

The contrast between art teachers' sincere intent to be inclusive and inspiring and the problematic narrative that some reinforce illustrates the need for further inclusion of disability arts.

# Inclusion and Disability as Curricular Practice

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As policies regarding students with disabilities in education have changed to support inclusive approaches, the field of art education must consider the translation of these concepts to Prek-12 art and design curriculum. This study examines curriculum content regarding the inclusion and representation of disability in United States' Prek-12 visual art and design classrooms in the state of Illinois. It utilizes a descriptive survey design that involved art and design education teachers throughout the state. These data provide information on the general state of art and design education while also considering the connections between theory and practice. Data from this study indicate that although art teachers include representations of disability as part of their curriculum, there could be further inclusion of disability arts. This article contributes to research examining the intersections of disability studies, inclusion, and special education in Prekindergarten-12 schools.

*Keywords: inclusion, disability, K-12 schools, curriculum, art education*

*Author note: Data collection for this research occurred while the author was employed at Illinois State University. Analysis was completed while the author was employed at Northern Illinois University.*

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In 2006, The United Nations passed the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, which required that nation-states "ensure an inclusive education system at all levels" (United Nations, 2006, art. 24: 1). What inclusion means and looks like varies considerably based on local and state policy. As Baglieri and Shapiro (2017) explain, inclusive education approaches can take many forms, including an individual approach to difference, pluralism as social practice, diversity as curricular practice, and critical pedagogies. Researchers in art education have explained that equitable inclusion must move beyond including people with disabilities<sup>1</sup> in classrooms, to also include the perspectives of people with disabilities in art and design education curriculum through art, narratives, and terminology (Keifer-Boyd et al., 2018). This study examines how inclusivity theories have translated to the inclusion of representations of disability in prekindergarten-12<sup>th</sup> grade visual arts education curriculum in the state of Illinois.

In the United States, most art teachers do not face as many curricular directives as other subject area teachers (Bolin & Hoskings, 2015). Bolin and Hoskings state, "What is actually taught and communicated about art to learners is frequently a matter of individual educator choice, with little specifically directed regulation from the state, school district, or supporting institution" (p. 40). Therefore, art and design teachers often have the freedom to determine which artists may be studied and what supplementary materials may be used. Art and design educators may often choose the content or concepts

associated with their lessons, so even when a district dictates that certain skills should be taught in specific classes, art teachers have the flexibility to infuse curriculum with content based on their choice. Stabler and Lucero (2019) describe that their ability to create a curriculum of their choosing in Chicago Public Schools was because neither was micro-managed by administrators in the way that non-art teachers may be. This freedom allows for art educators to engage in studies of representations of disability and disability aesthetics as a way to develop an understanding of disability as a complex and varied lived experience (Eisenhauer, 2007). Disability aesthetics, as defined by Siebers (2010), moves beyond historical notions of beauty as associated with an ideal form or healthy body and embraces representations that "seem by traditional standards to be broken," enriching and complicating our notions of aesthetics (p. 3).

