

# Creative Learning

## Art as a Language for Students with Diverse Learning Styles



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Rhode Island School of Design 2021

CREATIVE LEARNING: ART AS A LANGUAGE FOR STUDENTS WITH  
DIVERSE LEARNING STYLES

A Thesis

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# Dedication

To my family for all their support

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## Abstract

We all can experience a challenging time when finding the right word or sentence to describe something. However, for some individuals, this occurs every day with every sentence - so what if art were used as a language for those who have difficulties communicating their thoughts in traditional ways? Many children experience great difficulty when it comes to expressing their emotions and communicating verbally. However, the same children often thrive in the art room. Through art, the author believes that children can discover new ways to understand and explain what they are learning. In this thesis, the author explores what it means to be a child with a disability, what is considered expected, the importance of recognizing different learning styles, and how art can keep children inspired. The thesis emphasizes the importance of creating art as a language and how it can empower students with various disabilities through art educators.

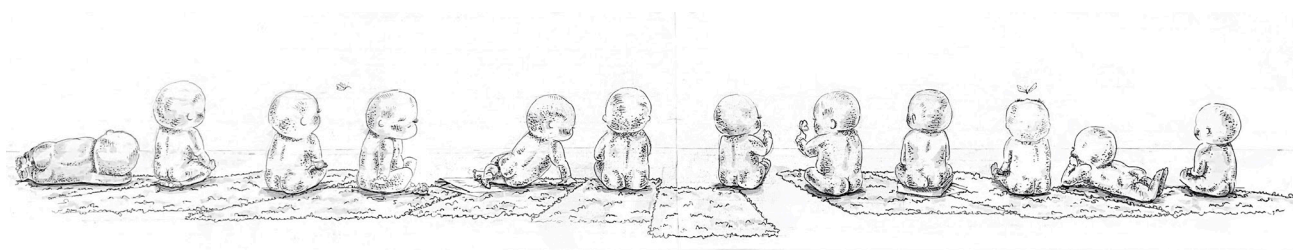


## Chapter 1

# Introduction

## Research Questions

We all have different ways of learning. Creating art is a way for everyone to understand one another and help youth expand their creative skills. Within this thesis, I explore questions such as: In what ways can Art Education influence youth of all learning types? In what ways can art educators encourage students with learning disabilities to become more confident? How can art unify the range of learners more successfully? What is normal, what is a disability, what are labels attached to students with disabilities, and what challenges do these students face? The thesis further examines art's potential in assisting students' express emotion and argues that art can be "read" and understood when it is approached as a visual language.



# Background and Setting

I became interested in my chosen area of research because of my personal experience with having a learning disability and having art to help me cope. The topic is an essential area of investigation, because of the many young people who have various disabilities and may not have the opportunity to create art. I believe that a good number of youths have very few outlets to express themselves and they get overwhelmed or lost within a standard school system. I believe that art education has the potential to bring everyone together to develop and express their thoughts and feelings. I feel that the most critical questions in this thesis investigation are:

- 1— In what ways can Art Education support the youth of all learning types?
- 2— How is a disability defined/ “diversified”?
- 3— In what ways is it possible to communicate emotion through art?

# Thesis Structure

The thesis is structured into five chapters. It begins with Chapter One that describes why I am writing about art education and youths with different learning styles. This chapter includes essential questions and definitions. Chapter Two provides the background story that describes how art helped a young student named Elle. Chapter Three provides a literature review and inclusivity and empowerment in pedagogical practice that explores the importance of art education in schools and particularly for learners with disabilities. The chapter also places my research questions in the context of published scholarship. Chapter Four discusses how youths can use art as a language, express emotion through art, and ways in which art education and other artists with disabilities can empower students. The chapter also provides examples of artists that have in various ways coped with personal issues through art-making. Chapter Five concludes with a summary of what I have discovered as a result this research investigation and how it will impact my own pedagogy and my development as an artist.

# Methodology

I sought answers to my questions utilizing various qualitative research methods that included an autobiographical narrative, a literature review, and interviews. The autobiography shares the experience of the kinds of stress a child with a disability goes through in school and how creating art can help express thoughts in a new language. Within Chapter One, I include definitions of terms I think are very important to my research. Some of my understanding of vocabulary related to students with disabilities was acquired during a graduate Winter session course, Lifespan Exceptionality.

