programming are more than twice as likely to graduate from college as their peers with no arts education. For children with disabilities, the benefits of arts education are profound, including development of knowledge and general skills, independent decision making, extended attention span, social skills, and enhanced communication skills (Dorff, 2012). In addition to aiding children with self-expression, education in the arts helps children learn to plan and develop feelings of pride and accomplishment and skills in problem solving and critical thinking (Clemens-Hines, n.d.).

Arts programming across artistic disciplines—including visual arts, dance, and drama—has been successfully modified to include children who are deaf, blind, and have motor difficulties. Tara Miles (2017), a family educator at Kendall Demonstration Elementary School in Washington, D.C., notes that dance is a visually accessible art form that can be accessed

Photos courtesy of Michelle A. Veyvoda



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“without barriers.” Other researchers agree that arts education can give voice to students with disabilities, maintaining that through arts education, “disabled young people acquire the skills and competencies of a visual language within a multicultural agenda that recognizes and celebrates difference” (Taylor, 2005), and that arts education both empowers students and facilitates the development of self-expression and identity. Taylor also discusses the importance of students being taught by teaching artists who themselves have disabilities and share the same disabilities with the students they teach, noting that these individuals function as role models and may have a “profound impact on raising students’ self-esteem” (2005).

Unfortunately, a one-size-fits-all approach to arts programming in schools and communities typically does not offer access to the most vulnerable children. Due to physical, linguistic, geographic, or financial

roadblocks, children who encounter these intersecting barriers may be unintentionally excluded from the arts programs that are available to their peers. For example, in a theater or movement class, the curriculum might be inaccessible for children who are different from their peers in that they use wheelchairs, or they use an alternative form of communication, or they cannot access transportation, or they come from families that simply cannot afford enrichment classes. For these reasons, many theater arts programs may inadvertently exclude their community’s most marginalized children, including those with disabilities, those from financially insecure backgrounds, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

Three New York City-based organizations—Kaiser’s Room, St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf, and the New York Deaf Theatre—seek to change that for deaf

and hard of hearing children, especially those children with disabilities, by partnering to bring arts programming to them. We plan to collaborate on arts education programming that is high quality while being accessible and ethically administered. Other arts programs have paved the way. For example, Arts Partners, a program at Buffalo State College, engages college students enrolled in arts courses in community-based experiences through which they plan and execute arts programming for children with special learning needs in Buffalo's inner-city classrooms (Andrus, 2012.) The National Dance Institute has partnered with three New York City public schools, including a bilingual English-American Sign Language (ASL) school, to bring dance to special needs students whose families struggle financially (Seham, 2012). With our emerging partnership, we seek to engage New York City's most vulnerable children in accessible theater arts experiences with teaching artists who are culturally or audiotologically deaf or hard of hearing and can function as role models for the children with whom they will work.

Kaiser's Room Where the Answer is YES

Kaiser's Room is a nonprofit organization based in New York City that provides opportunities for imagination and connection through theater and dance for students of all ages and abilities. Michelle Veyvoda, a speech-language pathologist with years of experience working with deaf and hard of hearing children and co-author of this article, serves on the Kaiser's Room Board of Trustees.

Many of the young artists served by Kaiser's Room spend their days in specialized schools with highly structured activities



Left: As part of a series of warm-ups, teaching artists include imaginative gross motor activities.

and routine sessions of speech, occupational, physical, and behavioral therapy. Kaiser's Room provides a rare opportunity in their highly programmed day for freedom of expression and self-determined decision making. There are no rules in a Kaiser's Room production—no set choreography that must be executed,

As Kaiser's Room began to explore ways in which to expand its reach, schools for the deaf emerged as potential partners.

no blocking that must be followed exactly. Participants who wish to walk off stage during a performance are free to do so, typically accompanied by a teaching artist who will continue performing the show alongside them. A participant who wishes to perform the entire show by sitting against a wall is considered just as much a part of the production as a participant who belts out songs from downstage.