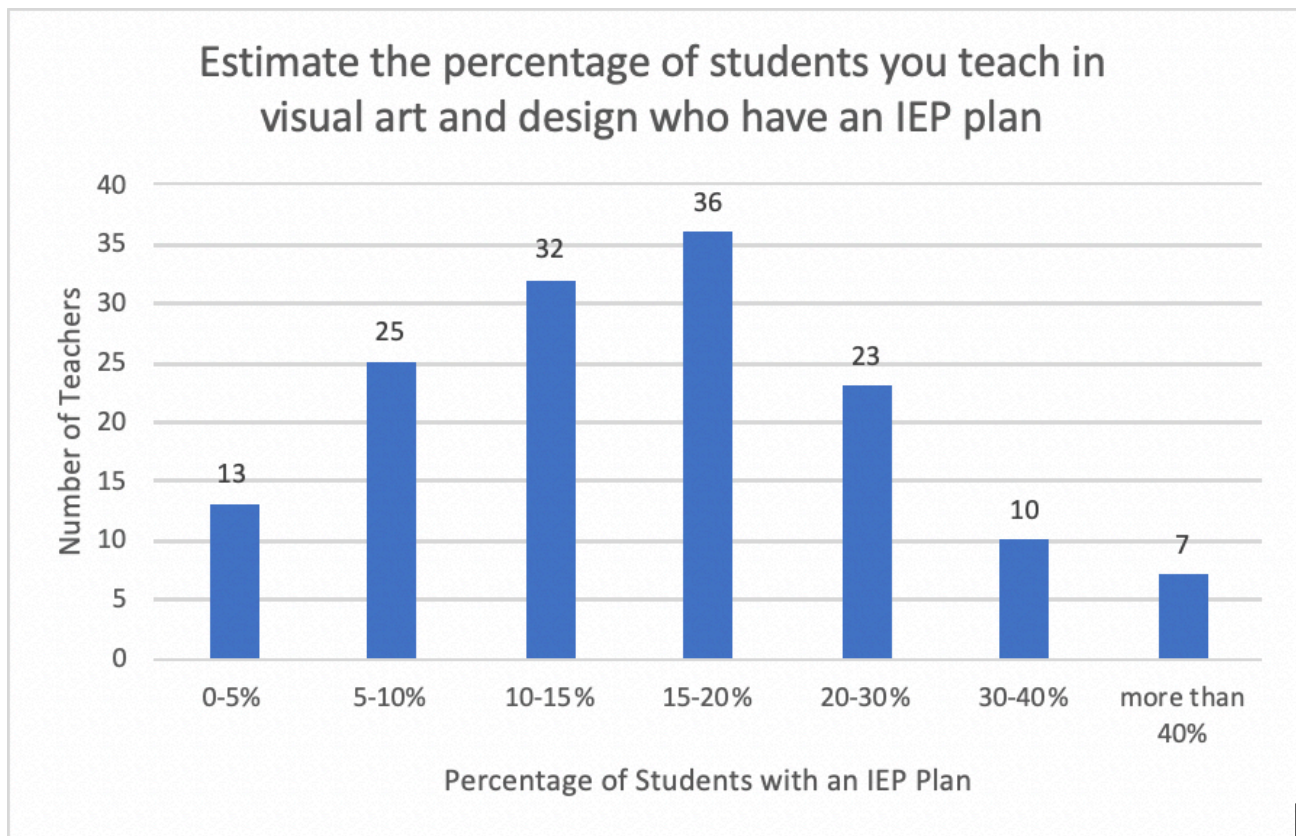
Research regarding the inclusion of representations of disability in other incorporated media, such as children's books, has important implications regarding the development of art education curricula (Kraft et al., 2013; Wilkins et al., 2016). In a research study with three third-grade classrooms that focused on introducing children's literature featuring characters with disabilities, the researchers found that students did not understand that the portrayal of certain behaviors was related to disability. However, when the disability and its connection to specific behaviors were explicit, students were more curious and motivated to learn about the disability (Wilkins et al., 2016). Kraft and Keifer-Boyd (2013) explained that the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, both people-first and identity-first language is used. In the United States, most schools use people-first language (Berger, 2017). For this survey, which was based on school settings, people-first language was used. However, within Disability Studies literature, many scholars and disability activists prefer the use of identity-first language. When referring to disability arts and/or specific artists who use identity-first language, then identity-first language is utilized.

**Figure 1**

Percentage of students with an IEP plan taught by teachers in visual art and design classes.



representations of disability in media such as films, songs, artwork, literature, and advertising affect and inform our understandings of disability. This leads to implications for art teachers when considering whether they need to identify disabilities when discussing an artist's work or other visual content. It is essential for art teachers to discuss disability with students because engaging in studies of disability can widen our understandings of human variation and differences (Siebers, 2010).

### Surveying Art Teachers in Illinois

This study utilized a descriptive survey design and was part of a more extensive study examining inclusive approaches related to disability, curriculum, and pedagogy in prekindergarten-12<sup>th</sup> grade visual art and design classrooms. In the United States, prekindergarten starts at age 4. Students typically graduate from grade 12 around the age of 18. However, students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs)<sup>2</sup> for an identified disability are allowed to attend

<sup>2</sup> Students with disabilities may qualify for an IEP, as determined by the school district. However, some students with disabilities may not qualify, inform the district of their disability, or be un-diagnosed. Students may or may not identify as having a disability/being disabled regardless of having an IEP. Teachers' knowledge of students with disabilities in their classes is provided through student information systems that identify students as having an IEP.

school through the age of 21 to meet graduation requirements. In the spring of 2020, a digital survey was sent to art teachers in Illinois<sup>3</sup>. The research consisted of a multi-stage process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher first contacted art teachers via email, then art education leaders at school districts to disseminate the surveys, and finally utilized social media tools to recruit local participants.