In Chapter 3, my primary source for research investigation was the Education Resources Information Center's (ERIC's) database ERIC Search. To keep my findings as relevant as possible, I limited my research to journal articles published in the last ten years. I also limited myself to three readings from each major category's primary idea due to the vast field of scholarship which this topic encompasses. Reading Alice Wexler's articles about art education and children with disabilities helped emphasize the importance of creating art in the classroom. My thesis adviser introduced me via email to Alice Wexler, Professor Emeritus in Art Education at SUNY, New Paltz, to discuss in detail children with disabilities in the art room. During my interview with Dr. Wexler, she introduced me to Alexandra Allen, a postdoctoral scholar at the Pennsylvania State University of Art Education in the School of Visual Arts who focuses on individuals with disabilities. I include in this thesis the interview questions I used. To guide my conversation, I also include my teaching in Project Open Door (P.O.D), a college access program for underserved high school students attending Rhode Island urban core city public schools.

# What is Normal?

What is normal? Normal is a standard; it is an expectation society has, but don't we have different standards and expectations? After all, we have different personalities, feelings, and reactions. Some people, for instance, have greater strengths in writing or drawing, or playing a sport. At the same time, others learn differently than other students in their class. So why does everyone use the word 'normal'? In my view, it is a word that puts people in a category. When a person is not in that category, where do they fit in? There are many words to use to describe things that are not normal, like strange or different or odd. So how do students view themselves when they do not think they are 'normal'? When someone says something is not normal, using words for instance like unique, extraordinary, or phenomenal can, I believe, open opportunities for change and acceptance.

Most students go through school without experiencing being taken out of class to see why they are behind. The "average" child goes through school knowing how to study and organize tasks. They remain focused and know what should be asked of them. Such students ask questions when they are not sure and they often confidently answer questions when being asked. But for some, this is not the case.

There are within this thesis a number of terms that are used throughout and which I felt necessary to provide at the beginning of the thesis my working definitions of those key terms:



# Labels

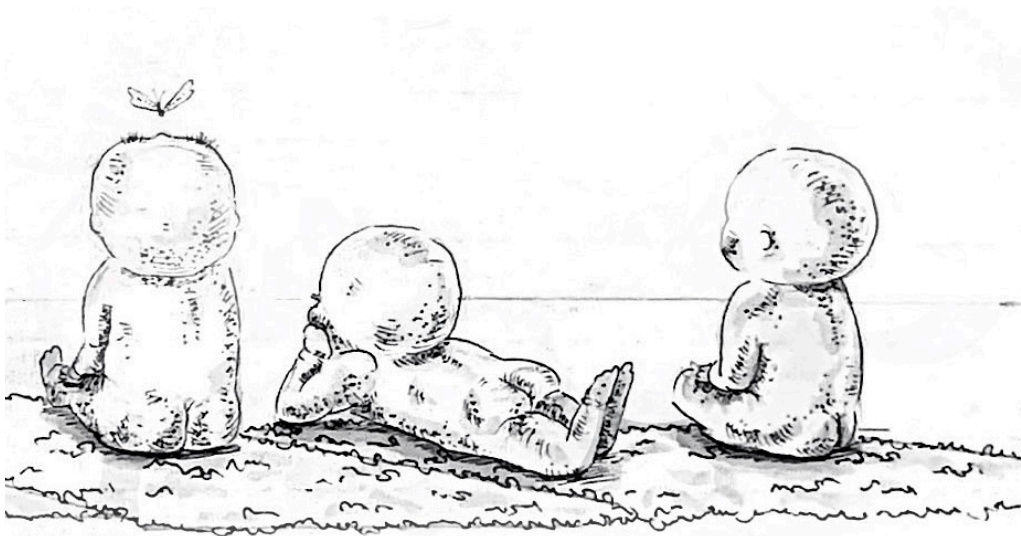
We all create labels for one another; it is a way to help us organize. It is a way to understand someone better generally. However, some labels do not always feel helpful. There is loneliness in being put into a box, the labeled box. This box separates individuals and can create the feeling of being different. We are all, in our own ways, different. In the school system and workplace, we need to create an environment where each person can be helped and celebrated because of our differences; because of our labels.

# Performativity

In school, almost everything is measurable, from the products students produce from their work to the teacher being analyzed in the classroom. The classroom is judged on the output and work and quality of the work. Steve Brown (2015) defines Performativity as “Focusing on the measurable at the expense of the less measurable,” which “also affects the professionalism of teachers”. The unmeasurable is, for example, the process of a piece of artwork a student is creating or the student’s and the teacher’s emotions that day. These are some of the essential pieces within an art room to create the best learning environment. Students of all learning abilities have unique and special ways of developing their ideas and expressing emotions that cannot be timed.

# Crip Time Theory

I recently came across this theory while talking to Alexandra Allen, a professor at the Pennsylvania State University of Art Education in the School of Visual Arts. She discussed why school systems should take into consideration Crip Time Theory. So what is Crip Time? In the article by Ellen Samuels (2017), she describes how our bodies and minds can break the rule of time. “My friend Alison Kafer says that ‘rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.’ I have embraced this beautiful notion for many years, living with the embrace of a crip time that lets me define my own ‘normal.’” For students with disabilities, this can take off the stress of working in a specific time frame.



