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An Inclusive Arts-mediated Program for Children With and Without Disabilities: Establishing Community and an Environment for Child Development through the Arts

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Abstract

This multi-method qualitative study examined the culture, intentional design, and features of a 30-year inclusive arts-mediated summer program called Spiral Garden. The study involved historical document analysis, and interviews with key informants and staff members. Study themes indicated that the Garden was intentionally designed to provide multiple opportunities and points of entry, and as focusing on child-directed experiences of freedom/possibility,
engagement/connection, and belonging/community. The Garden was viewed as having a principle-based, self-generating culture, where art is the means by which children engage in the community and with one another. The findings are relevant to service providers who deliver inclusive arts-based programs.

Keywords: arts-based, children, design, disabilities, inclusion, program

Reflecting a social model of disability, there is growing interest in inclusive program design, participation-based models of therapy, and intervention in real-world settings (King & Chiarello, 2014; Palisano, Chiarello, King et al., 2011). In recognition of health as a holistic entity incorporating body, mind, and spirit, there has also been increasing interest in the use of arts-based programs in healthcare environments (Sonke, Rollins, Brandman et al., 2009). Arts in healthcare is a multidisciplinary and rapidly growing field (State of the Field Committee, 2009).

There is a vast array of arts programming, with one primary area being artist-based programming involving participatory arts practices (Broderick, 2011; Sonke et al., 2009). This involves resident, volunteer, or visiting artists who provide beside and group services in healthcare settings (Sonke et al., 2009). Research on the value of these activities and programs is scant and often not theoretically based (Sonke et al., 2009). Furthermore, artist-based programming is different from what we call “arts-mediated programming”, where the focus is on art creation as a process by which to engage children, facilitate their communication with others, encourage their self-expression in a group context, and provide an experience of social interaction and sense of community belonging.
Few studies have examined children’s experiences of the arts (Bishop, 2012) or the deliberate design and outcomes of arts-based programs for children with physical disabilities. Furthermore, there is a lack of understanding of the processes by which these programs support children’s expression, communication, choice, and self-direction (Galindo-Riquelme, 2001; Standley, 2002). Clearly, pediatric arts-based programming within healthcare settings requires both evidence and theory to move forward as a recognized intervention format. At the same time, it is important not to examine arts practice solely from an evidence-based perspective based on a medical model, but also to use philosophical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives to explore the meaning of the experience of the arts (Broderick, 2011). A multitude of aesthetic, developmental, social, and clinical intents can underlie arts-based programming for children, and an interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach is necessary for holistic understanding (Broderick, 2011).

This article examines the culture, intents, and key features of an inclusive arts-based summer program for children, called Spiral Garden. This long-standing program has been in operation for 30 summers at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Staffed by artists, musicians, health professionals/child care workers, and supported by volunteers, Spiral Garden is open to children ages 6 to 18 from the hospital and the community. The Garden is an arts-mediated program that uses multiple forms of art, including storytelling, working with clay, puppetry, gardening, and painting, along with co-creating music, story, ceremony, and celebrations. It takes place in an outdoor setting (Figure 1) and employs a reverse-integration model, where able-bodied children are brought into the environment of
differently-abled children. The Garden has multiple intertwined goals and the impetus for this study was to understand its complex and evolving nature over time.

A social ecological approach was taken to the research, as this orientation reflects the complexity of the Garden and encompasses the many theories that may explain its processes and effects. Social ecological approaches integrate behavioral change and environmental enhancement strategies within a systems framework (Stokols, 1992). As reflected in such an approach, the Garden can be considered from personal, interpersonal, environmental, and group/community perspectives, along with associated theoretical approaches, including theories of child and community development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), theories of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and systems theories of emergent processes (Zimmerman, Lindberg, & Plsek, 1998).

Since our goal was to understand the Garden’s culture, intents, and key features, we used qualitative methods to explore these aspects of the Garden, seeking to then interpret the findings with respect to theory. To set the stage for this work, we discuss literature on inclusive environments and leisure programs for children/youth with disabilities, and the limited research on inclusive arts-based programming.

**Inclusive Contexts, Community Gardens, and Extraordinary Places**

Inclusive environments have been defined as spaces where children with and without disabilities have opportunities to engage in leisure together, allowing social acceptance to be established (Devine, 2004). Work on inclusive play spaces for young children with disabilities has identified
the importance of creating a space where disability is viewed positively (Jeanes & Magee, 2012).

A culture of inclusion and acceptance is thought to be achieved by situating integrated programs in sites ‘owned’ by individuals with disabilities (Jeanes & Magee, 2012). Staff members are considered to be critical in creating an inclusive culture, ensuring that prejudice is not tolerated and that spaces are friendly and welcoming for all (Bedini, 2000).

