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# Diversity in Action: The Story of an Art Workshop for Neurodiverse Students



*Abstract: This paper presents the story of a unique academic course that focuses on the experience of shared learning and co-creation in a neurodiverse group of students in college. The Department of Special Education at Oranim College of Education strives to develop a humanistic approach among special education preservice teachers that accepts every person, regardless of individual characteristics. These preservice teachers learn that it is important to support all dimensions of their students' development, addressing their diverse learning needs. Based on this vision, special education preservice teachers were offered an art workshop, in which they participate with neurodiverse students with or without intellectual disability, coming from a variety of religions – Jews, Muslims and Christians. The field of art was chosen as it provides equal opportunity of expression for participants, without requiring prior abilities or skills. This paper will present the story of this course in the eyes of both the teaching staff and participants, dealing with themes such as apart and together, communication and connection, and different perspectives.*

*Keywords: inclusion, undergraduate education, intellectual disability, art*

## Background

### *Legislation and Policy in Israel Regarding the Inclusion of People with Disabilities*

In line with current trends over the last two decades, humanist views promoting the concept of including individuals with disabilities in society have been strengthened in Israel. Contrary to the previous concept of integration, which required the individual to adapt to mainstream schools or institutions, the current concept of inclusion emphasizes the responsibility of society to support the needs of individuals with disabilities so they can take an active part and be valued members of a neurodiverse community (ALEXANDER et al., 2016; FARRELL, 2000). Neurodiversity refers to the reality that diverse minds and brains exist. In this sense, even groups of neurotypical people are neurodiverse, as no two individuals have exactly the same mind or brain (DWYER, 2021).

In accordance with this humanistic view, Israel's Special Education Act enacted in 1988 was updated in 2018, emphasizing parents' right to choose the type of school and level of inclusion at which their children will receive special services and support for their needs. This update created a legal infrastructure that encourages providing individual educational plans within mainstream schools. It was determined that the support services (accessibility, educational support, emotional, etc.) the students receive will be provided according to their needs and should not be affected by the type of school which they attend (SPERLING et al., 2019).

### *Integration and Inclusion Programs for Individuals with Cognitive Disabilities in Higher Education*

In light of studies showing that acquiring higher education increases the ability of people with different kinds of disabilities to integrate into the world of employment, gain equal social opportunity, and develop self-esteem and abilities, the United Nations Convention (2006) stated that people with disabilities should have access to higher education and lifelong learning without discrimination, and on an equal basis with others. Although this is a growing trend in Israel too, Tal et al. (2021) report that until 2016, no students with intellectual disability had completed undergraduate studies. In addition, a study by Israel's National Insurance Institute revealed that only 4% of students with disabilities that learn in higher education facilities are considered to have intellectual disability (SACHS et al., 2020).

Plotner and Marshall (2015) presented three main models for academic integration of individuals with intellectual disability: (1) the substantially separate model, in which students study in a separate program, but have access to campus services such as the library; (2) the mixed hybrid model, in which students primarily participate in inclusive academic coursework and social activities, yet receive additional separate academic or life skills support as necessary; and (3) the inclusive individual support model, in which individualized support for activities and coursework all take place in inclusive settings. In Israel most of the inclusion programs in higher education for individuals with intellectual disabilities represent the first model, sometimes with a few people receiving individualized support. As far as the authors have been able to determine, only one university in Israel offers all three models (TAL et al., 2021).

In the present paper a pilot course will be discussed that realizes the idea of full inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities within a preservice teachers' college setting.

## The Course Story - Equal Art Workshop Course for Neurodiverse Students

### *Context and Rationale*

Oranim College of Education is the largest and a leading academic college of education in northern Israel, serving thousands of students enrolled in bachelors and masters' degree programs in education, teaching certification courses, and advanced career training. Oranim boasts a broad range of programs and degrees, as well as a diverse student body, with students of different ages, ethnicities, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds.