# Accommodations

Accommodations are to help students with disabilities. Teachers, parents, and school staff create plans for students to meet their needs. It is not to make things simpler but to make the task at hand understandable for the student. Accommodations include prepared notes, recorded lessons, audiobooks, and many more helpful ways for students of all abilities. While taking my course Life-span Exceptionality with Janice DeFrances, the class and I learned how accommodations within special education could help students in their work at school. Accommodations encompass: clear instructions, visual material, seating arrangements, judgment-free space, physical movement throughout their day, extended time on tests, and praise of the student's efforts. In our book *A Teacher's Guide to Special Education* by David F. Bateman & Jenifer L. Cline (2016), the authors explain the purpose of special education is "to teach the skills they need so they can be successful in the general education setting or develop as much independence as possible for adult life" (p.15). Students gain more confidence and pride in their work, and with themselves, when they have the right help.

# Disability

Many questions and other words come to mind when we think of a disability. Words such as slow, delayed, weaker, and different are a few I thought of after being told I had a learning disability. I also asked questions like ‘will this get better?’; and ‘why don’t I learn like other students?’ However, as more people come forth and share their stories of having a disability, it indeed can be seen as a strength. As Laura Whitaker (2019) described in her TED Talk, “When we fail to shift our perspectives, we fail to see opportunity,” we should see the ability in disability. She asks what a five-year-old would say about a dandelion; it is another pretty flower, not a weed. They show us the benefits and opportunities we as a society do not always recognize as a benefit. We all need to focus on our abilities within the disabilities. Another book we read in our course Life-span Exceptionality was *Building on the Strengths of Students with Special Needs* by Toby Karten. The author writes, “All human beings, whether they have a disability or not, exist on a spectrum with a profile of strengths and weaknesses” (p.vii). Everyone has a balance between things they are good at and things they may have to become stronger. I believe the strengths arise after we have found our weaknesses. These strengths are the ones that stabilize weakness.

## A Unique Language

Every painting is unique; not one is classified as 'normal.' It should be the same when it comes to describing people. A learning disability is something we do not talk about, and I would like to change that. Speaking confidently about having a disability to a friend or the public is what I strive to do not just as a person who has a learning disability but also as an educator. It is promising that more appropriate language is now being used to describe someone with a disability. A disability is a part of what makes us unique, not something we have to put up with. Just as we embrace a painting that speaks to us, a disability should also be embraced as an opportunity to learn from and respect one another.

We each have our language and ways in which we express ourselves. When we integrate the arts into people's lives, it has the potential to bring us together and create community. We come to an understanding that each work of art will turn out differently depending on the artist. I believe it is important to integrate students with different learning styles in classrooms to help everyone understand each other so much better. Understanding not only in the ways we learn, but also how we view each other. After all, we are people, and we are all unique in the ways we think and speak. Incorporating everyone in the school system through art shows how students can work together and respect and offer help to students who may need help. In my goal to become a teacher, I want to connect and empower students by more fully understanding the difficulties that students with a learning disorder and disability experience while in school. I want to contribute to changing the way we think about someone with a disability. Just as art helped me through my struggles, I truly believe it can transform anyone. Being faced with a learning disability is challenging and is hard to think you are not a normal student. It is frustrating not to know how to express thoughts to people. However, as I came to understand these emotions, art seemed to always be by my side.

# I Remember

I remember the white pallet and a rainbow of paints sitting in front of me as I put them all over my face.

I remember scribbling and drawing thunder clouds when I got angry.

I remember going to school on a Monday and drawing in the daily journal of what we did that weekend.

I remember telling all my teachers I was going to be an artist when I grow up.

I remember teachers asking me, what are you going to do with that in life?

I remember my parents' support.

I remember the best time of the day was going to art class.

I remember sitting in a strange office with people looking at my art, then taking me to another room to test how I learn differently from most of my classmates.

I remember telling all my teachers I was going to be an artist when I grow up.

I remember sitting in my room doodling for hours when it seemed only ten minutes had gone by.

I remember my first day of high school art class shading in blocks and measuring out 1-point perspective rooms.

I remember teachers asking me, what are you going to do with art when you grow up?

I remember feeling lost and doubting myself.

I remember looking at a massive poster of jobs for artists and designers.

I remember telling all my teachers I was going to be an artist when I grow up.

I remember drawing and painting things that made me feel happy.

I remember getting a BFA.