Community gardens are an example of an inclusive environment. Within the anthropology literature, community gardens are referred to as ‘inclusionary spaces’ (Sokolovsky, 2011). School gardens, one type of community garden, are considered to provide a variety of benefits to children, including cultivating a ‘sense of wonder’ for the workings of the natural world (Zarger, 2008). Landscapes and places such as community gardens are considered to ‘socialize’ people by permitting or not permitting particular kinds of behaviors and by creating a system of shared meanings (Rotenberg, 1996). Another concept of interest is that of ‘extraordinary places’, which possess specific qualities not found in ordinary places. For example, they contain symbolic artifacts and create a feeling of the transitory that provides a temporal break in time and space (Foucault, 1986; Rotenberg, 1996).

**Leisure Programs for Children/Youth with Disabilities**

Inclusive, arts-based programming is one type of leisure programming for children/ youth with disabilities. Studies of leisure programs for this population typically focus on summer camps, including inclusive summer day camps (Boyd, Fraiman, Hawkins et al., 2008; Finch, 1998), segregated residential summer camps (Dawson & Liddicoat, 2009; Goodwin, Lieberman, Johnston et al., 2011), integrated residential summer camps (Hutchinson, Mecke, & Sharpe,
2008; Rynders, Schleien, & Mustonen, 1990; Tucker, 2011), and adventure education trips (Sutherland & Stroot, 2010). Outcomes of interest in these studies are primarily social in nature, including social acceptance (Devine, 2004) and social interactions and their meaning (Boyd et al., 2008; Rynders et al., 1990). Attitudes of peers have been examined (Finch, 1998), as well as sense of community (Dawson & Liddicoat, 2009; Goodwin et al., 2011), sense of inclusion (Tucker, 2011), and group dynamics and cohesion (Sutherland & Stroot, 2010).

Articles examining how programs are intentionally designed to create a sense of community are particularly relevant to the present study. Goodwin et al. (2011) examined the social meaning of a one-week segregated residential summer sports camp for young people with visual impairments. Their findings indicated the importance of landscapes that are affirming, restorative, and nurturing. Tucker (2011) indicated that few camps implement inclusion in a purposeful way. This dissertation discussed how camps can be expressly designed to ensure everyone becomes part of a community, and how continuity in staff members is important in fostering ‘camp culture’. Dawson and Liddicoat (2009) asked participants in a residential summer camp about their experiences, interpreting these through the lens of community as therapeutic. Using Sense of Community Theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), they proposed that daily program planning that centers on maintaining the criteria of community can be used as a road map for the overall design of a camp experience. Hutchinson et al. (2008) examined the nature of an inclusive one-week residential summer camp program, using participant observation, document analysis, and interviews with staff members. This program aimed to include all campers in the camp social experience. Findings indicated strategies for fostering an inclusive culture, in which inclusion is an expectation rather than a choice.
Inclusive Arts-Based Programming

To our knowledge, few studies have examined inclusive arts-based programs. Agnihotri et al. (2012) examined the feasibility of a theatre skills program in facilitating the social participation and social skills of adolescents with childhood brain disorder, and reported improvement in both areas from pre- to post-intervention and follow-up. Becker and Dusing (2010) examined integration into a community performing arts program, using a measure of quality of life pre and post intervention. In both of these studies, the focus was on children’s outcomes, rather than community-level aspects or program design.

There is also some limited published research on the Spiral Garden, consisting of interviews with staff members (Levine, 2002), an interview with a young person who had experienced the Garden both as a child and volunteer (Antze, 2002), and two qualitative theses using participant-observation methods (Davis, 2011; Galindo-Riquelme, 2001). One of these theses focused on art education, exploring art and art teaching/learning practices in the Garden, with experiences and observations recorded in a diary and via photos (Galindo-Riquelme, 2001). This thesis concluded that art making is the medium through which children are empowered, and socialization and construction of community are enabled. Galindo-Riquelme also reported that the program allows for child self-direction and inclusiveness. The second thesis examined friendship in the Garden, using journal recordings, materials (e.g., reports, stories, photos), conversations with parents and staff members, on-site interviews with children, and group interviews with current and former staff members (Davis, 2011). Davis concluded that there is an open-ended structure to friendship
in the Garden, provided by the norms and ways of interacting. The Garden, as a space, allows for ties of friendship.

**Summary of Research Gaps**

In summary, there has been little research on inclusive arts-based programming for children. Few studies have examined community-level aspects of inclusive leisure programs for children or youth, and only a few studies have examined arts-based programs, but not from a community perspective. Overall, the literature focuses on therapeutic effects for participants on a personal, social level, with some studies considering sense of community and inclusion. Previous research on Spiral Garden has examined its art education and friendship aspects, rather than its design and holistic nature. As a whole, the research literature on arts in healthcare contains little information from pediatric settings about arts engagement guided by artists or about the intentional design of arts-based programs. Studying the nature of the cultural, social, and physical community environment created by an inclusive arts-based program is important in providing information to others on how to structure such environments.

**Study Objectives**

This study sought to obtain a broad view of the Spiral Garden by examining the nature of the program environment from a scientific-humanistic perspective. Our objectives were to examine (a) the cultural aspects of the Garden, and whether the culture and intents of the program had changed over time, (b) the ways in which opportunities and affordances reflect the intentional design of the Garden, and (c) the nature of key program features. The objective was not to
conduct a program evaluation, but rather to conduct a descriptive study exploring the evolving culture, intents, and key features of a long-standing, arts-mediated program.