Many of the full survey questions were modeled after a Council for Exceptional Children Study commissioned study, *The State of Special Education Professional Report* (Fowler et al., 2019), using the same Likert scale categories. In the first section of the survey, participants were asked a series of demographic questions. In the second section, which is discussed in this article, the questions posed were designed to elicit information regarding the inclusion and representation of artists with disabilities as part of the art curriculum. Pilot testing of the survey occurred using a small sample of art teachers known to the researcher. Questions on the survey include multiple-choice and short answers.

The majority of questions were analyzed using a count method<sup>4</sup>. Three questions were open-ended. One open-ended question asked teachers to identify artists with disabilities they used in the curriculum and was analyzed using counting; another asked the teachers to identify "other" types of visual representations of disabilities they use in their classroom. In a follow-up short-answer prompt, teachers were asked, "Why do or don't you identify the disability?"

Analysis of this question involved a coding process, first identifying themes in the responses, then cross-checking those themes. One theme required a further, second level of coding to distinguish the responses. This research is limited by several factors, including potential bias by those who elected to participate in the survey and the accuracy of descriptive statistics as dependent upon teacher's self-reporting.

### **Survey Participants**

Initially, the survey was sent via email to 876 visual art and design teachers and later distributed via social media platforms. The survey received an initial 163 responses, of which twelve were from social media or shared links. The response rate for emails was 17.2%. However, only 153 participants identified as teaching visual art or design to PreK-12<sup>th</sup> grade students in a school setting in Illinois, therefore n=153.

Descriptive information provided by the respondents provided demographic data. Participants self-identified the location of their school as large urban for 18.5% of respondents, small urban for 11.25%, suburban for 52.98%, and rural for 17.22%. The schools that participants taught in were 87.42% public, 9.27% private, 1.99% selective enrollment public, and 1.32% charter.

There was a fairly even distribution of grade levels taught with a slight skew towards elementary school teachers. However, all grades from Kindergarten to Twelfth had between 48 and 74 teachers who identified as teaching that grade.

Only 13 of the teachers identified as teaching prekindergarten students. The largest group of

