



Methodology for the integration of arts for inclusion and learning development of children with special needs



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Version 2. Updated following the implementation of Activity 3 – the training event in Ghilarza, Sardinia, hosted by LVDA. Feedback and observations from the training are included throughout the methodology and can be identified by the mentioning of Ghilarza.

This material is created under the “Special arts – enhancing learning abilities, unlocking potential, nurturing inclusion” Erasmus+ project

Project number 2024-2-BG01-KA210-SCH-000289453

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Executive Summary

This methodology was created through the collaborative efforts of the partnership under the Erasmus+ project ***“Special Arts – enhancing learning abilities, unlocking potential, nurturing inclusion” (2024-2-BG01-KA210-SCH-000289453)***, implemented by a mix of educational and cultural organizations from Bulgaria and Italy.

The project is informed by both research and direct classroom experiences, demonstrating that the arts are a powerful tool for promoting educational progress and social inclusion among children with special educational needs (SEN).

The methodology provides educators with practical tools based on a clear theoretical framework for integrating visual, dance, and performing arts into the learning process of SEN students, both in special schools and in inclusive mainstream settings. It is built on desk research, study visits, and collaboration among educators, artists, special pedagogues, and school administrators.

The framework is designed for a range of professionals:

- Teachers looking to tailor artistic activities to meet diverse needs;
- Art educators creating inclusive workshop environments;
- School leaders establishing the conditions for sustainable implementation;
- Policy professionals seeking transferable and scalable good practices.

The document is organized in thematic sections, covering:

- A summary of scientific literature on arts and special education;
- Field insights from both special and mainstream schools;
- Pedagogical strategies aligned with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL);
- Specific recommendations for integrating visual arts, dance, and theatre in mixed-ability groups;
- Guidelines for administrative and institutional support;
- Strategies for networking and building lasting, inclusive teaching habits.

This resource emphasizes how the arts can truly transform learning environments and provides practical recommendations ready for direct use in teaching and for the educational and inclusive benefit of students with SEN. It invites us to recognize the expressive power in every child—regardless of ability—and to create learning environments where all children can grow, feel accepted, and actively take part in their learning journey.



Introduction

The **Special Arts** project was inspired by the shared experience of educators and practitioners, who have seen firsthand how participation in the arts positively influences both inclusion and academic performance in students with special educational needs (SEN).

Improved concentration and engagement in learning, as well as more relaxed communication and social interaction, are among the outcomes we aim to strengthen. By giving these effects more structure and sharing them with more educators and students, we can extend their reach and impact.

This methodology aims to support educators by offering ideas on how to:

- Improve focus and learning efficiency among SEN students in both special and mainstream education settings, using visual and dance arts;
- Enhance socialization and foster successful integration—and ultimately inclusion—through participation in visual and dance arts activities;
- Help arts educators and teachers develop skills, motivation, and a strong sense of purpose in supporting SEN students;
- Provide school administrators with clarity on their role and suggestions on how to make arts a meaningful part of the school’s agenda.

The first section presents desk research on the scientific background of using the arts in the educational and social development of children with disabilities.

From Part 2 onward, the methodology reflects ideas and insights gathered during study visits conducted as part of Project Activity 1. These visits involved tours of three partner schools in Bulgaria, where the team observed, participated, and analyzed educational practices on-site.

Part 1: Scientific background – general considerations

This section provides a systematic scientific overview of the role of the arts in education and socialization, with a particular focus on their use with children with special educational needs (SEN). It is emphasized that the arts — through their capacity to unlock emotional, social, and cognitive development — represent an alternative language for expression, especially for children with verbal difficulties or sensory integration issues.

1.1 General considerations

The cited studies (e.g., Greene et al., Hursen & Islek, Penketh) highlight concrete effects of arts activities on motivation, critical thinking, eye-hand coordination, and development of adaptive skills. Notably, the authors highlight several gaps in current educational systems. These include poor integration between special and arts education, limited collaboration between professionals, and a need for new pedagogical models. Arts are situated within



their broader social and cultural context before examining their specific educational relevance to learners with special needs.

Art is of great importance in shaping our society and culture, serving as a vital means for the socialization of the individual. As indicated by Middleton (2016), art generates social ties in society and directly or indirectly promotes union and solidarity, increases awareness on social issues, and brings about social changes. Generally speaking, art is an activity arising from the efforts to express emotions and thoughts about nature through tools such as line, color, shape, voice, word, and rhythm in an effective way (Dixon and Chalmers 1990; Artut 2002).

While many have attempted to define art, its meaning remains fluid and open to interpretation. However, we must agree that the concept, definition, and content of art — as well as the applications of art — have changed dramatically over time. On top of the complexity of art as a concept, defining arts education is also not much simpler. Education serves as a vital instrument for individuals to navigate innovations, shifts, and the complexities of modern society. Education undeniably helps to unlock and develop each person’s creative potential and talents. From this perspective, we can see that art can flourish through various educational pathways, making it more widespread. Consequently, arts education is widely seen as a fundamental part of holistic learning. According to Savoie (2017), arts education promotes both the individual and the society in terms of raising creative individuals and creative citizens.

Greene et al. (2014) emphasized that art experiences improve students’ critical thinking, help them to use time effectively, and observe their environment in a more conscious way. Hursen and Islek (2017) also specified that arts education increases students’ general motivation.

According to Penketh (2016), arts education is a multi-disciplinary field that can be integrated into various educational levels, as well as into various scientific subjects such as mathematics and science education, language education, and special education.

The goal of special education is to enhance the quality of life for individuals with special needs, helping them build independence through tailored educational programmes designed to align with their abilities, requirements, strengths, and interests. To be successful, these educational programmes — regardless of the type of establishment they are delivered through — should include art activities, since the latter contribute immensely in terms of both socialization and academic development of individuals with special needs.

Currently, educators are in favor of providing arts education to every student. However, there is a clear need for significant advancements in incorporating arts education within special education settings (Almqvist and Christophersen 2017).

Furthermore, Hourigan (2014) stated that organizations providing arts education and special education institutions need to collaborate so that all professionals — arts teachers, special education teachers, or artists — can reach students with special needs. This allows them to integrate the arts more effectively into special education.



Integrating arts education and art activities into special education to gain social and academic skills for individuals with special needs is further supported by the fact that arts education leads individuals to reject behaviors that suppress their thoughts and ideas. This leads to the adoption of creativity and the right to expression as the only way in life.

In most cases, the goals of arts and crafts for students with disabilities are similar to those in regular education. The main differences lie in simplified content and grading. These consistently remain:

- Development of subject-specific skills (methods, materials, and techniques, which are used);
- Generic abilities (such as curiosity, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, understanding of the relationship between part and whole, imagination, and communication, development of both manual and intellectual skills);
- And personal skills (confidence and identity).

1.2 Contribution of Arts Education for Individuals with Special Needs

Special education provides specifically designed learning opportunities catering to the developmental needs of individuals with diverse requirements, needs, and abilities. The focus is on the provision of more effective and efficient teaching strategies for these learners (Parrott et al. 2000). Being regularly engaged in arts education supports the development of both cognitive and motor skills, which is particularly beneficial for SEN children (Saldana 2016).

Through arts education, students develop a stronger sense of self and achievement, develop confidence and readiness for experimentation, facilitate social integration, strongly enhance eye-hand-brain coordination, and help regulate emotions. And at the same time, nurturing aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment, which in itself is extremely beneficial for SEN children. Artistic activities, which typically provide visual support, can further enhance the learning experience for children with special needs. Still, opportunities for children and young people with disabilities to engage in artistic experiences and activities remain inadequately used, making their promotion and expansion essential (Penketh 2017). Arts education serves as an alternative language and approach for understanding and empowering individuals with special needs to acquire vital skills for independent living.

Individuals with special needs can use the arts to express their internal worlds. Considering that all humans, with or without special educational needs, have various learning and expression preferences, the availability of different materials and methods used in art activities intensifies the interest and desire for participation. These different materials and methods allow students to discover ways to make associations between their characteristics within art activities.

Through arts education, people with special needs can become more creative, develop adaptive behaviors, and learn basic vocational routines. They also gain experience working with a variety of materials in purposeful and economical ways. They can experiment with different techniques and explore shape, color, and texture, often inspired by the natural



world around them. Art also helps them express thoughts and emotions, to shape and model ideas visually. Over time, this leads to increased productivity, leisure habits, independence, and a sense of belonging.

Additionally, arts are an important tool for individuals with special needs to communicate and share with each other (Artut 2004). Further to that, Salderay (2015) pointed out that the arts actually contain social integration, love, and hope — and this helps individuals with special needs to cope with difficulties and learn to functionally adapt to their lives.

Drawings of special needs children systematically progress from simplicity to complexity, and this exactly corresponds to Lowenfeld's view on artistic development in children in general (Alter-Muri 2002). This linear development is a continuous process following a pattern with gradual and progressive transitions.