The College's Special Education Department offers a four-year program aimed at training students to work in various educational frameworks such as inclusive schools, special education classes in mainstream schools, and special education schools for students with special needs who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, conduct disorder, and intellectual and developmental disability. The educational program includes methodological and theoretical courses as well as professional experience in various educational frameworks one to two days per week each year. In their professional experiences, the special education preservice teachers learn how to plan, perform, and evaluate lessons and interventions to promote special needs students' quality of life. As part of the school's vision, the special education department aspires to promote an approach of inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream environments.

Up until the current project, the model for inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in Oranim College was limited. As part of the field experience, in addition to the professional experience, the institution offered special education preservice teachers an opportunity to teach adults with special needs and intellectual disabilities. Since 2016 the department has collaborated fruitfully with an inclusive community and Home for Life for adults with intellectual, developmental, and emotional disabilities. Eight to fifteen residents participate each year in a learning group at Oranim, learning various topics such as science, leadership, creative writing, astronomy, and radio production and broadcast. As mentioned above, the teachers of those classes are preservice teachers from the Special Education Training program at Oranim College. The preservice teachers practice their teaching skills and become familiar with adults with intellectual disabilities, while the residents get the chance to learn and broaden their education in college. This inclusion model is based on Plotner and Marshall's first model (PLOTNER & MARSHALL, 2015).

The authors aspired to create a full inclusion model that would also serve as a learning opportunity for the preservice teachers studying in Oranim's Special Education Training program. In accordance with national policy for increasing inclusion, the special education preservice teachers, as future teachers in inclusive schools, will have to promote inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classes. In order to be able to take on this role, it would be beneficial for them to experience inclusion firsthand. This notion gave birth to the current Art Workshop pilot course for neurodiverse students. In this course, as opposed to professional experience, the preservice teachers are equal partners with students with intellectual disabilities instead of assuming the role of teachers. We believe that experiencing interactions with neurodiverse students from an equal position can change the students' point of view and attitudes, decrease fear of the unfamiliar, and offer them the possibility to understand what they will demand from their future students in school.

The medium of art was chosen as the course basis for several reasons: Art is a medium in which people can meet each other on an equal level and express their authentic selves without any need for prior requirements. Art has therapeutic power (McNIFF, 2019), and it can promote the development of emotional aspects (GRUBER & OEPEN, 2018), cognition, creative thinking (ULGER, 2019), and motor skills (BRAVO et al., 2017). Different modes of art

enable working in various directions, collaboratively or independently, and they have the potential to bring about depths of communication and connection between people who create together (GAVRON & MAYSELESS, 2018; VEROFF, 2002). Creating together can build community and establish solidarity and collective identity (LOWE, 2000).

### *Course Participants*

Twenty Oranim College students participated in the course. This included 10 female pre-service teachers from the special education program in their third and fourth year. The group included Jews, Muslims, and Christian Arabs. Ages ranged from 20-26. The course was a one-semester elective course for these students. From the Home for Life community (HLC), 10 students with intellectual disabilities (four males and six females) participated. All participants in this group were Jews ranging in age from 19-62.

### *Description of Lessons*

The purpose of the art workshop was to offer a place for a shared creative experience and meeting without prejudice. The goal was to create a place of equal opportunity in which art is the mode of expression with no need for prior abilities (LOWE, 2000; VEROFF, 2002).