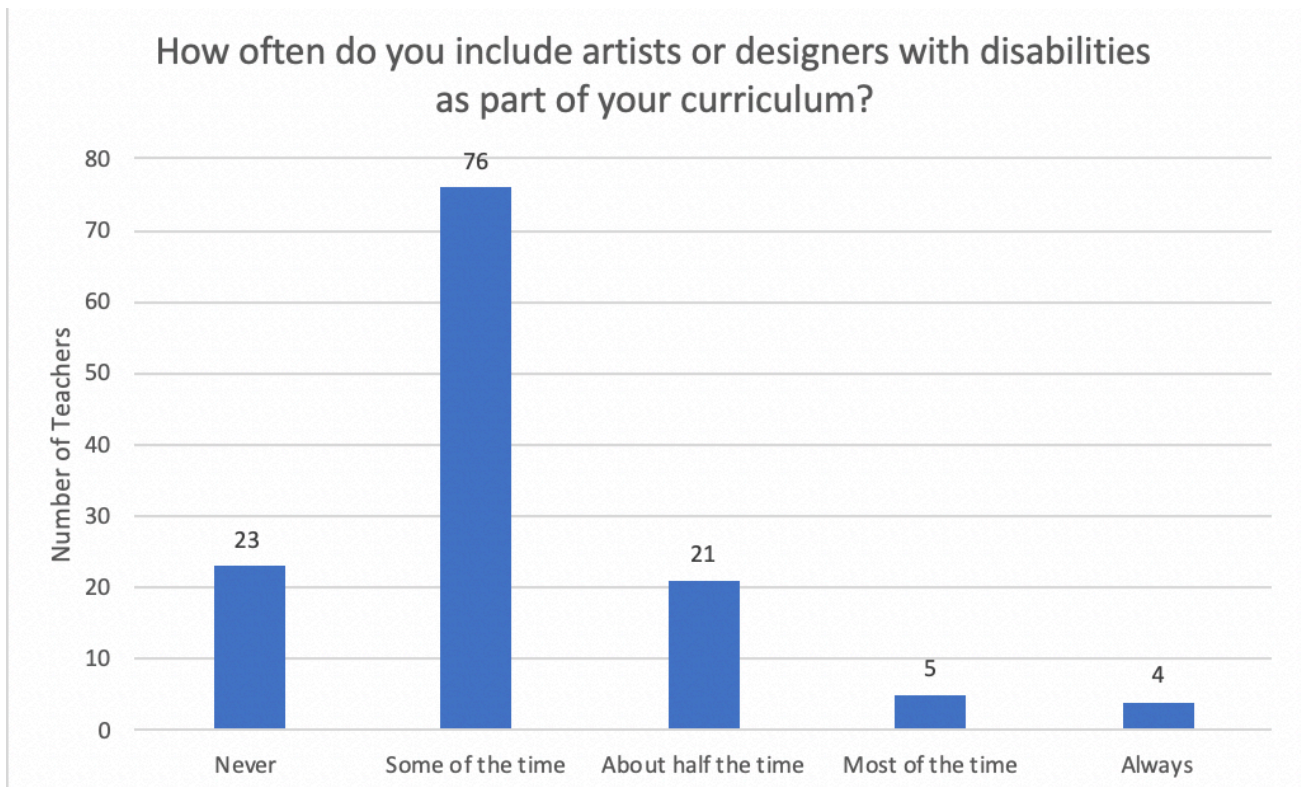
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<sup>3</sup> An Institutional Review Board approved this survey, and all participants consented prior to participation. IRB-2020-133

<sup>4</sup> In a count method, the total number of respondents who selected a specific answer is identified.

**Figure 2**

*Frequency of inclusion of artists or designers with disabilities as part of the curriculum*



respondents identified as teaching 15 or more years (47.01%), while the remainder of respondents were relatively evenly distributed between 1-3 years, 4-9 years, and 10-14 years. 7.28% of the respondents identified as having a disability.

### **Inclusion in Illinois Classrooms**

Teachers were asked to report on various questions that illustrated how students with IEPs received visual arts instruction and what the make-up of art classes looks like in terms of students with IEPs. In the United States, ninety-five percent of students with IEPs are in the educational environment described as "regular schools," making up 13.01% of the general population of students attending public schools (NCES, 2020).

Researchers have acknowledged that visual arts education is often one of the primary places where students with IEPs are placed for an inclusive setting, which may lead to a higher than average number of students with IEPs in some classes (Gerber et al., 2014). Teachers were initially asked to describe the percentage of students they teach in visual art and design with an IEP plan (Figure 1).

In reporting the number of students who have an IEP plan, 8.9% of teachers reported 0-5%, 17.12% of teachers reported 5-10%, 21.92% of teachers reported 10-15%, 24.66% of teachers reported 15-20%, 15.75% of teachers reported 20-30%, 6.85% of teachers reported 30-40% and 4.79% of teachers reported more than 40%.

From the responses, 21.92% of teachers identified a percentage range that aligns with the state statistic. In the state of Illinois, 15% of all students have an IEP (IRC, 2021).

However, 7% of students with IEPs are educated in a separate facility. Therefore, the average percentage of students with an IEP in public schools is 13.95%. Over half, 52.05%, of teachers reported that students with IEPs are over-represented in their visual art and design classes.