Artistic workshops, including drawing, music, drama, and dance, are crucial for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), particularly concerning their verbal and nonverbal communication (Osborne 2003). Arts can address core symptoms of ASD by promoting sensory regulation, supporting psychomotor development, facilitating communication, and promoting emotional and mental growth by allowing self-expression, visual communication, and creativity. The same is valid for individuals with intellectual disabilities. According to researches and experiments, the various expression means which arts offer are beneficial for pupils with intellectual disabilities since they provide the latter with non-verbal ways of communicating, which are meaningful and appropriate. Further to this, verbal instructions during arts lessons help to improve the receptive language development of students with special needs. When the teacher gives a "paint the door" instruction, the student can thus perceive the concept of "door," and their receptive language skills are enhanced. If a child is using a certain color, the teacher can ask about which color that is and thus support receptive language development. Among all the known artistic techniques, collage is probably the one that triggers all mentioned areas and creativity most successfully, since it encourages students to use various instruments and materials, developing fine motor skills without the engaged individual even noticing it.

According to professionals who work with special needs children, a child's suffering, anger, guilt, shame, and other complex emotions may be channeled into art that can be shared with classmates, teachers, or even with a broader community.

For instructors who work with different student demographics, including the arts into the curriculum may improve accessibility and encourage academic accomplishment. Arts present a way to level the playing field in education, as there exists no "better" or "greater" result — only different accomplishments. Regardless of a person's native language, ability, or disability, everyone has access to the creative disciplines of music, painting, and theater. Because of their emphasis on creativity and primarily nonverbal nature, the arts provide a variety of rewarding opportunities for student involvement in all academic contexts.

Arts should be available to all students because they bridge instructional gaps and spark enthusiasm in students of all skill levels (Seidel et al., 2009). When used in educational settings, the arts are especially effective when general education teachers work together with teaching artists. This strengthens student engagement and teaches the value of



learning through rehearsal and revision. It also supports both the learning and creative process, helping students reach their full potential.

According to Loughlin and Anderson (2015), students with disabilities are rarely engaged in higher-order thinking activities, and doing arts provides such an opportunity. An effective arts program can create the linkage to more abstract thinking, to nuance, and to more complex relationships. “... art-making requires students to take a more active role in their learning by... taking ownership of their work,” thus helping students with SEN to overcome being passive in their learning and having all the answers provided by adults (Loughlin & Anderson, 2015, p. 15).

Yet, as Seidel and his colleagues (2009) report, a high-quality arts integration programme is of crucial importance, as otherwise the arts would have minimal connection to academic activities and would simply be considered as a pastime in the classroom. Extensive training and planning of the arts integration process would guarantee improved student engagement and better effects in terms of academic connections and real-life relevance (Glass, Meyer & Rose, 2013). The collaboration between general education teachers and professional artists is an integral part of high-quality arts integration in support of students with SEN. Adequate preparation of the team implementing the arts integration will guarantee that students are immersed in and flourishing through the creative process, without teacher judgment or competition (Schwartz & Pace, 2008).

Conclusion

Arts education for students with special educational needs is not a supplementary option, but a pedagogical and developmental necessity. It supports diverse learners through accessible, creative, and culturally resonant means. To be effective, this integration must be supported by interdisciplinary collaboration, application of UDL principles, and openness to technology-enhanced methods. By embedding the arts into daily teaching practice, schools affirm the right of every learner to express, belong, and thrive.



Part 2: Children with special educational needs (SEN), attending special schools – needs and effects on their development

This section presents findings from on-site observations conducted in two Bulgarian special schools, examining how arts and crafts are used in educational and therapeutic settings for students with special educational needs (SEN). It documents the tailoring of artistic activities according to students’ age and ability and highlights the positive effects of crafts, visual arts, and tactile games on motor coordination, communication skills, and emotional regulation. Special emphasis is placed on the benefits for students with autism spectrum disorder and those with visual impairments, as well as the interdisciplinary and nature-based approaches observed. The section also discusses how immediate artistic results can motivate students and recommends greater use of assistive tools and digital resources tailored to Bulgarian school environments.

Following the implementation of study visits to two special schools, the project team observed several notable findings:

- All teachers involved in the use of arts and crafts with students possessed a certain level of knowledge regarding how to integrate artistic activities into the educational program.
- The teachers employed in these institutions had formal training and academic backgrounds relevant to working with children with disabilities.
- The two special schools observed demonstrated a pronounced focus on craft-based activities, particularly in the education of older students.
- Older students were engaged in vocationally oriented craft practices such as pottery, painting, weaving, wool work, floral design, and the production of soaps and other handmade items.
- Younger students with disabilities primarily engaged in artistic activities for therapeutic purposes. Even basic tasks, such as color mixing, were recognized for their calming and developmental value.

In addition to visual and manual arts, tactile games and activities were implemented to support the development of motor and communication skills. It was evident that students’ needs varied significantly depending on their age and developmental stage, necessitating differentiated approaches to artistic engagement.

Observations confirmed that participation in crafts such as making *martenitsi* or other projects involving small objects contributed positively to the development of fine motor coordination and hand-eye integration, skills of particular importance for many types of disabilities. These activities also improved students’ tactile sensitivity, which is critically important for those with visual impairments.

In confirmation of the state-of-the-art analysis in Part 1, we observed that in both special schools, arts and crafts are also used as an interdisciplinary educational approach. The children learn through the process. For example, they go out of the school to gather their



materials to prepare for their creative activity — collecting leaves and flowers if they will be doing drawings, collages, or floral compositions. Thus, they learn about nature and understand what flora exists in their environment, what purposes it can serve, and how its habitat can be improved so it can flourish.

The artistic activities develop SEN children’s attention and their ability to stay focused for prolonged periods of time. They also develop their communication and social skills by working with arts, which use a rather universal, not necessarily verbal, language. This enables them to form teams and work in groups.

For autistic children, working with arts helps them arrange their thoughts and organize their speech or communication when they need to ask for help. The fluctuations and minimal changes observed during a creative process help them accept change more easily and adapt to it in non-artistic situations as well.

It is true that, as is the case with everyone, with autistic children everything is strictly individual. Yet what is important to say — and what is valid for all — is that they all experience great joy from being involved in doing arts and crafts. It is also important to note that ASD is increasingly prevalent, both among students integrated into mainstream education schools and among children in special schools. The above is therefore extremely relevant.

Another universally valid observation is that children with disabilities are often very materialistic and respond better when the results of their efforts are immediate. The results from art are immediate. The results from mathematics, by contrast, are often somewhere in the distant future. This helps explain why arts are more attractive and more desirable for children with disabilities.

Being involved in arts and crafts — especially in activities that involve movement — helps to decolonize the body from the mind. In the time that we live in, the body is frequently subordinated to mental tasks. Children are seated on chairs in classrooms and have little freedom to use their physical presence meaningfully. The development of body and mind in synchrony is just as crucial for all SEN children as it is for their typically developing peers.

Additional Practices and Recommendations

- Teachers can enhance tactile activities using low-cost digital aids, such as tablets with a stylus for basic drawing, color-matching apps, or adapted educational games for shape recognition and coordination.
- Bulgarian special schools may explore free or low-cost software like Colorfy or Drawing Desk for guided visual expression, especially for students with fine motor challenges.
- Schools are encouraged to document student progress using portfolios with photos, audio recordings, or parent-shared digital folders, accessible even via platforms like Google Drive or Padlet.



- To ensure sustained benefits, a checklist of short-term behavioral and emotional indicators (e.g., improved focus, reduced anxiety, willingness to engage) can be developed by school teams for internal use.
- Offer digital alternatives, such as drawing apps, color games, or story-making platforms with visual icons — particularly beneficial for non-verbal or visually impaired students.
- Incorporate nature-based and recycled materials to reduce costs and promote environmental awareness, especially in low-resource settings.
- Consider using multilingual and visual documentation tools (e.g., digital slideshows, audio notes, visual behavior scales) to support communication and inclusivity.

Conclusion

The observations outlined in this section confirm that special schools provide a unique environment where artistic activities serve as both educational tools and therapeutic interventions. These schools offer the structural conditions necessary for differentiated, interdisciplinary, and developmentally appropriate use of the arts. The immediacy and tangibility of artistic outcomes increase student motivation, while physical engagement helps bridge the cognitive-somatic divide. By integrating digital tools and simple forms of assessment, Bulgarian special schools can further amplify the impact of inclusive arts education and track individual growth more meaningfully. When supported through intentional design and responsive teaching, the arts become not only a tool for learning but a gateway to connection, expression, and well-being.



Part 3: Children with special educational needs (SEN), attending mainstream schools – needs and effects on their development

This section examines the realities faced by children with special educational needs (SEN) integrated into mainstream education schools. Drawing from observations at a Bulgarian partner school, it discusses institutional challenges such as systemic intolerance, instability in resource staffing, and discontinuity in support. The section highlights the transformative role of arts educators in creating inclusive experiences that foster communication, confidence, and belonging. It also identifies the need for structured monitoring of student progress, digital support tools, and improved mechanisms for maintaining stable staff–student relationships. The observations reinforce the necessity of long-term institutional commitment for successful inclusion.

The children integrated in mainstream education schools have various needs and disabilities — autism, schizophrenia, Down syndrome, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and quite a few others. In the partner school in Gorna Oryahovitsa, 30 out of 430 currently enrolled students have disabilities and special educational needs. It is important to mention that, according to the majority of other local educational establishments, “Vicho Grancharov” Secondary School is the school where different children are redirected, if they manifest their differences in the process of being educated at the other, more “elite” schools. These practices highlight deeper issues in the educational system. The lack of tolerance towards children who demonstrate abilities different from those of typical students; the inability to “deal with” or “handle” such children; the refusal to update educational approaches and staff in a way that is welcoming and inclusive; the failure to see potential and ability beyond the disability — these are just some of the most pressing issues.