## Chapter 2

# Elle's Story

In everyone, there are 'weaknesses' that we all encounter. Although many may have trouble speaking, listening, sitting still, or not being able to do an activity better than another, there are always ways to help. There will always be strengths to balance out the weaknesses. I have come to believe that creative thinking, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning activities can turn a "weakness" into a strength.

For a long time, Elle thought she was like everyone else; “normal.” She would go into the same classes as her friends, learn the same things, and generally have a good time. However, in the 4th grade, Elle truly felt embarrassed in front of the class for the first time. Her peers sat in the classroom and took a reading test to see how far they could read in a specific amount of time. Elle was the one who could never finish in the allotted amount of time. It took her considerably more time to understand the story as she was slower than her classmates. After discovering Elle could not finish the readings, she was placed into a reading room with one other girl. As this happened, she could feel everyone’s eyes on her as she stood up and walked out of the class. Elle didn’t understand why she had to be taken to a reading class. While Elle read, she played a movie in her head so she could see the words in action. Elle didn’t need to know how to read; the tests she had trouble with were for speed and how far students could get through the story in a certain amount of time; it was frustrating. Although she was slower, it didn’t mean she was not retaining any information; in fact, Elle understood everything perfectly. Despite trying and not understanding questions or instructions that were being said, the embarrassment overcame her. It resulted in not speaking up and asking questions in class. Elle had to adapt to the fact that she needed to focus harder and think much harder than her classmates. Teachers didn’t really understand what the issue was, and neither did Elle.

Mrs. M, the fifth-grade teacher, took the time to find out if Elle had a learning disability. It was during this grade, she started getting taken out of class once a week in order to get tested on memory, organization, and language skills. Elle was yet again embarrassed to be taken out of class and have her friends look at her and wonder why that was happening. Some days it felt lonely for her. The school would have her go into a different room with a lady who would ask questions regarding word sequencing and memorization. Elle wasn't sure what was going on, but she knew she had difficulties putting words in the correct order and repeating what was just said to her. Elle would get papers back and have to chop them up and reorganize paragraphs in order so that they would flow better. Elle was always shy talking to people, and it would take her longer to reply because she needed to think about what she was going to say. Elle couldn't properly form a sentence without someone saying, "Can you please repeat that" or "I don't understand what you are trying to say," so she fell quiet. If Elle could not form a question so someone would understand, then how could anyone help her? She was gripped in a cycle of not understanding what teachers were asking of her and teachers not understanding what Elle was asking of them. So, the best thing she determined to do was to sit and try to focus harder, all while getting more and more frustrated. The stress of trying to focus and trying to cover up her disability would lead Elle to wake up every day with either a stomach or head ache. The misunderstanding of instructions in Elle's classes to disruptive students would create even more stress for her.

**It certainly did not feel "normal."**

However, if it weren't for being taken out of class, Elle would have never gotten diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder (APD). She had a disability when none of her other friends did. In middle school, Elle was given an Individual Education Program (IEP) along with accommodations. Some of her teachers had a hard time understanding this disability. So, she worked harder than others to maintain average grades but had no way to organize her thoughts or where to start in her schoolwork. Teachers thought she could advocate for herself and tell them what she needed for class.

**The issue was, how could Elle possibly tell them what she needed when she didn't have a clue where to start and how to ask for help?**

There were some days, when she sat in class and became overwhelmed by the work and would sit for long periods of time not writing any of her work down. Resource class was a place where students went to who needed more time and help on schoolwork. This is where Elle would start to make friends with kids who also had difficulties in school. She would learn a few techniques to help her organize notes. Elle's classmates would ask why she had been taken out of class but could not tell them. She didn't know what to tell them. It affected the way Elle looked at herself for a long time. Not until later on in school did Elle realize that a disability was not something that defined her as a person.