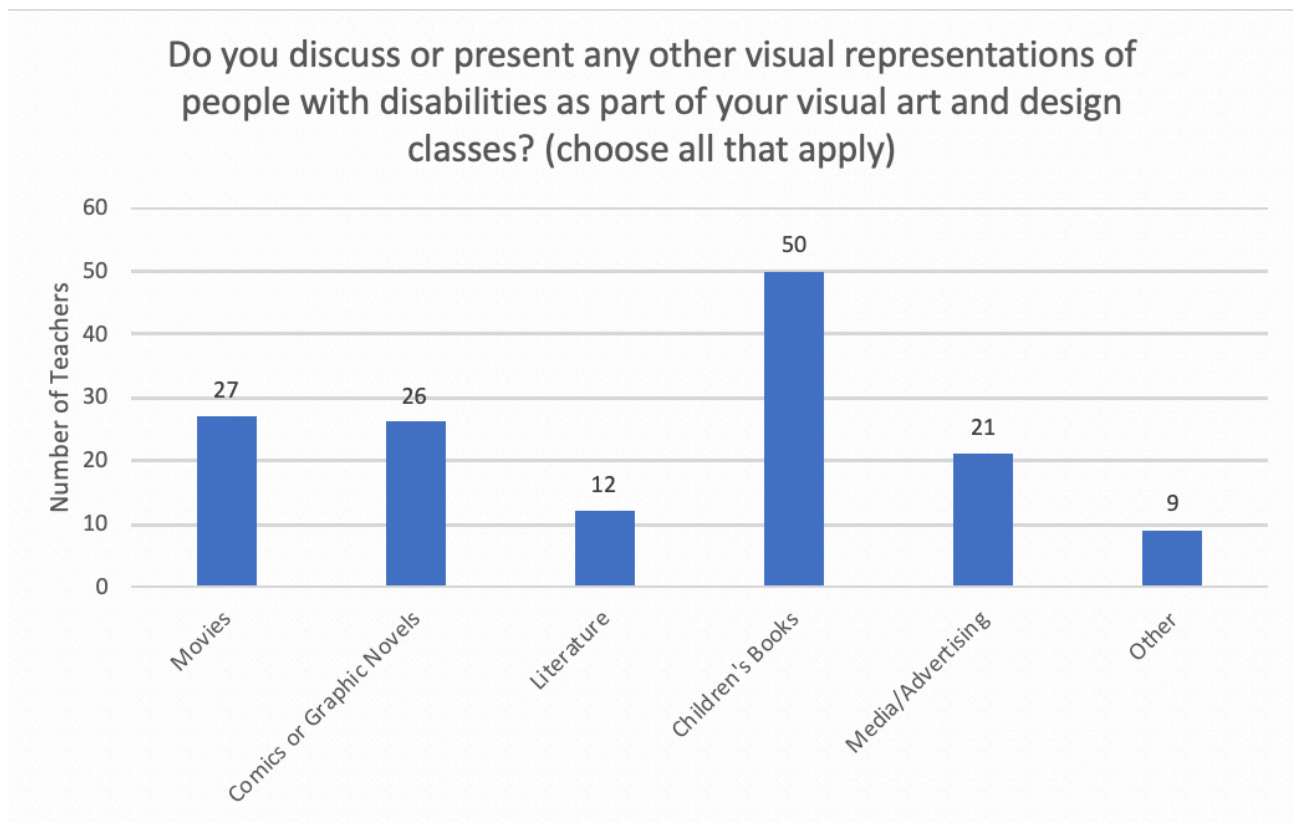
Follow-up questions to this provided additional insight into variations in class make-up that teachers may experience. 24.83% of teachers reported teaching a class where there is a smaller percentage of students with IEP plans. Teachers most commonly reported that these were high school classes such as advanced art, Advanced Placement (AP), or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. Additionally, 16.44% of the teachers reported teaching a class where all of the students have an IEP. The data suggest that visual art and design teachers are likely to teach a high number of students with IEPs, advanced level classes in the high school are likely to have a smaller number of students with IEPs, and self-contained classes for students with IEPs in visual arts are consistently being taught. The next question on the survey was designed to provide data regarding if the inclusion of students with IEPs in visual arts and design classes is extended to the incorporation of representations of disability through media, artwork, and literature. However, the inclusion of representations of disability should not be seen as merely a reflection of the inclusion of students with disabilities. Rather, the inclusion of disability arts, discussion of disability aesthetics, and other disability representations are a means to engage

students in a reconceptualization of disability for all students.