But let us return to “Vicho Grancharov” School, where integrated SEN students go to the resource rooms, or as they call them — magic rooms — because there they can work on their speech, expression, comprehension, and do activities that develop their fine motor skills.

The school is focused on preserving its resource teacher team, because if the number of SEN children goes down, so does the funding provided for the school for maintaining resource teacher positions. The system is thus volatile and rather insecure when it comes to providing consistent, specialized support for SEN students. For integrated children with SEN, losing the person they have grown accustomed to working with is stressful, disorienting, and requires another period of adaptation to new conditions. This instability harms students who rely on these services because progress is lost, and one of two bad outcomes occurs. That means either children are left without the support they had been receiving, or they are forced to start over and build trust and connection with someone new.

“Vicho Grancharov” School boasts a head of the arts field who is inspiring, hands-on, and has learned how to work with children with disabilities in a way that makes them happy and satisfied with both the process and the results. At the same time, the children develop skills



— communication, patience, attention to detail, perseverance — that will be invaluable in their adult lives.

The integrated SEN students grow as artists. They are much more flexible and relaxed, calmer and more inspired. Their creations are presented together with everyone else's, and they are an essential part of the school's exhibitions and image. They feel appreciated, cared for, and loved. Art helps them learn and express themselves.

Additional Practices and Recommendations

- Documentation of progress through student portfolios, teacher observation logs, and shared digital folders can help track emotional and communicative development over time.
- Free and low-barrier digital tools, such as ClassDojo or Seesaw, may be used by teachers to record learning moments and securely share them with parents.
- Arts educators working with SEN students should have access to individual support profiles or short diagnostic briefs to help tailor their approach.
- Team-based care planning — including input from class teachers, resource teachers, arts instructors, and parents — can strengthen continuity and reduce dependence on a single staff member.
- Simple student feedback tools (e.g., visual scales or expressive journals) can increase autonomy and self-awareness in inclusive classrooms.

Conclusion

The observations in this section reveal that successful inclusion of SEN students in mainstream education requires more than mere access; it demands systemic commitment, stable professional support, and a school culture that values diversity. When supported by trained and empathetic educators, particularly in the arts, SEN students not only integrate but thrive. Inclusive arts practices offer a powerful means of fostering identity, communication, and belonging. To sustain these effects over time, schools must document progress, support staff continuity, and apply accessible tools that empower both students and educators. In doing so, they create inclusive learning communities where difference is respected, and participation is universal.



Part 4: Needs of art teachers and art educational experts working with children with SEN

This section addresses the pedagogical, organizational, and emotional needs of art teachers and educational experts who work with children with special educational needs (SEN). It outlines what group configurations are most efficient, what the appropriate pacing of activities could be, as well as the value of co-facilitation. Emphasis is placed on the importance of professional exchange, familiarity with students' individual profiles, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The section recommends integrating reflective practices, peer learning, and accessible tools to support educators, particularly within the Bulgarian context, where SEN expertise among arts teachers may vary.

According to the experts involved in the project and also based on the cases we have studied, to work effectively, art teachers should work with group sizes that are appropriate for the respective artistic activity. For instance, if it is a type of visual or tactile art or craft, the number of students should be smaller, in order for the teacher to be able to give each student enough attention and provide the additional support and explanations that are needed by the child with SEN. When it comes to movement and dancing, however, this is not a requirement. Students can support one another, mimic each other, and move together according to the instructions of the teacher.

To be successful, educators need longer periods for working on the same artistic activity. Giving more time allows the child — with or without SEN — to truly immerse themselves in the artistic process and stay present and engaged for longer. A lovely example of this was seen in the special schools, where artistic workshops were organized as two consecutive class periods. This provided the children with a more meaningful and lasting experience and longer-lasting effects in terms of both skills and emotions.

Arts teachers thrive when they can share experiences. The practices and ideas of others can be genuinely useful and can enrich the educator's toolkit, making the experience more fun, more educational, and more diverse for the children they work with.

It is especially helpful for arts teachers to have a supporter — a co-facilitator or a chaperone, whenever possible. In classes with children with multiple disabilities, this is essential. The artistic process should be closely monitored, and if the teacher is alone in the room, they cannot monitor and simultaneously lead the activity. The session should also proceed without major interruptions. Therefore, if any of the children need special assistance with something, this support should be provided by the chaperone in question.

If there is an external artist working with a class, the class teacher should also be present and should share the experience on equal footing with the participating students. Joining the activity allows the teachers a completely new perspective, helping them develop new skills and see their students more broadly, because this is what a shift in perspective usually does for people who are open and willing to learn. At the same time, the teacher should remain flexible and able to step out of the artistic activity (even if that is easier said than done) and



intervene when needed, taking responsibility for a student who may require help. This way, the artistic process can continue without interruption.

A teacher who knows the children like a second parent is truly essential, especially when children with SEN are in the group. That person will serve as the anchor, providing the psychological stability needed for the learning process to truly take place.

A particularly important note when speaking about dance and movement arts is that the involvement of physiotherapists is always beneficial. They can assist children with disabilities in properly positioning their bodies. A child with a visual disability cannot clearly see the correct posture and may not be able to judge whether they are replicating the instructions correctly. A child with physical disabilities who can participate in dance and movement activities to some extent would benefit greatly from someone supporting them in achieving proper positions and postures. This is why access to physiotherapists can be extremely valuable.

Last but not least, the art teacher or educator needs to know the children they will be working with, to choose the right activity and materials. They need to know any specific triggers that might cause a student to enter into a tantrum and be prepared to avoid them. They should also be able to recognize if something is wrong with a student based on their diagnosis and condition, and take appropriate action, or request assistance from a chaperone or another staff member.

The Ghilarza feedback makes a blunt point that needs to be stated plainly in the methodology. Fear (from someone getting hurt, from someone not managing, from someone failing, from one’s own failure or incapability) can transfer from educator to child, and from child to child, especially in activities involving vulnerability, balance, mobility, or uncertainty. One section reports a child’s reaction to a game of trust as: “Fear, fear and more fear.” This is presented as evidence of how fear “travels from one head to another,” and why educators must manage their own reactions to avoid passing anxiety into the group.

A practical implication is that educators should treat self-regulation as part of safeguarding, not as personal preference. Before running trust-based or sensory-reduction exercises (i.e. such that are done in silence or with the eyes closed), the educator should check their own readiness, clarify safety measures, and explicitly name optionality and support roles. This aligns with a participant observation that “our fears influence the others” and that educators need to control those fears when working with children.

Additional Practices and Recommendations

- Teachers can use simple visual profiles or student “passports” that include icons or short notes on support needs, triggers, and calming strategies — especially helpful for visiting artists.
- In Bulgaria, platforms like Shkolo.bg or school-issued Google Workspace accounts can support team communication and lesson coordination.



- Organizing peer observation sessions or monthly exchange meetings between arts and SEN educators helps disseminate successful practices.
- Teachers can reflect on their work using simple self-assessment forms (e.g., “What worked? What could be adapted?”), which can be standardized and included in school portfolios.
- Co-facilitation can be supported by community volunteers, parents, or NGO partners, particularly in resource-limited schools.

Conclusion

The success of art education for students with special educational needs depends not only on curriculum content but also on context, structure, and the human relationships that shape the learning environment. Teachers must be provided with time, support, and professional development to respond flexibly and empathetically to the diverse needs of their students. Collaboration — both within the classroom and across institutions — enhances the sustainability of inclusive practices. In the Bulgarian context, practical tools, co-facilitation, and networked learning offer tangible ways to support teachers and ensure that inclusive art education remains feasible, enriching, and impactful.



Part 5: Making the arts accessible for all groups of students

This section explores the practical strategies and guiding principles for ensuring the accessibility of arts education for all learners, particularly students with special educational needs (SEN). It introduces the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a framework for creating inclusive artistic environments in a proactive manner. The section outlines the importance of adaptive tools, multimodal instruction, differentiated engagement, and the integration of assistive technologies. Examples of visual, tactile, and digital adaptations are discussed, with attention to how teachers in diverse educational settings — including those in Bulgaria and across Europe — can apply these practices using affordable and contextually appropriate resources.

If we want to be successful when using the arts with children with SEN, we need to be flexible and versatile in how we use resources, approach them, or adapt them when necessary.

If we are presented with knitting tools but our SEN children have trouble with their fine motor skills and cannot properly use them, we can create new, similar tools — but larger and more comfortable for children who have the will and desire to knit and want to participate equally with everyone else.

If using the potter’s wheel is not possible for all students, we can purchase ready-made pottery and allow them to color and apply lacquer to it.

Numerous adaptations can be made if a tool cannot be used by a specific child.

5.1 UDL

However, what truly matters to grasp is how to apply the rules of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which celebrates diversity creatively by promoting inclusion without isolating or overemphasizing any student’s disability. **UDL can be defined as an educational approach or philosophy that aims to meet the needs of diverse learners by suggesting flexible instructional materials, techniques, and strategies that empower educators.** Using UDL, arts educators can proactively design a curriculum that responds to the widest possible range of users **from the beginning**, thus reducing the need for time-consuming changes and adaptations, which can also be costly.

UDL is unique because it addresses the **WHY**, the **WHAT**, and the **HOW** of learning — and, as mentioned, it does this from the very beginning, before we even step into the diverse classroom.