**Methods**

The study was conducted by researchers and service providers with backgrounds in psychology, child development, occupational therapy, health administration, and the arts. The study involved an analysis of documents pertaining to the history and evolution of the program, interviews with staff members considered to be key informants, and interviews with staff members who delivered the program in the summer of 2013.

**Participant Recruitment**

Study approval was obtained from the ethics review board of Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital. Purposeful sampling was used to select individuals able to provide the most appropriate information on the study questions. Introductory emails and information letters were sent to Spiral Garden staff members and people no longer working in the Garden who had played foundational roles in the program’s past. A consent form and background information form (collecting basic information such as gender, age, number of years of experience in the program, role in the program) were sent to interested participants. Completed forms were sent to the study coordinator, who ascertained participants’ appropriateness for participation in Phase 1 or 2 interviews, based on inclusion criteria.
Phase 1 inclusion criteria were (a) past or present staff members who held key positions in the Garden at historically significant times, and who had left on good terms (as determined by a team member with long-standing Garden experience), and (b) had three or more years of experience with the program. Phase 2 inclusion criteria were (a) participated in at least two of the four Garden sessions in the summer of 2013, (b) participated in the role of artist/art animator, facilitator/developmental service worker, program/site coordinator, or in another role (e.g., another type of coordinator role, site facilitator, or support development worker), and (c) had a minimum of three years of experience with the program (not necessarily consecutive), in order to ensure participants had a strong sense of how culture may build over the course of the program.

Methods of Document Analysis

A total of 64 historical documents were gathered pertaining to the program over a 28-year period (1984 to 2012): 33 media documents (22 newspaper articles, 6 magazine articles, 3 newsletters, and 2 TV/website stories), 4 research publications (2 theses, 2 journal articles), 11 annual reports, and 16 other documents (e.g., vision statements, project reports, planning documents, a resource book, unpublished articles). Two research assistants each read one-half of the documents and extracted information on historical changes, objectives, stories/legends, social inclusion, and staff strategies. This information was summarized into a database. The research assistants and principal investigator then discussed emerging concepts and created a summary of ideas, which was brought back to the full team for discussion.
Interview Methods

In Phase 1, key informants were interviewed by a research assistant who had previous experience with the Garden. They were asked to share their knowledge of program intents, evolution, and major Garden features. A semi-structured interview format was chosen for its flexibility, while still covering pre-defined broad questions (Nicholls, 2009). Questions included “What is the culture of Spiral Garden?” and “How does Spiral Garden achieve its aims?”

In Phase 2, staff members in the summer of 2013 were interviewed by a research assistant who had not worked previously with Garden staff members. They were interviewed about key program elements contributing to its functioning, whether program goals were achieved, and the purposeful design of the cultural, social, and physical environment. Questions included “Reflecting on this past summer, what were your goals with respect to Spiral Garden?”; “Were there times in the Garden when the ‘ideal’ experience resulted? Please describe”; and “What strategies do you use to promote the vision of the Garden?”

Interviews were conducted in-person ($n=9$) or over the phone ($n=5$), depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted 1 hour on average (range= 38 to 85 minutes). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, with identifying information removed.

Qualitative Analysis

Information from the three data sources (historical documents and Phase 1 and 2 interviews) were initially analyzed separately using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
The analysis of the historical documents involved three team members who extracted key ideas and discussed their interrelationships. The analysis of interview transcripts drew on interpretive traditions within qualitative research where an in-depth understanding of participants’ experiences is developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Patton, 2002). Following a content analysis approach (Fiese & Bickham, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), four study investigators independently reviewed the transcripts and noted emerging ideas providing insight into the ways in which the program provides opportunities, experiences, and a cultural setting that promotes social inclusion based on arts-related activities. Ideas and written summaries were discussed by the full team to gain benefit of their insights and perspectives. The principal investigator then used these initial ideas to extract quotes from each transcript, labeling them, and categorizing them into themes.

In keeping with the grounded theory method, the constant comparison method was used to compare data and sharpen the growing theory (explanatory framework). This was done for the three data sources separately, based on extracted quotes, with separate summary documents prepared for each data source. These summaries were reviewed and discussed by three additional research team members, then brought back to the full team for further discussion. Trustworthiness was enhanced through investigator triangulation (Creswell, 2012), as the study team possessed a range of knowledge regarding childhood disability, program environments, the arts, and service providers’ use of strategies to facilitate positive participatory experiences for children. Last, the team discussed similarities and differences in the themes emerging from the three data sources. Connections were made between common themes to form integrated, superordinate themes. Triangulation of the data collected through the interviews and historical
documents was an important strategy to ensure dependable findings (Fiese & Bickham, 1998; Watson-Gegeo, 1988).

Results

Interview Participants

Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. Participants in both phases had extensive experience with the Garden ($M=12$ years, range $=3$ to 26 years). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 86 years at the time of their interview. All 5 participants in Phase 2 took part in all four sessions of the Spiral Garden in the summer of 2013.