When visual art and design educators were asked to consider how often they included artists and designers with disabilities as part of the curriculum, 129 participants responded. The respondents chose Never (17.83%), Some of the time (58.91%), About half the time (16.28%), Most of the time (3.88%), and Always (3.10%) (Figure 2). Teachers identified additional means they utilized to include representations of disability as part of their curriculum. For this question, teachers were allowed to choose as many categories as fit. Out of 145 responses on this question, they identified the following uses of media: Movies (27), Comics or Graphic Novels (26), Literature (12), Children's Books (50), Media/Advertising (21), and Other (9) (Figure 3). For "Other," teachers identified *Scholastic Art*, ART 21, tattoo artists, youtube, and self-made Powerpoints as sources for teaching students about work made by artists and designers with disabilities. Several follow-up questions were asked of teachers to help understand which artists or designers with disabilities they are including, if they identify the artist as disabled to students, and why they were making choices to do so. When teachers were asked, "What are the names of artists or designers with disabilities that you incorporate as part of your curriculum?" (Table 1), they overwhelmingly identified Chuck Close as the most frequently included artist. The artists listed include artists with physical disabilities, vision impairments, ASD, learning disabilities, and mental health disabilities. These artists create(d) in a wide range of media but mainly represent North American and European artists who produced work in the last one hundred and fifty years.

**Figure 3**

*Other visual representations of people with disabilities included in the curriculum.*



Another 35 artists were also uniquely identified by art teachers as artists or designers with disabilities whom they included as part of their curriculum. Rather than listing artists, three teachers listed “self-taught” and another three listed “unsure”. Five art teachers’ comments suggested this was not something they usually considered. Two of those teachers stated that they had never considered this before, and another two stated that “this is a good idea” and said they had never looked to see if the artists have a disability.

119 teachers responded to the question, “When you incorporate an artist with a disability, do you identify the disability to the students?” Most overwhelmingly said Yes (76.41%), with a

smaller percentage who selected Maybe (16.81%) and No (6.72%). In a follow-up short-answer prompt, teachers were asked why they do or do not identify the disability. 105 teachers responded with answers that fell into six main categories identified by keywords or concepts: empathy (n=3), identity (n=7), normalize/differences (n=13), part of the artwork/artists’ stories (n=22), success/perseverance/overcome (n=45), and do not identify (n=12). For those who chose to give reasons why they do not identify an artists’ disability, responses fell into two main categories. First, some teachers clearly stated they did not want the artist defined by disability. Other teachers worried about drawing attention to students with IEPs in their

classrooms, stating: "I don't want to spotlight students who are mainstreamed." Teachers who mentioned empathy were concerned with students without disabilities empathizing with people with disabilities. Comments about normalizing and differences included "to make disabilities seem not so different," "normalize differences," and "to reduce stigma around certain disabilities." A larger group of teachers (n=22) explained that they felt disability should

**Table 1**

*Count of Artists and Designers with Disabilities included as part of the curriculum*

Artists and Designers	Number of Teachers who listed the artist/ designer
Chuck Close	44
Frida Kahlo	26
Henri Matisse	26
Vincent van Gogh	21
Stephen Wiltshire	10
Paul Klee	6
Dale Chihuly	6
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec	5
Judith Scott	4
Jessica Park	2
Yayoi Kusama	2
Arnulf Stegmann	2
John Bramblitt	2
Mariusz Kędzierski	2
Laurel Burch	2
Georgia O'Keeffe	2

be identified as it "can be an important part of how they developed their skills," "may influence the content," and it "help(s) the students to understand why the artists creates art or how they create art." Several teachers who commented in this category pointed out that they only identify the disability if they feel it is relevant to the work.