Let us look at the **WHY** of learning. This basically means providing multiple means of engagement or motivation to participate. Some children might be attracted to frequently experiencing new things, while others might prefer a predictable routine and structure. By offering possibilities for various forms of interaction, emotional networks in the brain are



activated, potentially improving the learning experience. Examples of how UDL addresses the WHY of learning include offering choices in materials or themes, using music or rhythm to create a routine, and allowing collaborative or independent work based on student preference.

When it comes to the **WHAT** of learning, this translates into providing multiple means of representation, making it possible to perceive and comprehend information. Some learners may have sensory disabilities or preferences (e.g., blindness or deafness), others may present learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia), or language and cultural differences. It is essential to provide options for how content is represented, because this activates the brain’s recognition networks, allowing the learning process to advance. This may involve visual aids, tactile diagrams, translated instructions, audio descriptions, or simplified multimedia resources tailored to students’ language and literacy levels.

The HOW of learning refers to providing multiple means of action and expression — in other words, ways to demonstrate what has been learned or understood. Some individuals may struggle with oral expression (e.g., someone with a motor speech problem or an intellectual disability), while others may have difficulty with written expression (e.g., a person with dyslexia). It is crucial to offer diverse and alternative options for action and expression to positively impact their learning. Examples include drawing, cutting, performing, narrating, building, or using digital tools. These various output formats accommodate physical, cognitive, and communication differences.

When it comes to the seven principles of UDL and how they can be applied in the art room, the following examples can be given:

1. Equitable Use

According to this fundamental principle, everyone should have the same experience when doing an activity. In this way, no one feels excluded. We can provide all pupils in the art room with a range of supplies and equipment to suit their various needs right from the start. Students are free to choose what suits them best. Giving the same resources for carrying out the same task is equality. Giving each student the appropriate resources to complete the same project without barriers — that is equity.

For instance:

- If we are doing collages, we can offer a wide variety of scissors to choose from.
- If we are working with fabrics, we can include different types of textiles for students to select from.
- If we are drawing, we can provide different materials — watercolor, acrylic, oil, felt-tip pens, pencils, crayons, etc.; we can offer canvases on easels or ones that can be placed flat on a table; we can provide brushes of all sizes and types; we can include a potter’s wheel and also ready pottery for students with different skill levels.
- If we are doing a dance, we can have someone support the visually impaired dancer with the movements and give more verbal explanations; or someone can tap the floor to set rhythm for the deaf child; we can have a model dancer for children to



follow; we can design choreography that includes a child in a wheelchair — and their assistant, if needed.

- Use mobile apps or websites for drawing, collage, or music creation — such as Procreate, Canva, ABCya Paint, or Chrome Music Lab.
- Incorporate verbal prompts and rhythm apps (e.g., Metronome Beats) in dance-based activities.

2. Flexibility in Use

“The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.” When it comes to learning, this means that everyone should be able to participate. To return to the collage example, flexibility for someone unable to use scissors might mean they can tear paper by hand or use a paper punch. If the topic of the collage is “what home looks like,” the educator can explain that “home” can be many things — a house, an apartment, a room, or even another person. The teacher could also allow contributions in both analog and digital formats, depending on the available resources. This sparks creativity in those capable of complex thinking while giving concrete guidance to those who need it.

3. Simple and Intuitive Use

According to this principle, “the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.” When the arts teacher prepares a lesson plan and its objectives, these should be reflected in the project steps through simple written instructions and clear visuals or short videos.

Other ways to ensure simplicity in the arts classroom include:

- Focusing on the main theme rather than technical details;
- Using symbols for repeated tasks or materials;
- Implementing color coding for steps, systems, or supplies;
- Showing photos (not more than four) of the materials needed for upcoming activities;
- Providing cleanup procedures for each technique, presented clearly and step by step — just like project instructions.

4. Perceptible Information

This principle states that information is effectively communicated to everyone, “regardless of ambient conditions or sensory abilities.” This calls for multimodal learning — engaging more than one sense. In addition to written text, use photos, short videos, pre-recorded audio, 3D models, etc.

When presenting visual information, consider:

- Strong color contrast to improve readability;
- Avoiding text on top of images;
- Enlarging text for accessibility;
- Subtitling videos for hearing-impaired students;



- Using consistent design (fonts, colors, layouts) to reduce cognitive overload;
- Choosing fonts that are dyslexia- and visually impaired-friendly.

5. Tolerance for Error

This principle is about minimizing hazards. In the art room, that can mean ensuring enough space for everyone to move safely, access supplies, reach the sink, and get to their workspace. We also need to build an environment where mistakes are celebrated, or not even seen as mistakes. Art provides the freedom to not be perfect.

However, if the goal is for students to work within certain parameters — e.g., using only cool colors (crayons or markers)— we can remove materials that don’t fit that goal. This reduces the chance of mistakes without removing creativity.

When it comes to dance and movement exercises, based on the Ghilarza experience we can add that a usable methodology needs a clear, formalized “step-away” rule that is communicated before activities begin, repeated when roles change, and enforced without questioning the participant. Ghilarza feedback recommends extending the list of valid reasons for stepping away to include high-intensity emotional states, specifically: “Add fear and horror to the list of urgencies.”

This is not about lowering expectations. It is about maintaining safety, trust, and group stability. If a participant experiences fear or overwhelm and cannot step away safely, the entire exercise becomes risky and trust collapses. A structured approach is to define signals for requesting assistance, define who provides assistance, and ensure a calm exit path. This fits the broader need to minimize hazards and protect participation across diverse sensory and mobility profiles, especially in activities that involve closed eyes, altered balance, or reliance on others for navigation.

6. Low Physical Effort

7. Size and Space for Approach and Use

These two principles are deeply connected in the arts classroom. We need to think about how to make the art space welcoming, safe, and accessible for students with disabilities. Questions to consider during planning:

- Am I providing tools that make the artistic process more comfortable?
- Am I providing tools that make the process easier?
- Are tasks assigned in a way that students can complete independently, or do they require constant assistance?
- Does each student have visual or tactile access to what they need?
- Are tables and chairs comfortable for all students?
- How is the lighting? Do I need adaptive lighting, or can I seat students where they see and work best?



5.2 Technology in Support of Inclusive Artistic Practice

AI-Assisted Art Creation

Recent advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have enabled new modes of artistic engagement for students with physical, cognitive, and communication challenges. AI-assisted applications now allow learners to create digital artwork using voice commands, gesture recognition, or eye tracking, thus bypassing traditional motor or interface barriers. Platforms like **TherAIssist** and **DeepThink** offer guided prompts, emotion-linked color suggestions, and asynchronous journaling — blending art therapy with autonomy. These tools empower students to participate in visual creation processes even when direct manual interaction is limited.

Virtual Reality (VR) for Sensory and Spatial Inclusion

Virtual reality offers immersive environments that enhance spatial awareness, emotional regulation, and narrative thinking. Through platforms such as Tilt Brush or SensoryVR Studio, students with SEN can explore virtual galleries, simulate painting in 3D, or interact with calming visual stimuli. VR supports both personal expression and group exploration, and has shown particular benefit for students with autism or physical disabilities in controlled pilot settings across Europe (2024–2025).

Design Thinking in Resource Rooms – The Austrian Example

Inclusive schools in Austria have pioneered the integration of design thinking and digital storytelling in their resource centers. SEN students work collaboratively to prototype creative projects — such as animated scenes or functional designs — using tablets, visual coding, and feedback loops. This shift from therapeutic to innovation-based learning encourages self-confidence, structured experimentation, and digital fluency. Early reports highlight improved peer interaction and interdisciplinary learning outcomes.

Digital Accessibility and Interactive Whiteboards

Technologies promoting non-visual participation are increasingly adopted in inclusive classrooms. Creative interfaces compatible with screen readers, haptic tablets, and voice navigation allow students with visual impairments to take part in drawing, design, and collaboration. Interactive whiteboards (IWB) with multi-touch, magnification, and audio support further facilitate equitable access to group creativity, especially when used with tactile overlays or digital scaffolds.

Conclusion

The application of Universal Design for Learning in the arts classroom fosters an inclusive, dynamic, and student-centered environment where all students can engage in creative learning. Rather than positioning disability as a limitation, UDL recognizes difference as an opportunity for pedagogical innovation. By integrating assistive technologies, adapting tools, and encouraging creative variation, educators can empower every student to participate meaningfully. UDL’s emphasis on access, representation, and expression makes it a cornerstone for effective and dignified inclusive arts education.



Part 6: Benefits of different settings

This section compares the contributions of special and mainstream educational environments in supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) through the arts. It highlights the unique advantages of special schools, including specialized services and therapeutic expertise, and contrasts these with the capacity of inclusive education to foster social belonging. Emphasis is placed on the importance of structured cooperation between institutions, timely parental involvement, and the visibility of good practices. The section advocates for hybrid and context-sensitive models that leverage the strengths of both settings to create enriched, inclusive learning opportunities.

In special schools, children with disabilities can receive orientation and mobility lessons, adapted classes in all subjects, and physical education with inclusive sports. They may also benefit from tools like Braille instruction, tactile learning, and sign language education. In addition, they receive services and therapies from specialists who know how to support them in every aspect of life and help them develop skills for independent living and daily functioning. According to the Law on Education in Bulgaria, SEN students integrated in mainstream education schools have the right to spend five school days per year in special schools, where they can learn and develop additional skills.