Findings of the Document Analysis

This analysis provided a historical overview of the evolution of the Garden and indicated themes of Garden norms, interconnection, and emergent processes.

Evolution of the Garden. Eleven annual reports from 1984 (the first season of the Garden) to 2004 provided an overview of evolving, articulated intents of the Garden, along with staffing and structural changes. In 1984, the Garden’s documented intent was to enhance child development by providing children in the hospital with a child-directed, outdoor setting fostering creative expression. In 1987, site monitors were added to manage children’s needs, and time was provided for daily staff planning and debriefing. Ten years later, in 1994, the emphasis was on the Garden as a sacred, healing site; installations, ceremonies, and rituals had been introduced;
and a maximum capacity of 71 children was set. The 1995 annual report referred to the deep spirituality of the Garden and the vision statement considered it to be a supportive intervention for restoring health.

In 1999, the arts were considered to be the vehicle by which children make connections among their inner world of imagination, the world of social interaction, and nature. Challenges were noted in keeping a balance of children with special needs and those who were typically developing. In 2000, there was a stated emphasis on the goal of inclusion to create shared experience out of which new understandings might grow, and a special needs coordinator and one-to-one facilitators were added to facilitate this goal. In 2003, collaboration with social workers from other programs was introduced to help families access funding for transportation to attend. In 2004, there remained an emphasis on the idea of the natural world providing a context for healing, but with consideration of the importance of children’s collaboration.

*Garden norms, interconnection, and emergent processes.* As shown in the second column from the left in Table 2, the overarching view emerging from the document analysis was of the Garden as a community or ‘village’ where art is used as the way for individuals to connect both with one another and the natural environment, through an unfolding, non-prescribed process bounded by norms of respect, openness, and equality.

First, the *norms* (ethical principles) included an emphasis on listening to one another, providing opportunities for all individuals to have an opportunity to speak and engage in chosen activities, looking out for and supporting one another, and respecting the natural environment. Conscious attention to the design of the space and activities was considered to allow multiple entry points
for children to engage. Second, there were various themes of interconnection, including connecting through art, and interdependence, community, collaboration, and play. Third, the emergent process of the Garden comprised notions of mystery, unfolding, a sense of timelessness provided by freedom (to choose, to do, to be), and a sense of continuity of culture that has a historical basis, but also emerges over each summer in the Garden. The unfolding nature of the Garden was considered to allow everyone to have a sense of place and importance in the whole, where each individual contributes something and feels able to take risks without being judged. Co-creating art, stories, music, and song provides a sense of shared experience and shared history, which creates a permanent contribution that lingers on.

**Phase 1 Interviews (Historical Interview Themes)**

These interviews captured perspectives on the intents, evolution, and major features of the Garden. As shown in the second column from the right in Table 2, five themes emerged: (a) cultural aspects, (b) qualities of the environment reflecting social and physical design, (c) qualities of the environment that engage children, (d) opportunities and experiences, and (e) multiple intertwined intentions. Together, these themes reflected the intentionally designed fabric or nature of the Garden, including its arts-related aspects, provision of a range of opportunities and multiple points of entry, and the importance of child-directed experiences. Due to space limitations, we present these themes on a higher order level, with only a few illustrative quotes (with participant numbers in brackets).

**Culture.** Participants indicated that the Garden has an evolving and “self-generated culture” (#6) where stories and songs create a context of meaning, and there is a shared social
history created by children engaging in the arts: “The intention [was] to allow children to just invent and also to build… a shared social history… and that hopefully shared meaning would come from that” (#5). The stories in the Garden reflected and supported the development of its unique culture: “Story connects the dots and it creates the meaningful… reason for everything” (#1); “It’s all to do with the story and continuation and passing down, and it just gives it such a rich history and sense of community” (#2).

The Garden’s culture is one of acceptance, respect, and understanding: “The culture of community and acceptance and awareness and understanding… it seems to be based on that, and hopefully it continues to always be a culture of education as well. … Some kids are meeting other kids for the first time who look different, who don’t speak, who are clearly different than them, and they ask questions, and it’s a beautiful space to have that education and for them to get to know each other and they realize hey we’re not so different at the end of the day” (#2).

The Garden was also described as having a diverse culture, and an alternate culture of cooperation, interdependence, and respect for the environment. This culture was seen as providing a sense of collective identity, and personal meaning and value to the children.

*Sociophysical design.* The Garden was described as physically and emotionally safe, inclusive and accessible, highly supportive, welcoming, and full of possibilities: “Having… a low schedule structure allowed people who had different senses of time, or [needed more time]…to accomplish what they want to accomplish or… explore what they want to explore. It just gave people that… freedom” (#7). The Garden was also described as a place providing multiple forms and levels of connection (to activities, the culture of the site, other children, and adults); as a
highly interesting, playful, and inspiring place; a natural space; a spiritual place; and as a diverse place that values difference. The following quotes illustrate views of the Garden as an open and inspirational place: “a more open space where [children]… could choose, where they could try different activities, where they could take risks” (#6); “[a space that] can inspire you to realize… new possibilities… of how it could be… if everyone could come to the table and have a contribution” (#7).