The forty-five comments in the last category were statements related to the art teachers' positive attitudes regarding the ability of people with disabilities in visual arts. Comments in this category most commonly featured the words everyone/anyone, success/achievement, perseverance, and overcome. Many comments contained the words *everyone/anyone* and *success/achieve* together, including: "anyone can be successful" and "everyone can be an artist, successful people can have a disability." Some comments seem to suggest that perseverance may be necessary when someone has a disability and that identifying an artist's disability(s) may demonstrate this effort. Teachers stated phrases such as "shows perseverance" and "grit or perseverance that was needed to not let disability stop them," The word *overcome* was mostly used in terms of "overcoming obstacles" in phrases such as, "It is important for students to see the obstacles people have overcome to do what they do" or "it does show how the person has overcome challenges to create, and it can give inspiration." Overall, the teachers' responses suggest that those who choose to identify disability do so for various reasons; some perceive this important to understand the artist's work or process, while others perceive the inclusion of artists with disabilities as an avenue to develop empathy and an avenue to normalize differences. The largest group of respondents described the reasons for identifying a disability



as a means to highlight the success of individuals with disabilities and inspire students to persevere through obstacles.

### **Analysis**

#### **Inclusion of Disability**

According to Valle and Connor (2019), "If non-disabled people are unfamiliar with actual people who have disabilities or their first-hand accounts, it usually means not understanding the world they experience at all" (p. 26). The descriptive information provided by the teachers suggests that the inclusion of disability in art rooms is primarily happening in three ways. First, students with IEPs are participating at high rates in inclusive classroom spaces with non-disabled peers. However, a few of the teachers' comments about not wanting to draw attention to students with IEPs indicates that a culture exists in schools where having a disability is being perceived as being less-than or students being embarrassed by disability. Researchers suggest that the best method for dismantling this ableist notion is through engaging students to challenge cultural assumptions of disability through curricular content (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Keifer-Boyd et al., 2018; Valle & Connor, 2019). Through this survey, it became apparent that teachers engage in this work through two additional methods of inclusion. The majority of art teachers (82%) in this survey include artists with disabilities as part of the curriculum, at least some of the time. Finally, many art teachers also include other visual representations of disabilities, most commonly children's books. By exposing children to book characters with disabilities, teachers can increase children's understanding and acceptance of disability, which aligns with art teachers' comments regarding empathy and efforts to make disabilities not seem so different (Wilkins et al., 2016). However, it is important to

recognize that the representations of disability, both by artists and within media such as literature, should be carefully chosen so as not to fall into stereotypical tropes of disability prevalent in media. This includes the representation of people with disabilities as the object of pity, sinister and/or evil, a burden, incapable of fully participating in life, a supercrip, nonsexual, an object of violence, and laughable (Bilken & Bodgan, 1977).

#### **Artists with Disabilities/Disabled Artists**

Symeonidou (2019) describes the difference between disabled people doing art and disability art as an important distinction, in that disabled people doing art is any non-political art produced by disabled people while disability art shares the experience of disability. Furthermore, disability art is focused on living with an impairment and is often seen as "educative, transformative, expressive and participatory" as it presents the perspective of disability from someone who has a disability (Barnes & Mercer, 2001, p. 529). The idea of disabled people doing art can become problematic when introduced into curricula when it is purely about admiring people who create artwork similar to other able-bodied artists despite their impairment (Eisenhauer, 2007). While the teachers in this study indicate a high willingness and interest in including artists with disabilities as part of their curriculum, few artists from the list are engaging in disability art. In addition, some teachers express a hesitancy to discuss disability as part of an artist's work and state they only discussed disability when relevant to the artist's work.

How do teachers determine when to delineate whose work is and is not influenced by disability? This is where the comments made by teachers regarding the identification of disability

“when relevant” becomes problematic. Process and content are inextricably tied to how we inhabit the world. Understanding the subtleties of the many ways in which artists with and without disabilities engage in artmaking is the benefit of utilizing and identifying works of art by artists of diverse abilities. From the list of artists, glassblower Chihuly could be described as a disabled person who does art. There is little information to suggest that the work’s content is directly related to his loss of vision, shoulder injury, or mental disabilities. However, the process of creating work and perhaps the form is influenced by his need to hire artists to help with the glassblowing process. In an interview, Chihuly stated that following the shoulder injury, “Once I stepped back, I liked the view,” as it allowed him to see the work from more angles and enabled him to anticipate problems faster (Hackett, 2006, n.p.). In contrast, an artist such as Stephen Wiltshire, who creates “perfectly scaled aerial illustrations” based upon his abilities, demonstrates a close relationship between artmaking and neurodiversity (Stephen Wiltshire, 2020, n.p.). His process and artmaking stand out because of his divergent ways of seeing, remembering, and creating. In order to fully appreciate the artwork of either of these artists, much like with children’s literature, the viewer should be made aware of the disability. As Siebers (2010) points out, “the rejection of disability limits definitions of artistic ideas and objects” (p. 3).