Yet, the special school in Varna, for example, is only visited by seven or eight SEN students from mainstream education schools. These visits usually happen at key transitions — in 4th, 7th, 10th, and 12th grade, when there are state assessments. The visits start in 4th grade. This is how special schools discover which integrated SEN students exist, where they are, and what needs they have. However, these visits are not mandatory, and often parents do not bring their children to the special schools because of the stigma they still associate with these institutions. As a result, the many benefits a special school could offer are lost. It is even more disheartening when parents knowingly choose not to bring their children to the special school, despite understanding that this would be the best option for them.

Other issues related to this form of unintentional parental resistance include delayed access to special education support due to stigma or denial of the child’s diagnosis. This delays timely intervention and slows — or even blocks — the developmental process.

In many schools, educators and teams do amazing and very useful things for the development of SEN children without fully realizing it. Because they see their work from the inside, they maintain an internal perspective. Projects like *Special Arts* have the power to bring these positive approaches into the spotlight and to showcase them thanks to a “third-party” view and the peer learning opportunities the project organizes.

When comparing integration and inclusion, each type of educational institution has its pros and cons. The distinction between inclusion (placing SEN students in regular settings) and integration (ensuring mutual adaptation between SEN students and the mainstream environment) — and what each can offer — should be promoted and utilized, rather than ignored or dismissed.



In mainstream education schools, SEN children immediately meet and interact with a diverse environment, which teaches them behavioral norms, social acceptance, communication skills, and social subtleties — and so much more.

Based on our collaborative study visit, several suggestions emerged in this domain, which are presented below:

Inter-school cooperation

Formal agreements between schools — both specialized and mainstream — can ensure the sharing of resources and joint programming, instead of leaving such decisions to parents alone. This would allow special schools to contribute much more to supporting SEN students. Visits to these schools can also help the child discover a community where they are not the “different” one and where the professionals speak their “language.”

Mapping needs

The lack of a national register in Bulgaria for SEN students and schools is a major barrier to strategic planning. Such a register would be extremely useful for special schools, as it would give them information about which students with what needs are located nearby, and how and where to direct their collaboration offers. The same applies to mainstream schools, which would benefit from knowing what specialized services exist and under what conditions they can be accessed.

Professional exchange

Participants in the project highlighted the value of international collaboration and peer learning, sharing that they felt both emotionally and professionally enriched by observing one another’s work.

Conclusion

No single educational setting can fully meet the needs of all students with special educational needs. The evidence suggests that the greatest benefits arise from coordinated efforts that combine the strengths of both special and mainstream schools. By fostering inter-institutional collaboration, promoting informed parental involvement, and embracing both inclusion and integration, education systems can ensure that SEN students receive comprehensive, dignified, and effective support through the arts and beyond.



Part 7: Using arts with mixed ability groups

Here, we take a closer look at the pedagogical, developmental, and social benefits of using arts in mixed-ability groups that include students with special educational needs (SEN). Through a combination of theoretical insights and practical examples, it demonstrates how artistic engagement supports non-verbal communication, emotional expression, skill development, and social inclusion. Key contributions include fostering personal identity, enabling peer empathy, and promoting freedom from normative comparison. The section highlights the unique power of the arts to level differences and affirm each student's value and potential.

Personal Expression & Communication

- Art allows non-verbal communication, which is vital for children who are blind, deaf, or non-verbal.
- Because of its simplicity, art gives SEN children a voice — one that doesn't require spoken or conventional language.
- Through art, children can express emotions, experience recognition, and affirm their identity: *“I am here. I am a creator.”*
- In the arts, there is no single standard. This enables all children to express themselves. Because there is no minimum or maximum, SEN children can perform uniquely and share their inner world with others, without judgment, without being wrong, without falling behind.
- “Comparison is the thief of joy,” as the saying goes. In the arts, there is no comparison — and so the joy remains.
- Standards and comparisons often lead us to normalize everything — to define what's “right” and exclude what's “different.” In the arts, this pressure to conform is removed.
- The otherwise tempting notion of “normal,” which becomes the standard by which “abnormal” is identified and eventually excluded, does not exist in art.

Development of Skills

- Art improves fine motor skills, focus, and perseverance.
- Activities like ceramics and weaving are practical and sensory, and particularly benefit children with autism or cognitive delays.
- Students develop resilience and independence through completing creative tasks.
- Using art to teach other subjects to children with SEN is extremely effective:

“I taught children with special educational needs in mathematics. I had a seventh-grade student. We were learning geometric shapes. I can tell you that really, in order for these children to learn something, we need to somehow pass the subject through art. Because this is the easy way to reach them. And an interesting way, for that matter. This means cutting, assembling, making. This applied aspect is simply irreplaceable. And they somehow remember. Even though they are all children with difficulties, they remember, and at the moment of study they can explain everything we have talked about. They may



have forgotten most of what we have done within two hours, but if we start repeating the content, you can actually observe how they cope with each step we have taken previously — faster and faster. And there is always something memorized. So, I think that progress can be considered really possible, by passing it through art.”

— Todorka Ivanova, “Vicho Grancharov” school

Emotional and Social Growth

- Art builds confidence, especially when children see their work displayed.
- It nurtures relationships: neurotypical peers learn empathy and understanding by working alongside SEN students.
- Students learn self-regulation — for example, understanding not to shout when a classmate with autism is present.

Freedom and Creativity

- Unlike academic tasks, art does not judge or compare. There are no wrong answers.
- It creates space for experimentation, which helps students heal and grow.
- Teachers noted that the balance between structured art (applied skills) and free expression (pure creativity) is key.

Integration and Belonging

- Art can serve as a bridge between special and mainstream environments.
- Public exhibitions and shared projects provide validation and visibility.
- Seeing their own or their peers’ artwork appreciated helps children feel they belong and are valued.

A poignant testimony by tiflopedagogue and school principal Zhulieta Petkova illustrates this impact:

“It is a great reward for us, knowing what kind of children we work with, when we ask a child, ‘Who did this?’ and with a huge smile — not being able to speak — they understand the compliment, the recognition. That is the greatest reward for us. And also the tears in the eyes of the parents, from the fact that their child — their non-verbal child, in a wheelchair, with mental retardation, with many diagnoses — is on stage. Or the things they made are in an exhibition.”

“Another great success for us is when a child who ended up in our special school was given the necessary knowledge and skills, and was eventually integrated into a mainstream school. It doesn’t happen as often now, because children’s conditions are getting more complex, but it still does happen.”



Additional Practices and Recommendations

- Use collaborative art projects (e.g., group collages, murals, installations) that allow for individual contributions within a shared outcome.
- Offer adaptive materials such as textured papers, larger brushes, ergonomic tools, or digital drawing platforms.
- Encourage peer teaching and co-creation, allowing students to demonstrate techniques or lead parts of the activity.
- Document both process and product — use photos, audio notes, or short videos to capture non-verbal participation and student effort.
- Support reflective practice through visual or verbal student journals, self-assessment checklists, or expressive prompts such as *“How did I feel while creating this?”*

These strategies are adaptable to a wide range of school settings and can be adjusted according to the group size, age, and school infrastructure.

Conclusion

The use of the arts in mixed-ability groups presents a compelling model for inclusive education. Artistic engagement enables all students — regardless of their abilities — to participate meaningfully, communicate authentically, and build mutual understanding. By removing normative pressures and offering multiple entry points for engagement, the arts create a learning environment where difference is not only accommodated but celebrated. This approach supports both individual development and collective cohesion, affirming the essential role of the arts in inclusive pedagogy.

7.1: Using Visual Arts with Mixed Abilities Groups – Theory and Practice

This subsection focuses on the use of visual arts in mixed-ability classrooms, outlining how structured and collaborative visual art projects can foster both individual self-expression and group cohesion. The theoretical foundation emphasizes the dual role of art as a medium of freedom and discipline. Practical models such as collective collage-making are examined for their potential to promote inclusion while respecting each student's unique abilities. The main developmental benefits come from improved sensory exploration, motor skills, emotional well-being, and cognitive engagement.

Even though freedom is a core element of artistic expression, discipline is also fundamental. We can therefore say that the use of visual arts teaches students to follow certain rules, to carry out step-by-step activities, to develop communication skills, and to socialize successfully — all of which are invaluable for their adult life.

In visual arts, when an artist leads a single project using the technique of collage, it can be highly productive and beneficial for participants with SEN to contribute to the creation of one large artwork together.



The art teacher prepares a project that involves the creation of several individual pieces, each made by participants according to their own skills, and the art teacher (or artist) is responsible for composing the final work. Thus, the teacher is entrusted with an important preliminary design phase, which then leads to the creation of the different individual parts, ultimately culminating in the final composition. Even in the final stage, collaboration from some of the children may be included.

This working model increases the sense of cohesion within the group, making everyone part of a unified whole while maintaining the unique expressive characteristics of each individual.

The completed work, signed by both the children and the art teacher, is then displayed or donated to charity, emphasizing the importance of making these emerging artists proud of their contributions. Since art can be considered a form of language, displaying the final piece is a key part of the entire process, as it actively creates a visual language for others to experience and enjoy.