Engagement. Participants discussed qualities of the environment that engaged children. Children are engaged in multiple ways due to the availability of multiple points of connection (with people, art, nature, and oneself), support from staff members, the arts experience itself, opportunities for social connection, and play. The following quote illustrates these multiple points of connection: “So not only have they connected those activity areas, they’ve actually connected to the culture of the site, and they’ve actually connected with other kids and other adults in terms of… the significance of that culture” (#1). Strong connections with staff members occur: “Kids get an attention and a consideration and value to their ideas and feelings they may not be able to get in… [their] everyday lives” (#9).

Opportunities. Participants focused on the open-ended opportunities provided by the Garden: “We designed the environment the way we did so that it read that it was open ended” (#5). By design and careful consideration, the Garden was viewed as providing the opportunity for intense immersive experiences. A spectrum of possibilities (e.g., the wild and the structured, the invigorating and the restorative) was seen to create rich potentials for children’s choice and experience. There were opportunities to: participate successfully in creative experience, explore
and experiment, self-direct and make choices, have social and community experiences, reflect and learn about nature and oneself, play, and experience an alternate sense of what is possible.

The following quotes illustrate the range of envisioned opportunities: “The idea was about creating a situation that physically encouraged, by its design, self-direction and exploration without big time constraints” (#5); “A place to… reflect and gain some perspective on a lot of the things that we take for granted” (#1); “They’re learning how to use their imagination … they’re learning how to come up with these ideas, and how to create them, really make them happen” (#2). As a result of these experienced opportunities, children “become empowered by understanding that something is possible because they’ve actually done it” (#4).

**Intentions.** Participants indicated the intentional creation of an overall environment providing opportunities for many experiences (*a diverse environment*), a multitude of possible ways to connect due to diversity and accessibility (*multiple entry points*), and carefully considered elements that supported “engaging meaningfully as a group, in a meaningful space, in a short period of time” (#1) (*meaningful experience*). Art in all its forms (visual, musical, storytelling, and performing) was the basis for personal experiences (e.g., connecting to other children) and the creation of Garden culture: “Part of the reason that we were using art forms to bring people together is because we had such a diversity of people who communicated in so many diverse ways” (#7). Children were provided with a range of entry points (e.g., through art, story, song, different people). The following quote illustrates these multiple points of entry: “The breadth of scale, the breadth of ability… the breadth of material… the breadth of… attitudes in the Garden… allow children these varying entry points” (#1).
The intention was to provide children with various opportunities: to experience being a child in an outdoor environment, for growth/development, for intense and meaningful personal experiences, and for an experience of community. The following quote illustrates opportunities for the natural unfolding of development in a deinstitutionalized space: “The intention [was]... to create a space that allows child development to unfold naturally and individually with kids at their own rates, in their own ways according to their own interests. So that was one intention. The other intention was to get out of the hospital and just put children in what is a normal summer for kids. Green grass, trees, wind… time, sand, plants… music, other kids” (#5).

Phase 2 Interviews (Present Garden Themes)

As shown in the right-hand column of Table 2, five themes emerged: (a) the Garden’s philosophical basis, (b) the Garden as a unique and special place, (c) arts-mediated relational aspects, (d) a child-directed place of openness and possibility, and (e) staff members’ facilitating role. Together, these themes reflected the provision of opportunities for experiences of freedom/possibility, engagement/connection, and belonging/community.

Philosophy of the Garden. This theme concerned the philosophical principles by which the Garden operated. Participants discussed principles of possibility, equality, inclusion, and authenticity. These ways of being together pertained to both children and staff members. As one example, the principle of possibility concerned seeing possibilities and children’s capabilities: “Everybody’s… willing to try things that sound crazy and make them happen and see what’s possible so… it’s just the whole concept that almost anything is possible” (#10). The principle of authenticity involved bringing oneself to the Garden: “If you think about how you’re with a
child, would you want them not to... bring themselves? So if you’re looking at it from that point of view, then you have to look at it from yourself. If I’m saying to somebody across from me you’ve got to bring you, then how can you not bring yourself?” (#11).

A special place. The Garden was viewed as special and precious to children and staff members, as it provides an alternate world and a back-to-basics experience: “[It is a] unique space with a unique culture and a unique set of activities that exists independently from the rest of your life. ... its own world... it’s very separate... almost isolated from... anything else that you do outside” (#14); “They can play in the sandbox, they can get dirty... they can... grow things in the garden.... [it’s] getting back to basics” (#15). Since the Garden is a special place, it motivates children to create art, as they want to make a contribution to the community: “It’s the... quintessential community... everyone has an interest in furthering a certain cause, and at the Garden it’s to play and provide an area for people to play and do what they want” (#14).

Arts-mediated. Participants saw the Garden as a deeply interconnected community where art is the common language or medium for communication, the means of engaging children, and the means of creating community through its power to connect people, ideas, and activities. A sense of community continuity is provided by song, story, and the art that children leave behind over seasons of the Garden. The beautiful outdoor setting, songs of gratitude, and celebrations were seen to establish connections to the Earth, others, and the Garden. The mediating role of art is seen in the following quote: “The point of the art is to get kids involved, it’s not to make art. So when you sit two kids at a table to make clay, they may make something out of clay, but the idea
is to communicate with them and let them communicate with each other… that’s the end goal. And the art is a means” (#14).