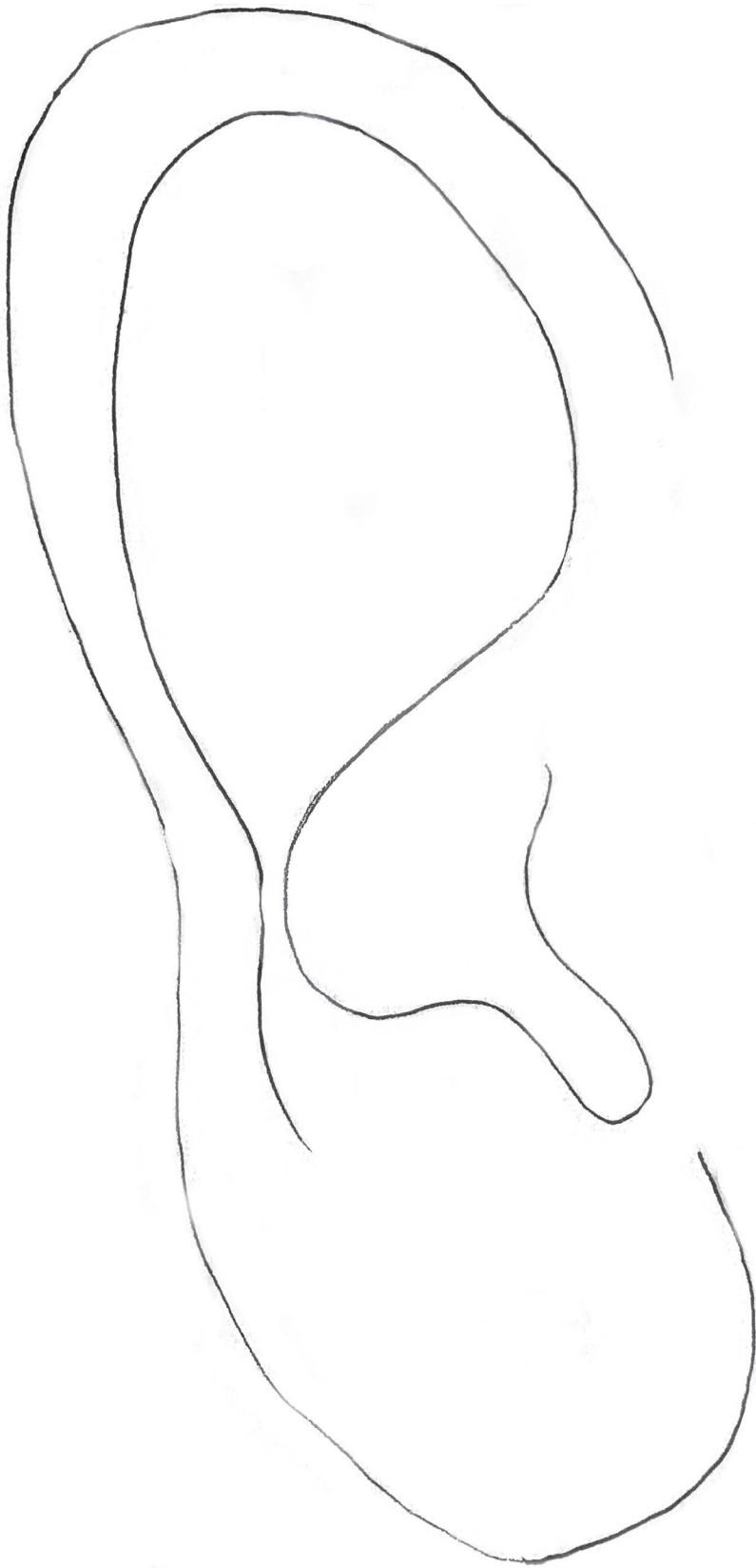
## **Early life with Art**

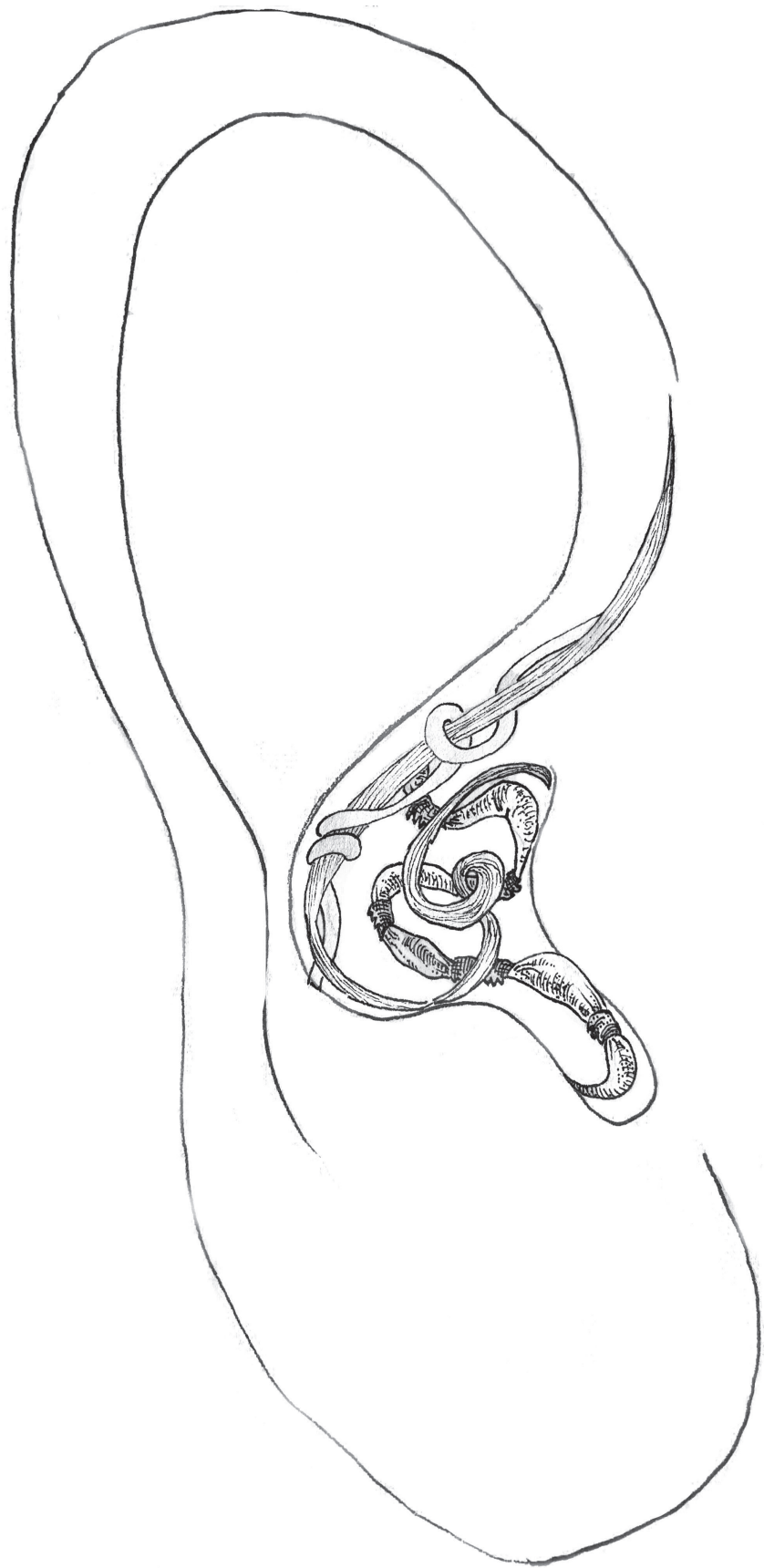
At the age of three, Elle knew how to hold a paintbrush. She would draw and paint every day. Ever since those first few years of her life, art would remain as the outlet where he could express her feelings. It was difficult for Elle as a result of her disorder to verbalize feelings of anger and frustration, which affected her thought process and speech. The frustration led Elle to bite and scratch herself, which was not a healthy way

to help her express anger. After a few times taking it out on herself, Elle would realize drawing was the outlet she needed. It was not just to express aggravation, but it was a form of language she created.

The quietest moment in Elle's early life was when she was drawing. She focused the same amount, if not more, on her art than in school. Hours would pass by that would feel like minutes. Elle could sit and process her day while she drew something she thought was pretty and show it to her family. Every day she would go to art class with no worries. Indeed, this was the best part of the day. Her confidence would rise as the paintbrush glided along the surface of the paper. There were no words, numbers, or clarifying required. Elle did not need to read, write, or understand equations; all that was needed was some paper and paint and her imagination. Drawing was and still is Elle's outlet when she cannot find the right words to say or navigate the right emotions to express. She told all her grade school teachers that one day she would be an artist.