Here are some of the benefits of visual arts for children with disabilities:

- **Self-Expression:**
Art is a universal language, offering children the opportunity to express how they feel and what thoughts and ideas they have. This is especially helpful for those who have difficulty with verbal communication or are non-verbal.
- **Fine Motor Skills:**
Activities like painting, sculpting, or using adaptive tools for artistic purposes can significantly improve hand-eye coordination, finger dexterity, grip strength, and overall tactile sensitivity — which is particularly important for children with low vision.
- **Sensory Exploration:**
Children can engage with different textures, colors, and materials, which is especially beneficial for those with sensory processing differences or diverse learning styles.
- **Social Interaction:**
Collaborative art projects such as collages or group murals help build teamwork, communication, and social skills within a mixed-abilities team.
- **Emotional Well-being:**
Creating art can be therapeutic, helping children reduce stress, build self-esteem, focus on their inner world of emotions, and process those feelings. Arts support the formation of a child’s social identity and self-esteem, which has a positive impact on mental health and well-being. Children get a sense of purpose and meaning, and symptoms of anxiety or depression subside. Emotions are recognized and managed better and the energy is channel successfully.
- **Cognitive Development:**
Art activities enhance creativity, problem-solving skills, and spatial understanding and orientation — all of which are particularly important for children with various disabilities.

Here are some examples of accessible art activities, aligned with the UDL principles described earlier:



- **Adaptive Painting:** Provide large, easy-to-grip brushes, sponge brushes, or even paint rollers of various sizes for children with motor challenges.
- **Sensory Art:** Use playdough, textured materials, scented art supplies, or paints to engage multiple senses.
- **Nature Art:** Allow children to collect — or provide them with — natural materials such as leaves, flowers, twigs, or pebbles to use in their art.
- **Collage Making:** Include fabric scraps, paper cuttings, pre-cut shapes, or recycled materials to make tactile collages.
- **Digital Art:** Offer accessible digital art tools on tablets, computers, or interactive whiteboards.
- **Collaborative Painting or Collaging:** Create large-scale paintings, collages, or murals together to encourage teamwork and shared creation.
- **Sculpting:** Use materials like playdough or clay that can be shaped by hand — excellent for developing fine motor skills and tactile engagement.

Conclusion

Visual arts offer a rich, inclusive medium through which students with diverse abilities can develop essential skills, express themselves, and collaborate with peers. When properly structured and facilitated, visual arts activities become a powerful pedagogical tool that bridges differences and celebrates individual contributions within a unified whole. By adhering to Universal Design for Learning principles, educators can ensure that visual arts classrooms remain spaces of accessibility, creativity, and mutual respect for all learners.

7.2: Using Dance Arts with Mixed Abilities Groups – Theory and Practice

This subsection examines the educational, developmental, and therapeutic potential of dance and movement-based arts in mixed-ability classrooms. It explores how dance supports neurocognitive and motor development, enhances social interaction, and promotes emotional well-being among students with special educational needs (SEN). Practical guidance is provided for structuring inclusive dance sessions, emphasizing peer engagement, trust-building, and the importance of recognizing and encouraging each student’s natural expressive capacities.

Dancing and movement stimulate several brain regions at once, promoting neuroplasticity — the brain's capacity to form new neural connections. Dance and movement play a vital role in supporting both motor and cognitive growth in children with SEN, whose brain pathways may develop differently.

The hippocampus, a crucial area for memory and learning, is engaged throughout the mental effort required to learn and practice dance steps and motions. Brain connections are strengthened substantially through regular participation in such activities, which enhance memory, attention, and spatial awareness.



The motor cortex, which is necessary for coordination and movement control, is also stimulated by dance and movement. Such exercises provide a fun and efficient way for people with motor difficulties to receive physical therapy, supporting the development of balance, coordination, as well as motor skills – both fine and gross. Rhythmic elements of dance also support better planning and execution of movement.

Dance and movement have positive effects on social and emotional health as well. These activities can trigger the release of endorphins, which improve mood and reduce anxiety. For children with SEN — who may struggle socially or emotionally — dancing and movement offer a safe space for self-expression and connection. Participating in group activities helps foster social skills, communication, and collaboration, all of which contribute to emotional well-being.

Like any dance instruction, the approach starts with asking participants to become familiar with basic movements before progressing to more complex patterns and sequences. As students are challenged to perform the same step or sequence in different ways — facing another direction, dancing in pairs, dancing faster or slower, dancing alone or in teams, imagining they are in a swamp, whirlwind, or on burning coals. Thus, they develop physical mastery alongside problem-solving, creativity, and other higher-order thinking skills. By observing the entire class, the teacher can determine which students need additional support or adaptations.

A key methodological condition for accessibility in mixed-ability settings is the deliberate progression from simple to complex. The Ghilarza sessions demonstrate that a carefully staged increase in task complexity reduces early stress responses and supports participation across varied levels of proficiency and ability. This approach is not just a sequencing preference. It is an inclusion mechanism. Participants explicitly recognized the impact of “starting from very simple tasks and increasing the difficulty,” and linked this to the ability of a mixed group to be “gradually engaged and involved” without overload at the outset.

In practical terms, educators can translate this into planning rules. Start with a task that requires only one decision and one action. Then add one variable at a time, such as pace, distance, role switching, or a sensory focus. The goal is group alignment, not technical perfection. The Ghilarza narrative also frames this as “gradual increase in the complexity of the games and activities,” which enabled participants to “raise the level with small steps” and reach a shared proficiency “without the stress of facing heavy challenges from the onset.”

It is important that the dance instructor possesses both the skills and pedagogical knowledge to lead the entire group safely and effectively. A helpful approach is to begin with one or more workshops where teachers and students work together as peers. This allows teachers to step out of their usual role and enter the experience as participants. In the special space and time of the dance workshop, students may even become the teachers, offering valuable insights. Naturally, the teacher’s presence in the workshop is also useful if a problem arises — they can respond immediately and ensure the creative process continues smoothly. This is also true for other forms of art.



Once teachers and students have formed this group of peer participants, they can begin playing games, dancing, or creating theatre together.

To ensure a positive impact during group work, it is essential to recognize the importance of art as a means of self-discovery and expression. In the workshop, having the right skills and knowledge of body movement is crucial so that no action is forced on children; instead, their natural expressions are encouraged.

It is vital to trust the workshop process — and to trust the dance teacher — knowing they have a clear goal but will also allow each person to follow their own path. When working with children with SEN, it is extremely important to understand the line between imitation and creation, and how valuable it is to gently guide children from imitation toward their own creative expression. Both imitation and creation can be highly beneficial during the dance process.

In fact, the unique movement of each individual student can become creative material in itself. A skilled dance teacher can observe this movement and use it as a starting point for further exploration.

It is remarkable how children on the autism spectrum change even at the very beginning of the workshop. Dance and movement activities often involve eye contact and physical interaction, which can be challenging for neurodivergent children. But when these interactions are introduced with care, and at the right pace and intensity, participants respond beautifully and join in with pleasure.

Through dance and movement workshops, autistic children can gradually practice making eye contact, accepting physical touch, saying others’ names, and trusting new people in their environment — all within a safe and supportive setting.

Additional Practices and Recommendations

- Adapt movement activities using chairs, mats, or supported positions for students with limited mobility.
- Use music with strong, predictable rhythms to guide movement and support self-regulation.
- Incorporate cultural or folk dances to affirm identity and celebrate diversity.
- Introduce technology where possible (e.g., rhythm apps, motion-based games) to provide interactive movement cues.
- Capture participation through video or teacher notes to document non-verbal engagement.

In lower-resource settings, simple recorded music, body percussion, and verbal guidance can substitute for more advanced equipment.

Conclusion

Dance arts offer a uniquely embodied form of inclusive education that integrates movement, cognition, emotion, and social connection. In mixed-ability groups, dance becomes a



language of its own — accessible, participatory, and expressive. With skilled facilitation and responsive pedagogical strategies, dance workshops can empower students with SEN to explore their bodies, engage with peers, and experience creative joy. Dance thus becomes not only a means of physical development but also a powerful tool for building trust, empathy, and community within the classroom.

7.3: Using Other Arts – The Potential of Theatre

This subsection explores the inclusive and developmental value of theatre and performing arts when working with students with physical and mental disabilities. Theatre is presented not simply as a recreational activity but as a powerful tool for expression, communication, and personal growth. Core themes include relational accessibility, trust-building, and non-judgmental creative exploration. Emphasis is placed on fostering group cohesion, enhancing emotional well-being, and encouraging active participation through varied and adaptive artistic methods.

The use of the performing arts — theatre, dance, and other forms of expression — is a key resource in working with people with physical and mental disabilities. These disciplines are not just recreational activities or leisure moments, but powerful tools for communication, expression, and personal development.

These arts make it possible to overcome communication and cognitive barriers, offering each individual the opportunity to explore and express emotions, thoughts, and identity in unique and profound ways. In the context of disability, where physical or mental limitations often hinder traditional verbal or motor expression, artistic language becomes a privileged means of fostering social inclusion, autonomy, and mental and physical well-being.

Through theatre, dance, music, painting, and other plastic art forms, people with disabilities can develop motor skills, improve coordination, increase self-confidence, and stimulate creativity. These practices also encourage the building of social relationships, even in situations where isolation may otherwise prevail, promoting a sense of belonging and active participation in the community.

Welcoming and establishing a climate of trust at the start of drama workshops

- Welcoming should be understood not only as removing physical barriers, but above all as fostering relational accessibility — that is, attention to emotional well-being and positive communication among participants.
- Creating a climate of trust means developing relational skills that enable active listening, respect for diversity, and encourage participation without judgment.