*Child-directed.* The Garden was described as a process-oriented place where there was deliberate design for openness in various respects, including multiple entry points to activities, freedom to make choices, and freedom to play and be playful. There was intentional design for a safe, fluid process, where the goal is a positive, carefree experience: “Here it’s all process… not to say there isn’t an outcome, we always have an outcome, but that isn’t the goal. We’re able to… really play and be in the moment with the kids” (#11).

*Staff members’ intentions.* Staff members discussed intentionally facilitating so that all children can enter, be engaged, have a good experience, feel socially included, feel a sense of community, and feel they are making a contribution: “If they don’t know how to enter, then… I find a way for them. I kind of reorient my own thoughts around how to give them a way to enter” (#11); “Trying to facilitate a moment for them is what the job is” (#11). Participants stated intentions of inclusiveness (i.e., connecting the kids to one another, tailoring ways for kids to enter socially), creating a shared sense of community (by engaging kids in community activities and doing things together), and engaging kids in activities (i.e., helping kids to enter activities and ensuring they have a good Garden experience). The following quote illustrates the intentional connections made by staff members: “Connecting them by… interest, what’s going to engage them, what’s really… going to excite them… what’s really going to spark [them]… what element of the story or what kind of character could I play or what kind of music would really get them excited or connected to what’s going on?” (#10).
**Overall Qualitative Themes**

Consideration of similarities in the themes emerging from the three data sources revealed three super-ordinate themes (left-hand column of Table 1). These were: (a) the Garden as a self-generating, process-oriented community or village based on principles of equality, possibility, inclusion, and authenticity, (b) the fundamental role of art as a connector and means of engaging children with activities, others, and the community, and (c) the intentional design of the Garden to provide children with multiple opportunities and points of entry, in order to bring about child-directed experiences of freedom/possibility, engagement/connection, and a sense of belonging/community.

Differences among the data sources are summarized in Table 2 (top row). First, the historical documents provided a *process-oriented view*, with a focus on emergent processes guided by various principles. In comparison, the historical interviews provided a more in-depth understanding of the *nature of essential Garden elements* and how they connected with each other in a multi-determined fashion to provide children with a range of opportunities for self-directed experiences. The interviews with current staff members provided information about *staff members’ intentions*, and the principles underlying these intentions. Compared to the historical interviews, which focused on *designing for opportunity*, the current interviews were more concerned with *personal intentionality*—how the desired intentions of the program are brought to life or enacted.
Discussion

In line with increasing interest in ecological models to enhance the participation of children with disabilities, this study provided rich information concerning the culture, intentional design, and key program features of an inclusive arts-mediated program called Spiral Garden. The Garden was seen as a community with a principle-based, self-generating culture, where art is the means by which children engage in the community and with one another. The super-ordinate study themes provided a broad perspective, encompassing views of the Garden as a community, as arts-mediated, and as intentionally designed to be open, fluid, and child-directed. First, the Garden was seen by staff members as a self-generating community based on principles of equality, possibility, inclusion, and authenticity. In this way, the findings extend previous work on leisure programs that has focused on principles of inclusion (Anderson & Brown Kress, 2003). Second, the Garden was seen as arts-mediated, in the sense that the arts experience enabled the provision of opportunities and experiences. Art functioned as the medium through which to engage children with activities, others, and the community as a whole, including its culture. Third, staff members indicated that the sociophysical and cultural aspects of the Garden were intentionally designed to provide multiple opportunities and points of entry for children, in order to support child-directed experiences of freedom/possibility, engagement/connection, and a sense of belonging/community.

In the following sections, we discuss how the findings link to literature on arts in healthcare, extraordinary places, complex adaptive systems, and program environments, opportunities, and experiences. This literature helps us to understand the unique nature, principles, and complexity
of programs such as Spiral Garden. The Garden is complex in that it can be viewed from different perspectives, on personal and community levels, in historical and present terms, and as a whole or in terms of constituent elements. The findings support the view that many aesthetic, developmental, social, and clinical intents can underlie arts-based programming for children (Broderick, 2011). The corollary is that many types of theory are relevant to the Garden’s functioning. The findings also indicate the utility of adopting an interprofessional and scientific-humanistic approach to examine such programs.

First, with respect to the arts in healthcare literature, a major finding was the importance of arts practices to the Garden as a community, and to the experiences of children and staff members. Clearly, children’s reported high level of engagement would not be achieved without an authentic arts experience guided by knowledgeable, nonjudgmental staff members. In what we call an “arts-mediated” program, the attainment of arts skills is not the focus; rather, the focus is on art creation as a process by which to engage children, facilitate their communication with others, encourage their self-expression in a group context, and provide them with an experience of social interaction and sense of community belonging. The findings therefore contribute to literature on the arts in healthcare by demonstrating the importance of participatory, arts-mediated practices in a pediatric setting, and by indicating the role of arts and aesthetics in the built environment of Spiral Garden (Broderick, 2011; Sonke et al., 2009).