Elle would eventually start to figure out ways to advocate for herself. Her confidence slowly grew after she graduated high school and went to college to study fine art. It wasn't until then that Elle started to accept and think of herself as more than someone with a learning disability. She realized absolutely no one could be put into the category of 'normal.' After undergraduate, Elle went on to apply for a place in a MA in Art + Design Education program. When she was accepted, she realized she would have to write a thesis which is a lot of writing to do for someone who would instead draw her message. Writing still isn't her strong point, but Elle knew she needed to help guide and empower students similar to herself in school to use art as a language.









## Chapter 3

# Inclusivity and Empowerment in Pedagogical Practices

We express our feelings to one another using many words and phrases. However, what if we can't find the correct word? Somedays, we might know the exact wording to use to relay our ideas, but other days, it feels like we need another cup of coffee to jumpstart our brain. While we all have days like these, for some, every day can be a struggle, just like it can be for Elle. But what if we can find a way to express our feelings without using words and phrases? Teaching students how to express their thoughts clearly, pedagogical practices, including semiotic tools, art games, and confidence through creating art, can help. The art room can help motivate, boost confidence, and have students become socially and emotionally stronger. In thinking about the power of art, a number of key questions arise, for instance: In what ways can art be considered a language? How can students' emotional and cognitive development be strengthened through art? And how can pedagogical practice help students engage with art? Answers to such questions can be found in a vast arena of scholarship. In this survey of selected research articles, I identified what I consider to be three themes that relate very directly to the questions I am asking, these are:

1—Voice and Language Through Art

2—Emotional & Cognitive Development Through Art

3—Pedagogical Practice: Engaging Learners  
Through Art

# Voice and Language Through Art

Using semiotic tools in the art room scholars argue can have a positive impact on children with disabilities. Claudia Saldaña (2016) defines semiotics as “the creation and identification of meanings by the use of signs and symbols” in her article, *Children With Disabilities: Constructing Metaphors and Meaning Through Art* (p.89). The author researched a group of children with disabilities from a non-profit organization near the US-Mexico Frontera area that provides a summer camp for students with disabilities. The three main categories that emerged as a result of Saldana’s analysis were (1) Teachers’ perceptions of art (2). How children with disabilities respond to art, and (3) Teaching practice through art. Saldaña argues there is a connection between teacher and student through art, stating: “My study shows that teachers recognize how art allows communication without words” (p.90). The use of symbols can create a better learning environment for children who have difficulties expressing their needs with words. Saldaña indicates that other researchers have conducted studies through social semiotics and art, that reveal how “students show awareness of their disabilities by motivating them to identify their disability as a strength that is taught in their learning development” (p.90). Saldaña further argues that with any weakness, there will always be a strength to balance and help oneself.

A teacher who worked with children, attending the center claimed that “art is a voice that transforms the diverse language experience of children with disabilities” (p.92). Using their hands to speak and use signs, the students showed how they understood or wanted something if they could not speak. Painting and music activities were ways for students to express themselves through art. “The combination of disciplines with art allows teachers and students to develop a learning connection between meanings and senses” (p. 94). Throughout this article, Saldaña describes, “semiotic signs are used to bridge art and disability” (p.88). She concludes that art is a way to communicate with both teacher and student to understand better and develop other cognitive abilities. One can see that art is a way to build connections between people even if they have difficulties speaking, using symbols just as these educators and researchers have done can help students with various disabilities.

## **Emotional & Cognitive Development Through Art: Confidence and Expressing Feeling through Art**

Through art, we can express emotion through the use of color, shape, and line. Farrington & Shewfelt (2020) describe how the arts could play a significant role in the social-emotional development of students. Engagement in the arts can lead to improvement they argue in “emotional self-regulation, responsibility, collaboration, or confidence in expressing complex ideas stemming from personal thoughts and feelings”

(p.31). However, these authors also argue that such social-emotional development in students does not come overnight or magically appear.

Using developmental experiences through art, students can reflect on their experiences and apply them to the arts. According to Farington & Shewfelt (2020), researchers have identified ten “developmental experiences,” tinkering, encountering, practicing, choosing, contributing (the five action experiences), and the five reflection experiences. These include describing, evaluating, envisioning, connecting, and integrating. They argue that students also need a safe and positive learning environment, so it is okay for them to be comfortable trying new things, experimenting, and putting forth an effort. The authors argue how art education can not only offer opportunities for creative and social-emotional learning but can also be the “building blocks for developing social-emotional competencies” (p.31).

Marilyn G. Stewart’s (2014) *Enduring Understandings, Artistic Processes, and the New Visual Arts Standards: A Close-Up Consideration for Curriculum Planning* describes and analyzes the new National Visual Arts Standards and what they mean for curriculum planning. She identifies the fifteen (15) enduring understandings that are located within the following four groups of Artistic Practice: Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting. With these in mind, Stewart proposes ways in which students could further take initiative risks, be willing to explore, and open to new ideas through art. In Creating it is where Stewart indicates that students create relative content and tap into personal interests and experiences,

and by doing so there is “recognition of the communicative power of images, objects, and places in their contemporary world” (p.7). In discussing the standards category of Presenting, there is an acknowledgment that in all cultures, we create then share with others; this helps the students investigate possibilities, limitations of spaces, and technologies. Presenting also helps “they recognize factors and issues that enter into the decisions about the presentation of their own words” (p. 8). The students should end up knowing the value of their work and how to present it. The third category Stewart talked about is responding. Students can make sense of the artwork to “read” what they see (p.9). They engage in thinking about themselves and others to appreciate the world we live in. Determining the relevance and constructing solid and captivating interpretations, some may not like the piece but will still come out with a well-stated response. Furthermore, the author described how each of the standards connects us to “personal experiences, community values, and cultural history” (p.9). Students come to understand the purpose of art in different places and times, connecting with changes in beliefs, values, and traditions. The knowledge of context influences connections; how we appreciate, encounter, and understand (p.10). We tend to draw to our personal experience within the art piece continuously.

Art is an investigative process that lets students explore evolving interests by taking what they see from other artworks and in doing so they create new knowledge and insights. Art educators should assess the student’s needs, interests and questions. Creating an engaging learning environment in which to teach art based on these standards will contribute to students’ understanding of these four areas of artistic practice and will enrich their learning. As each student expresses their thoughts and questions about their peers’ work, not only will

it build confidence, but it also has the potential to enrich their ability to communicate. While the student is communicating their ideas visually, the audience is then communicating with the artwork verbally.