The course curriculum was based on three principles that were reflected throughout all course lessons:

1. Structured design of lessons: with the presentation of the lesson topic, modelling, a short exercise, a long exercise, and an exhibition of artwork at the end. This principle refers to a fixed lesson structure, where the participants know what is expected, uncertainty is minimized, and stress is reduced. This enables preferable preconditions for inclusion of neurodiverse students (CAUSTON-THEOHARIS et al., 2008).
2. Themes and goals: There was a guiding theme for each lesson, starting with them of *Alone vs. Together* in the process of creation. Next, the theme of *Observing and Planning vs. Spontaneity* as used, and educators shifted between these topics. Once the group had worked together, the lessons focused on processes of planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Finally, the goal was to work in full collaboration. Setting goals for each lesson helped the teacher optimally plan the exercises and evaluate their success.
3. Experiencing various creative methods and materials (see Table 1 in Appendix 1): This principle relies on the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model (ROSE & MEYER, 2002; SHMULSKY et al., 2015) in a way that enables each participant to experience a variety of materials, get acquainted with new materials, choose the materials that best enable self-expression, and take an equal role in the learning and creation process.

Applying these principles enables UDL, which more effectively meets students' differentiated needs (ROSE & MEYER, 2002; COUREY et al., 2013) and provides an opportunity for a process in which barriers can be removed towards shared experiences and collaborative creations.

The workshop took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, so it was held outdoors. This enabled facilitators to use nature as a reference for inspiration, with a source and space for creation. Two out of twelve lessons were cancelled because of Covid-19 lock-downs. The

course lecturer was the first author, specializing in special education and in arts. Table 1 presents the course syllabus including the leading theme, methods, and materials (see Appendix 1).

### *Ethical Issues*

All participants in the course gave consent to the documentation of the course process and artistic products in photos and writing. After the end of the course, the authors asked for consent of the preservice teachers to use sentences they said, and only quotes were used in the paper from participants who provided consent. The authors did not quote any of the HLC participants.

## **Discussion of the Group Process**

Staff and participant reflections on the course are discussed below based on three sources to establish different points of view:

1. Supportive meetings for Oranim students: Participants were given the opportunity to meet separately from the whole group to discuss dilemmas, feelings, and issues regarding encounters with students with intellectual disabilities. Three meetings were held—one prior to the course and two during the course. This process was based on the insight drawn from an inclusive course at another college in which students reported that they lacked support for the inclusion process. All the meetings were accompanied and documented by the second author. In order to provide an opportunity for free expression, the meetings were held without the presence of the course lecturer.
2. A concluding meeting for the whole group: A closure meeting was held at the end of the last session for the whole group.
3. Reflective diary: Participants were asked to make a visual reflective diary. In the second lesson, the participants decorated a blank notebook in which they were encouraged to express their feelings after each lesson. The instruction was flexible and allowed them to choose various ways of expression. An expressive diary is a tool to process and work through personal experiences (WOLFE, 2011). Analyzing personal diaries can be used as a qualitative method (DOWLING et al., 2016). The information from the diaries enriched our understanding of the students' cognitive, emotional, and inclusive processes.

In addition to the students' points of view, the course lecturer (the first author) documented the workshop processes and her thoughts and feelings throughout the course. In addition, she documented the creative processes and products by taking pictures throughout the course.

### *Hopes and Fears*

The course planning phase was characterized by diverse emotions for the teaching staff and participants. The vision was to create a place providing equal opportunities, minimum prejudice and judgments, and an authentic chance to meet as people without labels. Along

with those hopes there were also concerns about how to create the best conditions for this to happen and whether equality in learning is really possible.

Before the beginning of the semester the first meeting with Oranim's group was held. The preservice teachers mentioned that they were excited for the opportunity for a new and different experience. They expressed their hopes to get to know people with intellectual disabilities and to feel part of a group. They wished they could be calm and enjoy the experience, and they hoped that art could serve as a bridge for relating and communication.

Besides those hopes, there were also some concerns about the forthcoming meeting, and some questions were raised: Will there be strange or inappropriate behaviors and how should we respond to them? Will I understand the HLC students? Will I have enough patience? The students also expressed fear that they would feel pity toward the HLC students. Three students mentioned that they took the course for reasons of scheduling convenience, and they were not aware of its uniqueness.