Second, with respect to the literature on extraordinary places, participants viewed the Garden as an inclusionary space with symbolic meaning and a sense of the ‘special’. They described the Garden as a community or village focused on basic needs rather than commercial or materialistic
concerns. Its unique and special nature parallels the characteristics of extraordinary places called heterotopias (Foucault, 1986; Rotenberg, 1996). The Garden appears to possess each of the six features of heterotropic places: universality (i.e., is a commonly understood place, such as a village), identifiable functions, presence of “multivocal symbolic artifacts that may mean different things to different people” (Rotenberg, 1996, p. 86), heterochronicity (i.e., a place that constitutes a break with time and space, through the accumulation of meaning over time and the creation of a feeling that something is transitory), entry only through permission, and linkage to remaining places in society through a sense that the real world is closed off or reimagined through the existence of the extraordinary space.

Third, the Garden can be viewed holistically as a complex adaptive system (Zimmerman et al., 1998). Although this notion is typically applied to healthcare organizations or systems, it applies to any group of individuals with freedom to act and whose actions affect the context for others (Plsek & Greenhalgh, 2001). Complex adaptive systems have several important properties, which reflect the Garden’s (a) evolving, self-organizing nature, (b) network of diverse yet interconnected elements that interact in a dynamic manner, and (c) simple rules that permit creativity and innovation (Anderson & McDaniel Jr, 2000; Chaffee & McNeill, 2007). The role of history in shaping the Garden and the unpredictability of events and behaviors are, in fact, expectations of complex adaptive systems (Chaffee & McNeill, 2007).

Fourth, findings concerning the Garden’s special nature, culture, and provision of opportunities and experiences resonate with the literature on sense of community, optimal environments and structured programming, and children’s developmental experiences. Participants described the Garden as a “quintessential community” built through a culture shaped by the arts, in which
children feel connected with and make a contribution to the whole. Sense of Community Theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) holds that community is built through a sense of membership, a sense of influence (i.e., that the individual matters or makes a difference to a group), integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (i.e., a sense of shared history, common places, time together, and similar experiences). These aspects correspond to important aspects of the Garden’s design.

The findings indicate that, in addition to being “content providers”, service providers are “context providers” (Broderick, 2011) who work to provide an inclusive, alternate world, as well as opportunities and engaging participatory experiences for children. The Garden was discussed as having positive physical and aesthetic qualities, and affording a variety of opportunities (e.g., for exploration, belonging, and creative expression). These environmental qualities can be considered to foster meaningful experiences brought about by psychological engagement in activity settings, and the provision of opportunity, support, and choice (King, Petrenchik, Law et al., 2009; Petrenchik & King, 2011). The Garden was viewed as providing rich opportunities for heightened engagement, self-direction, enjoyment, and challenge, which are important developmental experiences for children and youth of all ability levels (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Staff members indicated the particular importance of experiences of freedom, engagement, and sense of belonging, which parallel the experiences of choice and control, fun, and belonging found to be important in previous research with youth with disabilities (e.g., King, Gibson, Mistry et al., 2014). This attests to the general developmental importance of experiences that fulfil basic human needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
The Garden was viewed as structured to provide open opportunities for children to have experiences of their choice. Unexpected, surprising, and free experiences are important in the structured lives of many children today, not just those with disabilities. Making decisions and choices is widely regarded as an important aspect of children’s participation and development (e.g., Hammel, Magasi, Heinemann et al., 2008). Service providers indicated that children chose from a rich array of activities, based on their personal interests. The variety of activities, people, objects, and art appears to deeply engage children in activity and interaction, contributing to the Garden’s high situational interest (Krapp, Hidi, & Renninger, 1992). Research indicates that using children’s interests as the basis for involvement in activities can lead to positive social interaction with peers, as well as increased competence in communication (Raab, 2005). By offering children choice among a variety of stimulating opportunities, children are invited to discover their preferences and aspects of themselves.

In summary, the Garden is intended to provide a variety of child-directed experiences, rather than being a child-focused setting where children are more formally directed to take part in particular activities at specific times, which is characteristic of many inclusive programs. The Garden’s status as a heterotopic place; a complex, adaptive system; a rich environment; and a child-directed place are important in understanding the experiences of freedom/possibility, engagement/connection, and a sense of belonging/community reported by staff members.

**Study Strengths and Limitations**

Team members’ varied backgrounds ensured a combined aesthetic, clinical, environmental, and operational perspective. A study strength was the use of multiple qualitative methods, which
provided triangulation and substantiated the super-ordinate study themes. Rigorous methods are not commonly used in evaluations of arts and health programs (Tesch & Hansen, 2013). It is noteworthy that we captured the perspectives of key informants involved with the program over a 26-year span in the 30 years of program operation. Although we cannot generalize to other inclusive arts-based programs, this study provides a model for how such programs could be evaluated. We realize that the unique nature of the program, including its culture, longevity, and unique staffing complement, may not be replicable in other settings; however, the program design features and staff members’ intents and strategies are relevant and important in the design of any inclusive arts-based program.