In an artistic context, this kind of climate promotes free creative expression, which also serves as a tool for therapy and personal growth. In work groups that include individuals



with intellectual or sensory disabilities, this aspect becomes especially important for achieving the intended outcomes.

It is very important to welcome and protect the emotional reactions that arise during the activities, valuing the authenticity of each lived experience.

The Ghilarza notes show that facilitation quality is not only about clear instructions. It is also about managing energy, vulnerability, and pacing across a group. In the facilitator reflection, the morning is described as "running like a fluid," and the group as "vulnerable and listening." The same reflection notes a previous day as "a mission with a high level of complexity," including a moment where engagement risk appeared, followed by intentional stabilization.

For the purpose of the methodology, this supports one simple rule. The educator must monitor not only performance but also emotional saturation. When saturation rises, the educator shifts to grounding, rhythm, breathing, or simplified tasks that re-align the group. This is particularly important in diverse groups where sensory load and social load differ sharply between participants.

For a climate of trust to be created and for free expression to be encouraged, there should be no judgment in the working group. Only then we can have an authentic artistic experience. In artistic and art therapy contexts, the absence of aesthetic or interpretive judgment enables individuals to present themselves in their truest form, freeing themselves from internal blocks and increasing both creativity and personal autonomy. A non-judgmental environment makes everyone feel welcomed and valued, supports open expression, and helps build positive group relationships.

In theatre groups that include individuals with various types of disabilities, the following good practices have proven effective:

- **"The Circle as a Space of Equality."**
Begin and end each session in a circle, involving everyone present. The circle represents both a symbolic and literal space of equality and inclusion. It promotes democratic participation. With no corners or hierarchy, the circle becomes a space of harmony and equity. In it, each person can express themselves freely, listen to others without judgment, and feel welcomed in their uniqueness. The circle supports the development of group skills, refines empathy and active listening, and teaches cooperation, trust, and how to overcome loneliness and individualism.
- **"Variety and Integration of Techniques."**
Offer a range of artistic activities: drama, movement, body and voice expression, music listening, object manipulation, costume and set design. Adapt each activity to suit the attention spans and abilities of participants. Balance physical and non-physical exercises to highlight the strengths of each participant, avoiding limitations or rigid roles.
- **"Body and Voice Warm-up."**
Start each session with a warm-up tailored to the physical characteristics of the group. Use humor and playfulness to make the exercises accessible and enjoyable, especially for participants not used to movement.



- **“Maieutic Approach.”**
Encourage participants to search for authenticity in stage action, avoiding stereotypes and clichés. Provide meaning behind each exercise, maintaining a protected environment. It also supports sincere exploration.
- **“Improvisation.”**
Work without pre-assigned roles, leaving room for improvisation around chosen themes. Rework these improvisations into a collective dramaturgy.
- **“Guided Visualizations.”**
Once the group reaches a good level of confidence, offer guided visualizations. Lead participants through personal imaginative journeys that can help stimulate creativity and identify any emotional challenges or fears. Silence and sensory attention can function as structured pedagogical tools rather than passive atmosphere. Thus for example in Ghilarza, silence was not treated as a break from learning, but as a learning condition that supported internal attention, group regulation, and creative activation. Participants stated, “I enjoyed the silence. It is another way to see yourself,” and also described how silence supported observation and re-opened creativity.

From a methodological perspective, this suggests that silence can be introduced intentionally in short intervals, paired with clear prompts that anchor attention (for example, “notice one sound,” “notice one texture,” “notice your breathing”). The expected outcomes are not only calmness but also a stronger sense of collective presence. This is consistent with the reported experience of becoming “one organism,” and it can be particularly relevant for children who experience language barriers, anxiety, or sensory integration differences.

Trust is not a motivational add-on. It is a methodological precondition for activities that involve vulnerability, role switching, or reduced sensory input. The Ghilarza practice provides a clear structure: participants walked in silence to a park, formed pairs, and alternated the roles of guide and guided, with the guided person keeping eyes closed while the guide directed attention to selected sensory points (touch, smell, hearing, sight).

The exercise is described as requiring a safe environment, monitoring support, and explicitly “trust” and “responsibility and care.” A participant perspective confirms the emotional arc of the method. It begins with fear and uncertainty, then moves toward calmness once safety and care are experienced. One comment captures this precisely: “It was a little scary closing my eyes,” followed by the shift into a more pleasant experience when the partner acted carefully.

For use in schools, the transfer is concrete. The educator must define roles, boundaries, and stopping rules in advance. The educator must also normalize hesitation and allow opting out without explanation. The core learning is not endurance. It is the experience of safe dependence, safe leadership, and respectful guiding.

A methodological principle reinforced by the Ghilarza notes is that sensory experience becomes educationally useful when it is translated into language,



imagery, or artistic form. After the tactile and sensory walk, participants engaged in writing to convert sensations into meaning. This is described explicitly as a process of understanding through expression: “We dress experiences into words... we share them in order to understand them.”

The same reflection includes a concrete therapeutic-metaphorical mechanism that can be directly adapted for children. If a difficult sensation or fear appears during an activity, the group can describe it, name it, and reduce its power. The text illustrates this with: “we can describe it, give it a name... and we can put it in our pocket.”

Methodologically, this supports structured debrief formats that do not force personal disclosure. Children can externalize experience into a character, an object, a sound, a movement, or a drawing. The educator’s job is to guide the shift from raw sensation into shareable representation, while keeping participation voluntary and psychologically safe.

- **“Active Involvement and Collective Ideation.”**
Involve participants both as actors and as creators. Begin with a story, a reading, or a shared tale, and build the script and staging together - step by step - encouraging originality and shared authorship.

Giving feedback

Ghilarza provides a feedback structure that can be lifted directly into a methodology as a reusable protocol. The session explicitly moved through defined phases, including “Feedback phase 1: Statement of meaning,” followed by facilitator questions such as “Was the level of guidance clear?” and “Did the exercise feel accessible to everyone?”

For school practice, the protocol can be operationalized as follows. First, collect one-sentence meaning statements without debate. Second, ask two fixed questions on clarity and accessibility. Third, invite participant questions to the facilitator, focusing on options, sensory aims, and possible adjustments. Fourth, record what did not work and translate it into rules for next time. Ghilarza includes examples of this “what did not work” layer, including recommendations to shorten long activities. This makes feedback a design tool, not a polite closing ritual.

Examples

In Sardinia, Mauro, a 43-year-old man with both motor and speech disabilities, felt like an integral and essential part of the group during the final performance. He crossed the stage at his own pace and, together with his companions, brought to life a choreography created during the workshop days.

Another example: a child with selective mutism began to communicate and express herself through puppet theatre — by speaking as her character.



Conclusion

Theatre creates a unique space where students with disabilities can explore identity, connect with others, and express themselves creatively. Inclusive theatre practices rooted in empathy, trust, and collective authorship cultivate a sense of belonging and personal agency. By valuing authenticity over performance, theatre in education becomes a catalyst for social inclusion and emotional development, offering all students an opportunity to be seen, heard, and empowered.



Part 8: Teacher/Educational Expert Network Development

This section addresses the importance of building and sustaining professional networks among art educators, special pedagogues, and community actors committed to artistic work with students. It emphasizes collaborative learning, mutual support, and knowledge exchange as central strategies for enhancing educational practice. The section outlines practical approaches for establishing both online and offline networks, encouraging peer learning, mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Ultimately, these networks contribute to professional development, innovation, and the broader dissemination of inclusive methodologies.

To achieve lasting impact, it is necessary that teachers make themselves available to actively participate in workshops alongside the participants. Putting art at the service of specific contexts such as disability requires particular skills, which are refined over years of experience. Therefore, to consider the various artistic forms as genuinely helpful in special education settings, it is important to maintain continuous contact and exchange between expert trainers (dancers, actors, visual artists) and teachers. In this way, the skills of both groups are enriched and complemented.

To build strong networks with like-minded art teachers and educators engaged in supporting children with disabilities, one should focus on connecting with other educators, artists, special pedagogues, and community members, both online and offline. Attending thematic conferences, workshops focused on disability, and other local events with members of the disability community, as well as participating in online communities dedicated to art education and disability, can significantly expand one’s knowledge about how to support people with disabilities through the arts. These engagements also expose educators to innovative practices and adaptations that can make their artistic offerings more inclusive and effective.

Here is a more detailed breakdown of the activities that can be undertaken:

1. Online Engagement:

- **Join thematic online communities:** Explore social media groups (e.g., Facebook or LinkedIn), online forums, and digital platforms specifically dedicated to art teachers and/or special pedagogues.
- **Use hashtags:** Use relevant hashtags (e.g., #arts, #disabilities, #adaptedarts, #inclusivearts) to find and connect with other inclusive art educators on social platforms.
- **Join and participate in discussions:** Get involved in online conversations, ask questions, and be willing to share your own experiences and resources. This increases the chances of being accepted into the community’s knowledge base.

