

Opening Doors of Unlimited Possibility through the Arts at Texas Scottish Rite Hospital (Dean Memorial Learning Center)

by Francine Brown, Master Teacher



Francine Brown

Before returning to Southern Methodist University to pursue a Masters Degree in Art, I taught for several years in the Dallas Independent School District. Those years were helpful in preparing me for an off-campus Experimental Arts Program that I would have the privilege to develop under the direction of Dr. Ann McGee-Cooper.

From the moment that I stepped into Ann's office, she was ready, willing and able to provide me with a brand new teaching adventure. We met with administrators, teachers and parents at the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital. They wanted a creative arts program for children with learning disabilities at their Dean Memorial Learning Center. And so, I was about to embark on a unique pilot program in which I would design and implement two and three dimensional activities involving art, music and creative dramatics. The parents were so eager to have their children participate in this new program that more than fifty students were enrolled for the fall semester!!! Due to the special needs of these boys and girls, class sizes were usually very small (four or five at most) with children in the same age bracket. However, the new arts program would consist of two classes with approximately twenty five children per class ranging in ages from six to fourteen years old.



In order to turn this problem into a wonderful opportunity, a dynamic team was recruited. We enlisted on-campus teachers and students as well as off-campus volunteers. Aylett Cox, director of the Dean Center, was assigned to oversee the activities and enlighten each of us towards a better understanding of children with dyslexia. I now had a terrific team, and all of us were excited to learn along with the children.

Most of the team was involved in many of the multifaceted on-campus Experimental Arts Programs where "Imagination's Growing Place" was an ongoing process. These programs provided us with an abundance of creative ideas and hands on experiences.

Before the new off-campus arts program began at the Dean Memorial Learning Center, important preparation needed to be completed. To give me a better understanding of the difficulty that dyslexic children experience when reading and writing, I would observe them in some of their classes. It was very insightful to watch how their teachers encouraged them in their academic studies.

Next, my team and I began converting the school's empty gym into a fun filled learning environment. A portable sink, tables and chairs, and many supplies were added to this empty room. A large red circle was taped on the floor in the center of the room. Each day the children would enter the room and be encouraged to sit around the edge of the outlined circle. This "starting place" gave them a consistent area to begin the day's activities, which avoided much confusion.

Simple games, storytelling, role playing with lots of arts and crafts, musical instruments and whimsical gadgets and props were introduced to help stretch their imaginations and strengthen their motor skills. Interaction with the other children was encouraged, as well as one-on-one attention to each individual child. A fail safe environment was created where the children could develop a positive self-image. They were given the opportunity to think, to dream, to discover, to inquire, to learn, to do and to achieve a much needed belief that they were truly special.

This off-campus Experimental Arts Program at the Dean Memorial Learning Center was quite successful. I personally gained much insight and learned more than I am able to share in this narrative. As the years have passed, and I reflect back on EAP, I know that these programs helped shape my creative abilities in many areas. While both on-campus and off-campus Experimental Arts



Aylette Cox, Director of Dean Learning Center

Programs were created to benefit children, they were equally designed to train and equip adults and college students with the ability to also dream, discover, inquire and learn.

We were all motivated and inspired to take on a multitude of avenues that would lead us to have the vision to see through the eyes of "Imaginations Growing Place". Whether we became teachers or chose another opportunity path, our horizons were broadened and our freedom of expression was no longer bottled up - it was finally uncorked! We saw that our possibilities were limitless.



Whether you believe that you can or you can't, you are right! – Henry Ford

Believe in your unlimited gifts and sure enough, they will grow to amaze you! - Ann McGee-Cooper

Every problem is an opportunity waiting to be discovered. - Ann McGee-Cooper