We acknowledge the potential for bias in the selection of participants for the historical interviews, since inviting the participation of staff members leaving on good terms may have led to more positive reports of the Garden. Data saturation may not have been reached in the historical interviews, which were rich and varied in the perspectives they provided. We focused on service providers’ perceptions and have no reports from families and children.

**Research Implications**

Several ideas deserve further exploration due to their potentially important impact on programming. These include investigating how the child-directed nature of the Garden is afforded by designing for openness and possibility in terms of multiple features (i.e., materials, multiple activities, and multiple entry points). Further research is warranted on how environmental design and service providers’ strategies serve to support children’s engagement. In this regard, researchers have called for work on evaluating processes and mechanisms that are
unique to the field of arts and health (Tesch & Hansen, 2013). It would also be interesting to examine the interface of disciplinary perspectives in creating a spectrum of opportunities and experiences, and whether children see the designed-for affordances. Ethnographic and structured observations could be conducted to capture the nature of the Garden’s environmental qualities and opportunities, and the importance of the back-to-basics, outdoor experience in a village-like setting and atmosphere. Finally, it would be of interest to conduct comparative work to examine whether Spiral Garden has a characteristic experiential profile of heightened enjoyment, engagement, choice, and belonging in comparison to other programs.

The literature indicates that there are methodological challenges in conducting research in this area, due to the complex nature of arts interventions and the multiplicity of their possible outcomes (Tesch & Hansen, 2013). The findings suggest the utility of adopting complexity theory as a theoretical lens, as it allows one to embrace the complexity of community-based arts programs in healthcare settings, directing our attention to making sense of programs, elucidating higher order processes and patterns, and using shared language that is understandable from both an “arts” and “health” perspective.

**Implications for Practice**

This article provides a demonstration of the intentional design of an inclusive arts-mediated program in a hospital setting. Service providers and managers can use the knowledge to spearhead the development of similar programs in order to provide children with disabilities with developmentally appropriate psychosocial experiences. The intents, processes, opportunities, and experiences of the Garden can be replicated in other settings. Furthermore, the clear
intentionality behind the operation of the Garden has important implications for programs striving to be theory-guided and evidence-based.

**Declaration of Interest**

The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this paper. Four of the authors (Sheffe, Vine, Crossman, Curran) have been involved in the delivery of Spiral Garden.

**Acknowledgements:**

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**References**


Tucker, T. W. (2011). "First we crawled, then we walked, now we want to run": An examination of the transition processes used by inclusive camps. [Dissertation]. *Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Sciences, 71*(10-A), 3789.


Table 1 *Study Participants in the Interview Phases*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Phase 1 (Historical)</th>
<th>Phase 2 (Current)</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( (n=9) )</td>
<td>( (n=5) )</td>
<td>( (n=14) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of Years with Spiral Garden</td>
<td>5-26</td>
<td>3-23</td>
<td>3-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years with Spiral Garden Mean</td>
<td>11.78 (7.98)</td>
<td>12.20 (7.92)</td>
<td>11.93 (7.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Standard Deviation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Range*</td>
<td>33-86*</td>
<td>20-53</td>
<td>20-86*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age Mean (Standard Deviation)*</td>
<td>52.43 (20.18)*</td>
<td>38.60 (13.33)</td>
<td>46.67 (18.37)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Discipline in Spiral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Garden (not discrete):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Completion</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artist/Art Animator</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:1 Facilitator/Developmental Service Worker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program/Site Coordinator</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other**</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*2 participants did not provide responses

** Other included various coordinator roles (e.g., Creative/Artistic/Volunteer Coordinator) and Site Facilitator/Monitor
Table 2 Study Themes Arising from the Three Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUPER-ORDINATE THEMES</th>
<th>Historical Document Themes</th>
<th>Historical Interview Themes</th>
<th>Present Garden Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROCESS-ORIENTED VIEW OF INTENTS</td>
<td>NATURE OF ESSENTIAL GARDEN ELEMENTS</td>
<td>HOW STAFF MEMBERS PROMOTE CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE GARDEN AS A COMMUNITY</td>
<td>Norms of respect, openness, and equality</td>
<td>Culture of acceptance, respect, and understanding</td>
<td>Philosophy of possibility, equality, inclusion, and authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(establishing a principle-based, self-generating culture)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A special place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ART AS THE CONNECTOR</td>
<td>Art as a way for individuals to connect with one another and the natural environment</td>
<td>Sociophysical qualities of the environment</td>
<td>Arts-mediated aspects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(leading to personal engagement and generation of)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Qualities of the environment that engage children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTENTIONAL PROCESS-ORIENTED DESIGN</strong></td>
<td>Designing for an unfolding, non-prescribed process</td>
<td>Multiple open-ended opportunities for experiences</td>
<td>Child-directed to optimize experiences of freedom/possibility, engagement/connection, and belonging/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(providing multiple open opportunities for important child experiences)</td>
<td>Multiple intertwined intentions</td>
<td>Staff members’ intentions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Photograph of the physical space of the Spiral Garden.