Researchers in disability studies have argued that disability arts have the ability to advance disability culture and claim disability aesthetics (Siebers, 2010). Others have said that the inclusion of disability arts in inclusive curricula counteracts the exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination of people with disabilities

(Symeonidou, 2019). The survey results suggest that some artists being included are making art that falls within the category of disability arts, including the second most frequent artist listed, Frida Kahlo. Nevertheless, further inclusion of disability arts could be achieved. A repeated response on the survey was the idea of the inclusion of artists with disabilities as a means to teach perseverance. When non-disabled people depict disability, they can fall back on dominant stereotypes of disability (Symeonidou, 2019). One stereotype that exists in both movies and literature is the narrative that “people with disabilities can cure themselves through sheer force of will” (Disability Movies, 2020, n.p.). The contrast between art teachers’ sincere intent to be inclusive and inspiring and the problematic narrative that some reinforce illustrates the need for further inclusion of disability arts.

### **Conclusions**

This survey provided data that illustrates how theories on inclusivity are currently being interpreted and implemented in Prekindergarten-12 education. Based on the teachers’ responses, it is clear that students with IEPs are being included in visual art and design education classrooms. However, it appears that students with IEPs are over-represented in many classrooms, and problematically stratification occurs in that there is a smaller proportion of students with IEPs in advanced classes. The information collected in this survey does not provide clear insight into why this is happening, although there could be several reasons. In the state of Illinois, visual arts classes are considered a language, and students must complete one language class in order to graduate high school. A disproportionate number of students with IEPs may be advised into an introductory visual arts class to complete the requirements. Alternatively,

because art, especially modern art, has historically embraced a disability aesthetic (Siebers, 2010), there could exist a perception that students with IEPs may be more accepted or successful in visual arts classes than other subject areas. However, the sample size was not large enough to reveal trends within sub-categories, and future research with a larger sample size could reveal whether over-representation is occurring at all grade levels or specifically within secondary settings. In addition, a separate study incorporating advisors, students, and the academic placement process could lead to insights as to why a disproportionately high number of students are participating in visual arts yet not advancing to higher-level advanced classes. The inclusion of students with IEPs in the classrooms reinforces for all students the fact that human variation and differences are normal (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017); however, the responsibility for disability awareness should not fall on the students with disabilities, but rather on educators through the development of inclusive curricular content.

The educators' responses regarding the inclusion of representations of disabilities in art and design classrooms provide insight into how the implementation of inclusion has moved, beyond inclusion as a placement in a particular setting, to curricular practices that include the representation and perspectives of people with disabilities (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017; Keifer-Boyd et al., 2018). Representation of disability as described by the teachers took many visual forms and media. Artists with disabilities and children's books were the most commonly featured examples. Further research with a more extensive data set could also provide insight into the types of media commonly used at specific age levels, as elementary teachers may be more

likely to use children's books and secondary teachers may be more likely to utilize resources such as movies, media, and advertising. In addition, information about this media would provide insight about the types of representations of disability that are being included in prekindergarten-12 classrooms. Participating teachers value the inclusion of artists and designers with disabilities. However, the data revealed conflicting information on the inclusion of disability perspectives, and more information is needed regarding engagement with artists whose work can be described as disability art. The analysis of this research suggests that further studies are needed to understand how teachers effectively incorporate disability art, aesthetics, and representations through their curricular approaches. In addition, future studies should incorporate students' perspectives and examine the effects of curricular inclusion of disability.

As described by Symeonidou (2019), a genuine commitment to inclusive education in art and design education engages students with disability arts and representations of disability. In learning more about individual artists, students can learn how the subject matter of their work and the process of creating the work are impacted by differences related to disability. More importantly, the inclusion of disability art and visual representations of disability in media and culture, as part of the curriculum, can serve to illustrate the many ways people can inhabit, perceive, and represent the world around them. This has important implications for students to understand their own divergence and differences.

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