The teaching artists of Kaiser's Room respond individually to each child's needs. For example, when it is indicated, the Kaiser's Room teaching artists respond, "Sure, we can perform this song from your parent's lap," or "Absolutely, we can do this dance sitting in a chair." Stephane Duret, founder of Kaiser's

Room and a teaching artist with the organization, describes an experience several years ago when he was on stage with a child with autism at the Chicago Children's Theater. The child wanted to lie under a bench onstage throughout the performance. Rather than impose rules on the child, Duret instead joined the child under the bench and performed the entire show from there. According to Duret, at the conclusion of the performance, the child—who had not spoken to Duret throughout the show—looked at Duret and said, "Friend." For Duret, this moment was the catalyst for creating Kaiser's Room. At Kaiser's Room, flexibility and respect for the ever-changing needs and preferences of participants is summed up by the slogan: "Imagination. Connection. A World of YES for

All Abilities.” Kaiser’s Room supports the arts as a conduit to developing imagination and human connection.

As Kaiser’s Room began to explore ways in which to expand its reach, schools for the deaf emerged as potential partners. Kaiser’s Room recognized that its philosophy and instructional methods are a natural fit for work with the Deaf community, in which 40-50 percent of individuals have additional disabilities (Nelson & Bruce, 2019). Veyvoda suggested the organization create a pilot class at St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf, a school at which she had previously worked and which, she knew, had a diverse population of deaf children. Kaiser’s Room was committed to adjusting its programming to be accessible to a diverse deaf student body. This included ensuring classes would be linguistically accessible to the deaf children, most of whom use sign language but many of whom do not sign or speak and use alternative or augmented communication devices or methods to communicate. In addition to using a variety of listening devices and having varied access to sound, the St. Francis students come from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Further, 45 percent have disabilities in addition to deafness.

Kaiser’s Room recognized the importance of complete language access, representation, and role models for deaf children (Howerton-Fox & Falk, 2019), and decided that its collaboration with St. Francis would involve teaching artists who were deaf. This would ensure the programming would be consistent with the values and culture of the Deaf community. However, without the internal expertise and infrastructure to effectively engage diverse, profoundly deaf children in theater arts programming, Kaiser’s Room needed to find a partner to develop and execute classes in an appropriate, accessible, and ethical manner. Fortunately a partner was nearby.

Above and right: During all class activities, such as this stretching exercise, connection and flexibility are the driving motivations of the teaching artists.



New York Deaf Theatre Partnering for Students

The New York Deaf Theatre was established in 1979 by a group of deaf actors and theater artists who wanted to create opportunities to produce a dramatic art form that was not found elsewhere in New York City: plays in ASL. A nonprofit, professional organization, the New York Deaf Theatre is the longest-running company of its kind in the greater New York City area and the third oldest Deaf theater company in the United States.

Over its nearly 40 years of existence, the New York Deaf Theatre Company has evolved beyond producing quality theater for deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing audiences to engage with theater education. For six years, it has produced a “sign-along” program, in which deaf and hard of hearing individuals and ASL students present a concert of songs in ASL to students throughout New York City. Much of the Deaf talent fostered by New York Deaf Theatre has gone on to become teaching artists with various performing arts programs in the local community and throughout New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. The New York Deaf Theatre has always been proud to provide a platform where deaf and hard of hearing individuals are given employment opportunities and the Theatre continues to look for partnerships that support its mission.

The first meeting of representatives of Kaiser’s Room and the New York Deaf Theatre occurred in the spring of 2019. The





Left and below: After floor activities, students follow teaching artists' directions to walk with "heavy feet" and "light feet" at different speeds. These activities allow students to use their imaginations while connecting to their developing skills of maintaining attention and imitation.

of this meeting, it was determined that Kaiser's Room, with teaching artists from the New York Deaf Theatre, would pilot a series of classes at the school. By the fall of 2019, preparations for the classes were underway. These included:

- **Training for teaching artists**—Kaiser's Room held a training for teaching artists of the New York Deaf Theatre. An ASL interpreter was present to ensure full communication access. The training consisted of several activities intended to help the teaching artists empathize with the needs of the participants. They discussed barriers that they may unintentionally introduce into the performance space and ways of building rapport. With guidance from Duret, they experimented with ways of creating a supportive, flexible, and "yes-centered" experience for the participants.
- **Building community**—At the trainings, the teaching artists engaged in thoughtful conversation around the role the arts can play in social communication and connection for children with disabilities, and they discussed and experimented with ways to turn behaviors that are often perceived as negative, such as withdrawing or self-stimulating, into an opportunity for connection and engagement. However the young participants choose to move, imagine, create, communicate, or participate is accepted, and teaching artists learn to say "yes" and embrace all participants and ways of participating.
- **Adjusting curriculum**—Kaiser's Room and the New York Deaf Theatre began the process of adjusting the

goal: to partner in creating classes for students who are deaf or hard of hearing and have additional cognitive or developmental disabilities. At this meeting, representatives from the two organizations shared missions and philosophies, identified the need in the Deaf community for artistic programming, outlined a potential pilot structure, and made a plan for next steps—including finding a school in which to pilot the program. St. Francis stood out as an ideal partner. Two people—a New York Deaf Theatre board member and the executive director of Kaiser's Room—had consulted with the school regarding other community-based theater initiatives. The group decided to reach out to incoming director Jodi Falk, co-author of this article, and invite her to meet Duret, learn about the Kaiser's Room philosophy, and consider if such a partnership would be possible.

St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf Sharing a Mission of YES

In Brooklyn, N.Y., St. Francis educates deaf students of all abilities, including those with autism, intellectual disabilities, and/or developmental delays. The school serves students as young as babies in the Parent-Infant Program and educates children and teens through eighth grade. In the halls and classrooms of St. Francis, visitors see students and staff communicating in ASL, with augmented or alternative communication devices such as the Picture Exchange Communication System, through digital communication software, and in spoken English. The guiding beliefs at St. Francis are inclusiveness, accessibility, and the support of students' independence.

On a warm summer day, Veyvoda, Falk, and Duret met in person. The goal was for Duret to share the Kaiser's Room philosophy with Falk and to create a shared vision for an inclusive and accessible theater class at St. Francis. By the end



Kaiser's Room curriculum for deaf and hard of hearing children with additional disabilities. One early idea shared by the New York Deaf Theatre's executive director, J.W. Guido, was to establish a common vernacular of signs and classifiers that could be used by participants who have limited mobility and limited ability to sign or gesture. This is an ongoing process and will evolve as the two organizations gain more experience with the students of St. Francis.

- **Selecting students**—During the fall of 2019, Kaiser's Room administrators and New York Deaf Theatre teaching artists made a site visit to St. Francis. The goal was to tour the space, learn the culture of the school, and determine which class would participate in the pilot. Jenna Brooks, the educational supervisor at St. Francis, suggested one class of six students in fourth through seventh grade. Within this class, one student is deaf-blind, all students have intellectual disabilities, and all have severe language delays and use forms of alternative or augmentative communication. Two students have a diagnosis of autism, and one student, while undiagnosed, presents with the characteristics of autism.

Partnership in Action Classes Begin

In early February, this class of six students, two deaf teaching artists, a classroom teacher, a deaf teacher's assistant, a hearing teacher's assistant, a speech-language pathologist, and the educational supervisor launched the first session of the theater arts pilot. The deaf teaching artists led the class. It consisted of a series of warm-ups, which involved imaginative gross motor activities, such as pretending to be various animals. Following warm-ups, the group sat in a circle and engaged in more imaginative work, such as imagining they were holding something wet, petting something soft, and lifting something heavy. This work allowed students to explore their imaginations while also connecting to their developing skills of maintaining attention and imitation. Following this activity, the group walked through the space, following the teaching artists' directions to walk with "heavy feet" and "light feet" and to walk at different speeds. The session ended with stretches as the students were encouraged to "reach up to the stars."

The pilot phase of the course development is scheduled to continue for eight weeks. While we don't know what the future has in store for this exciting partnership, we look forward to continuing to bring arts programming to deaf and hard of hearing children of all abilities.

Author's note: Readers interested in contacting Stephane Duret, founding director of Kaiser's Room, can e-mail him at stephane@kaisersroom.org.

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