### *Together and Apart*

The course took place outdoors in a naturalistic setting after a year of distance learning. The first few meetings included very structured lessons, both in content and activities. The lecturer divided the group into pairs and small working groups that were varied with each lesson to enable the students could get to know each other without forcing them to cope with needing to solve problems during the creation process. In this phase some of Oranim's students experienced difficulties in letting go of their teacher role point of view and giving themselves the freedom to take on an equal role in the group. A parallel process was observed where some HLC students were constantly looking around to see who would help them.

This theme was expressed in the second separate meeting for the Oranim group of students, which was held after three sessions of the art workshop. In this meeting the preser-



**Image 1:** Second lesson - Collage, joint assignment, white covers black. Materials: black cardboard, white sheets of paper, scissors, and glue. Task: Each pair cuts the sheet of white paper they received and then together, as a group, stick the shapes on the black cardboard with the aim of covering as much of the black with white as possible.

vice teachers said they felt an automatic need to take responsibility for the HLC students. One of them said that sometimes she loses her patience. They discussed those feelings and wondered if and how they could get rid of them. They felt that they were taught to hold a patronizing point of view – a “teacher’s point of view” without feeling equal. One of the preservice teachers said, “I don’t know if I will be able to see us all as equals”. Another participant said, “In this course we are not educators but also not friends”.

Image 1 shows the Oranim group taking the role of teachers in helping the other students, as they are the only ones holding the glue.

As they continue to explore this notion, the preservice teachers asked themselves if they would behave the same way if the partners in the course were *regular* Oranim students. They tried to imagine a normal relationship including going out together and talking about personal issues. Some expressed their fear that they would give the wrong advice, or while going out to a coffee shop their partner would behave in an embarrassing manner. One participant said that she is jealous of the HLC students’ ability to be “authentic without masks, inhibitions, with no need for protective mechanisms”.

Regarding the lessons content and structure, the preservice teachers said that the assignments in the course allowed everyone to express themselves, and there was no feeling of low academic level. One participant said that the gradual process was good for her because the lecturer initially paired the students and later gave the opportunity to choose partners independently.

After the fourth lesson the content and format of the lessons was pre-set, but not the creative activities. The students could choose with whom to work, or if they preferred to work alone or in collaboration. In this phase it could be noticed that each group member had his or her own tendency to work alone or in collaboration, regardless of their creative or intellectual abilities.

A change was noticed as students began to work side by side (see Image 2). Working alone but near someone else enabled mutual creative influence without the need for joint creation or common conversation.



**Image 2:** Fifth lesson - Stones, dots and lines. Independent assignment. Dots and lines are influenced by the stone. Materials: Pages, watercolors, brushes, Q-Tip, corks. Task: After the first exercise in which the stone is painted, each student chooses what comes out of his stone – either lines or dots.

## Winds of Change

After five lessons, the structure of the lessons changed and was more flexible. At the beginning of the lesson two exercises were suggested - short and long, without any further instructions. This enabled each student to work at their own pace and decide when to move to the next exercise and whom to work with. This phase revealed the time each student needed to process and create.

After a while it could be noticed that students connected with different people in each lesson. Some steady groups were established but were flexible enough to include new members according to attendance in each lesson. In the small groups there was a special dynamic in which one student took a leading role and the others took other roles and acted together. An example for a change was in the lesson of nature prints, when the students collected plants for the exercise and started to share their resources. When they started printing, they shared the knowledge they acquired in their research. For example, they showed each other what happens when they print a specific flower or ask a fellow student what color is better for a specific leaf (see Image 3).



**Image 3:** Lesson Four - Nature Print. Materials, watercolors, brushes, and leaves. Leaves and flowers were collected by the students. Working alone but together. Formal study of floral and leaf prints.

At the end of each lesson an exhibition of the artwork was held, and the group performed an analysis of individual and group work. This section also showed a change. At the beginning, the lecturer had to invite students to present their works of art. As time went by the students themselves came forward. Most of the time the HLC students were the first to volunteer to present their artwork, and they encouraged Oranim's students to present the creations as well. This exhibition allowed the group to view the similarities and differences in all their artwork, and to understand that they have a lot in common even though their lifestyles and cognitive functioning are different.