2. Offline Networking:



- **Attend thematic conferences, seminars, and workshops:** These professional development events offer great opportunities to meet other art educators and specialists in inclusion, and to learn from leading voices in the field.
- **Connect with local artists and special pedagogues:** Attend workshops, artist talks, and exhibitions to build relationships with local artists. Participate in sessions led by disability experts or inclusive arts practitioners to better understand specific conditions and how the arts can be adapted effectively.
- **Get involved in community events:** Engage in community-based art initiatives and meet other educators and local advocates of inclusive arts.
- **Host or attend local meetups:** Create or join local gatherings for artists, art instructors, and members of the disability community. These events promote a sense of community and collaboration.
- **Seek mentoring and collaboration:** Find experienced art educators and inclusive arts specialists who can guide you or collaborate with you on projects. In turn, offer your support and knowledge to others.
- **Support your peers:** Share their art, attend their exhibitions, join their workshops, encourage them, and acknowledge their contributions

3. Building Genuine Connections:

- **Be real and sincere:** Focus on creating authentic relationships, not just expanding your contact list. Experts in inclusive arts and special education can easily recognize genuine intentions.
- **Be truly interested in others:** Practice active listening, ask meaningful questions, and show genuine curiosity about the work and experiences of fellow educators.
- **Be helpful and supportive:** Share your knowledge, resources, and encouragement within the networks you are part of — or building yourself.
- **Follow up:** After meeting someone, send a thank-you message, connect on social media, and maintain the relationship over time.

4. Supporting and Learning from Others:

- Celebrate the work of fellow educators by attending their events and sharing their successes.
- Offer encouragement and assistance, particularly to those new to inclusive creative teaching.
- Create opportunities for collaborative teaching or joint initiatives.

Through active and meaningful engagement in both online and offline communities — and by building sincere relationships — art educators can establish a strong support system that promotes their well-being and professional growth in the field of inclusive arts.

Conclusion

Developing and maintaining networks among art educators and inclusive education professionals is essential for long-term success. These networks serve as spaces for mentorship, creativity, and shared learning. By embracing both online and offline strategies, educators can build dynamic communities of practice that enrich their work and expand the



impact of inclusive arts education. In doing so, they contribute to a culture of openness, shared learning, and sustained support for all students.



Part 9: Administrative Support and Assistance Provided by School Administrators for Organizing the Conducting of Artistic Activities

This section outlines the critical role school administrators play in enabling and sustaining inclusive artistic engagement in schools. Drawing from research and practice, it emphasizes that administrative commitment directly impacts the value and implementation of arts programming. It also highlights the importance of administrator training in inclusive practices, resource allocation, and team support. Key strategies include providing appropriate staffing, securing materials, facilitating communication with parents, and fostering a calm and collaborative school climate. The section concludes that leadership is a cornerstone for embedding the arts inclusively within the educational culture.

9.1 Safeguarding and Risk Management

Principals have a significant impact — even if mostly implicit — on school activities and priorities (Christophersen and Ferm Thorgersen 2015; Bamford 2012). Studies have demonstrated that a principal’s interest in and commitment to the arts is reflected in the extent to which arts education is actually valued in the school they lead. Additionally, the principal plays a key role in staff recruitment and therefore influences the range of competences available in the institution. This means that principals and their values are crucial for the introduction and implementation of arts education.

In many cases, instruction in the arts is assigned to generalist teachers who lack a background in the field. These teachers often lack both the competence and the confidence to teach arts. Their self-efficacy tends to be much higher in scientific subjects than in artistic ones. Their limited or absent subject knowledge significantly affects the way they teach arts. Implementing arts curricula requires teachers to move between various pedagogical approaches and roles (Hallam, Lee, and Das Gupta 2011; Lindström 2012). This creates a risk that educators without specialized knowledge will rely solely on personal interests or past experience when delivering arts instruction (Alter, Ays, and O’Hara 2009). On the other hand, specialist arts teachers frequently report feeling unprepared to teach students with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

At the same time, special education teachers recognize the potential of arts education but often feel they lack pedagogical models and appropriate teaching methods (Kissinger and Ponder 2009).

To support art teachers effectively, administrators must have experience working with children with disabilities.

Administrators are responsible for providing resources, materials, and conditions — they know how and where to obtain them. However, without knowledge of the actual needs of the target groups, the results can be inadequate.



Working with children with multiple disabilities is a process that never ends. Continuous professional development is essential.

Administrators must ensure that all staff receive equal training, so that everyone knows how to support children or handle situations as they arise.

Raising children’s tolerance threshold or reducing irritability is crucial so that, when they leave school and encounter the outside world, they can respond more calmly and functionally.

Administrators must support their team in breaking down tasks into the smallest possible steps and phases. Activities should be extremely simplified so they are achievable for each child.

School administrators should require a consistent safeguarding rule across all arts-based activities that involve vulnerability, sensory reduction, mobility challenges, or high emotional load. This includes a standardized “step-away or ask for assistance” option that is presented as normal participation, not as failure. Feedback from Ghilarza explicitly recommends including “fear and horror” as valid urgencies for stepping away. Administrators can operationalize this by ensuring adequate staffing, clear supervision roles, and a physical environment that supports calm exits and quick support without disrupting the group’s safety and trust.

Administrators can also create a parent support group, facilitated by a school psychologist. The psychologist should act only as a moderator of discussion — not as the source of solutions. These solutions (even to anonymous questions placed in a suggestion box) should come from other parents. The psychologist’s role is to know which topics to raise and how to guide the conversation.

Another very helpful step an administrator can take is to encourage staff to collect evidence — such as video recordings — of children succeeding at specific tasks or behaving inappropriately. These can be shown to parents as proof. Some parents don’t believe the school staff or reject certain realities, and some believe their own methods are more appropriate. Showing visual proof helps parents understand that, when it comes to disabled children, the special pedagogues and teachers have priority, and that the school’s approaches are more effective. This turns parents into allies.

9.2 School Climate and Enabling Conditions

One of the most valuable things an administrator can do is to create an atmosphere of calm, peace, and mutual support in the school. Voices should not be raised. Children should not be shouted at. The work is already strenuous enough — the team must feel safe, heard, calm, and supported at work.

Administrators have a direct role in protecting the emotional climate in which inclusive arts work can succeed. The methodology already states that leadership should create “an atmosphere of calm, peace, and mutual support,” and that “voices should not be raised.”



Ghilarza feedback reinforces why this matters. When educators carry unregulated fear, it can shape the group’s emotional state and weaken confidence and independence in children. The administrative expectation should therefore include reflective practice, peer support structures, and explicit permission for staff to pause, ask for assistance, and debrief, especially after activities with higher emotional intensity.

Having said all this, we can conclude with a strong confirmation: the headmaster plays a crucial role in the success of an inclusive arts programme, whether in a special or mainstream school. This includes providing a clear vision for how the programme should be launched and developed; securing materials, staffing, training, and student-related costs; advocating for the arts; monitoring progress; and supporting both teachers and students at every step. A headmaster’s leadership is essential for creating a school culture that values and integrates the arts into the broader educational experience and recognizes the positive effects on the personal development of children with SEN.

Conclusion

School leaders have a central role in the successful implementation of inclusive arts-based learning. Their vision, resourcefulness, and leadership directly influence whether the arts are perceived as central or peripheral to the educational mission. By investing in staff training, supporting collaborative practices, engaging families, and fostering an emotionally secure school climate, administrators lay the groundwork for inclusive, creative, and empowering learning environments. Their leadership ensures that the transformative potential of the arts is realized for all students, particularly those with special educational needs.



Final Conclusions

The methodology presented in this document provides a comprehensive and research-informed framework for integrating the arts into the education of children with special educational needs (SEN). Drawing on both theoretical foundations and practical insights from multiple partner institutions, it demonstrates the value of arts education as a transformative force for inclusion, personal growth, and pedagogical innovation.

The findings across all sections converge on several key conclusions:

- **The Arts as a Pedagogical Necessity:**
Arts education is not an auxiliary element, but a central pillar of inclusive education. It supports cognitive development, emotional regulation, motor coordination, and identity formation in ways that traditional academic subjects often cannot.
- **Multi-Contextual Application:**
Whether in special schools or inclusive mainstream settings, the arts offer meaningful opportunities for engagement, expression, and learning. Each environment has unique strengths that can be optimized through collaboration and flexibility.
- **Universal Design and Differentiation:**
The principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provide a strategic foundation for making artistic activities accessible to all learners. Through careful planning, the learning environment can accommodate a wide range of needs without isolating or stigmatizing any student.
- **Teacher and Artist Collaboration:**
Successful inclusive arts-based teaching requires ongoing dialogue and cooperation between general educators, special education specialists, and professional artists. Their combined expertise ensures both accessibility and artistic integrity.
- **Leadership and Infrastructure:**
Administrative support is vital. School leaders must actively promote inclusive values, allocate resources, provide training, and cultivate a calm, supportive institutional culture in which arts can flourish.
- **Networking and Knowledge Exchange:**
Sustainable progress depends on building professional communities of practice. These networks enable the sharing of effective strategies, mutual learning, and the advancement of inclusive pedagogies across institutions and national contexts.
- **Holistic Student Development:**
Ultimately, the arts help students with SEN to be seen, heard, and valued. They help students express themselves, create, and connect with others, reinforcing a sense of agency, belonging, and potential.

This methodology affirms that inclusive artistic learning is both a shared responsibility across systems and a practical strategy for educational transformation. Its implementation demands commitment, creativity, and collaboration — but the outcomes justify the effort: more inclusive, expressive, and humane learning environments for all children.



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This methodological document was developed as part of the Erasmus+ project "Special arts – enhancing learning abilities, unlocking potential, nurturing inclusion" and reflects the collaborative efforts of educators, researchers, and practitioners dedicated to fostering inclusive arts education across Europe.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the Human Resource Development Centre (HRDC). Neither the European Union nor HRDC can be held responsible for them.