This change was also apparent in the third meeting with Oranim's student group, which took place after eight lessons in the art workshop. At first the preservice teachers felt the need to help and kept looking around to see who needed their support. But after time, they said, "Now I am waiting for them to contact me if they need help, and I do not automatically go to help". The feelings of pity and compassion toward these students were



no longer present. As one participant stated, “At the beginning of the course there was fear of the unfamiliar, but now that we know each other there is a sense of comfort. It feels nice when one of them chooses me to work with”. They also mentioned that at this stage it is easier for them to set a limit when necessary, such as if a male participant approached a female student in an inappropriate way.

### Final Insights

The last part of the course focused on planning and building naturalistic sculptures – one in the college and one in the Home for Life community. The process of the final project included individual and collaborative creations, as well as joint decision-making while the lecturer only helped and refined the group process.

In the closing meeting Oranim’s participants said that the learning experience in the course was different from what they were used to, as it was not academic in nature but experiential and enabling. The cognitive demands were minimal but the creative and emotional demands were more prominent. Regarding the artistic outcomes, sometimes it was hard to know who created the work, and sometimes the work of the HLC students were of better quality than the works of the preservice teachers from Oranim. They also said that they could feel the connecting power of art.

Participants from Oranim also expressed that this course should be a compulsory for both special education and mainstream education preservice teachers who are going to teach children with special needs into their classrooms. They said that the course and the lecturer were a model for inclusiveness that they will take with them to their future work. Two students said that this course was more powerful than everything they had learned in other educational programs, even more than professional experiences.

Almost all the participants said that they experienced great pleasure in the course. They learned to use different artistic tools and techniques. The diaries expressed themes that were mentioned above such as joy, pleasure, working in collaboration, using new art techniques, and feeling part of a community.

### Summary

The primary importance of the course is that neurodiverse students chose to take part in it. The aim of the course was to create a place for shared learning that respects diversity. From the reflections of the participants and the staff it seems that this goal has been achieved. The various students in the course reported positive experiences related to being involved in the independent and collaborative creative process.

Several factors contributed to this experience. First, using art as a medium was beneficial because there are no academic and cognitive requirements, and there is ample space for authentic self-expression of all students with their differentiated needs, tendencies and abilities (COUREY, et al., 2013; ROSE & MEYER, 2002). Second, learning from previous experiences at other colleges, there were separate meetings with the group of students from Oranim. The conversations in those meetings contributed to venting emotions, finding support, and establishing the personal and collaborative development of future teachers. The course enlightened them to see people with intellectual disabilities as having strengths, skills, and enviable qualities.

From the authors’ perspective as teachers of teachers, this was part of the rationale for the course to provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to experience inclusion

firsthand. Oranim students' statement that this initiative should be a compulsory course for every future teacher supported one of the project's primary goals.

Along with the positive processes, there are some suggestions for improvement in the next course. First, it is important to have separate conversations with HLC students as well and to allow them to vent their emotions and express themselves in relation to their needs in shared learning. Second, it would also be beneficial for HLC students to fulfill all course assignments, such as the reflective diary and the use of the college student's portal in order to increase their commitment and contribution to the course. To enable equal learning, we recommend using UDL principles, considering group characteristics, and providing emotional support during the course.

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## Appendix 1

Theme	Materials	Exercise
Together and alone	Pencils	Hands
	Paper cuts	A personal collage (decorating the reflective diary)
	Charcoal	Shadow on shadow
Planned and spontaneous	Watercolors	Nature prints
	Gouache and stones	Lines and dots
	Photography	Sculpture in nature
Planning-monitoring-evaluation	Toy fragments	Self portraits (recycle)
	Adobe	Planning sculpture models
	Adobe	Building sculptures

Table 1: Course plan