## **Pedagogical Practice: Engaging Learners Through Art**

In the Thuketana & Westhof (2018), article Group work during visual art activities to reduce indecisiveness, the authors report on a study conducted with five grade R students (5yrs). The students were a part of a privately-owned school in Pretoria, South Africa, which included students from other countries as well as Pretoria areas and where English was their language of instruction. This study involved what was identified as four indecisive learners and one decisive learner. Thuketana & Westhof argue in the article that a negative home environment becomes a hindrance to the child's development. When the child relies heavily upon the adult, whether it being the parent or teacher, "This form of neglect and dominance then often manifests as indecisive behavior in the classroom" (p.2). The study demonstrated the ways in which visual art activities helped each indecisive student. Thuketana & Westhof stated that "Young learners need a safe and secure environment for successful development and positive behavior to take place," (p.2). By having students form small groups work together on art projects, the researchers saw the differences between indecisive and decisive learners, "Support and guidance could not only lead Indecisive learners to achieve their potential capabilities but could also support them to gain confidence to explore the environment" (p.3). The indecisive students lacked

confidence and were hesitant to start. In contrast, the decisive learners started right away and knew their plans for their art project. The indecisive students would look up to the decisive children.

Over the span of ten weeks, the students became more confident in themselves and their decision-making. The authors stated, “it became evident that even if the indecisive learners did not interact at first, they listened to and observed the other peers” (p.7). Independent decision-making and freedom for children in a learning environment should be included in both home and school. There should be enough time in the day for visual arts. Thuketana & Westhof concluded that group visual art projects are highly recommended for art educators as such activities will lead to more confident, independent, and enthusiastic students. Some students have trouble gaining confidence in the classroom. Nevertheless, with the help of art and students who learn differently than another, they can all help each other. When students come together as a team, they attain achievements inside and outside the school. When students are creating in the art room, they are all drawn to the work that they are inventing. While I am creating my work, I have noticed the people surrounding me are also engrossed in their work and are quiet. Even though it is a quiet time, it is a time where we can all relate to one another. We dive into our most creative selves and make visible on paper what is in our minds. Creating a drawing or painting gives us the chance to express ourselves and relate to each other without using words. When it is time to look at each other’s work, we look at the art itself, not necessarily the artist. However, what if we started looking at who created the piece? What their story is and why they made it? If there is a way to get to know and understand someone, it is through their artwork.



In a telephone conversation about students with learning disabilities with Alice Wexler, Professor Emeritus in Art Education at SUNY, New Paltz. We talked about how students can thrive in the art classroom. Wexler noted how accommodations could make tasks easier for students with disabilities, but educators need to create accommodations that are accessible and not just simple. Some accommodations, Wexler shared can keep a child behind rather than challenge them; students with learning abilities deserve Wexler believes the chance to be challenged. This idea resonated with me because we each need specific accommodations within the broader circle of needs. Students with disabilities need ones that do not necessarily make it easy but keep us thinking and learning at an appropriate level.

In Wexler's pedagogical practice, she gives students more choices arguing that if given a choice the child can then make more decisions, which then leads to personal growth. Wexler also found using art materials that can be transformable and accessible creates more possibilities and outcomes for the student's work. In her 2016 article *Reimagining Inclusion/Exclusion: Unpacking Assumptions and Contradictions in Arts and Special Education from a Critical Disabilities Perspective*, Wexler states, "the arts might be a natural ally in establishing student empowerment and equality in the classroom" (p.32). If a student is disabled or non-disabled, they can all create pieces of artwork and become united within the classroom. Society may think a disability is represented as undesirable and "therefore all that can be excluded" (p.33). In thinking about what Wexler is saying I have begun to think about what if I along with other educators could reverse the idea of a disability

being “undesirable” and rather than an asset, it could perhaps provide a way for students to understand each other better. In such a scenario, there is potential to create a learning space where students feel they can create a unified classroom. Wexler believes there should be a greater focus on what students want to accomplish in their work rather than focus on the labels they are given (p.41) stating:

While the arts have not been visible in disability studies as they might, I argue that they offer students and teachers an examination of personal experience of disability that merits intense investigation and produces interdisciplinary form of self-representation and self-narrative (p.36).

I recently had the opportunity to meet with Alexandra Allen via zoom conference to talk about students with disabilities and the art room. Here are some of the questions I had sent to her after the meeting. Alexandra also responded to them through writing:

Lana Gunn

What was your pathway to teaching art to people with disabilities and how do you reflect on it today?

Alexandra Allen

When I began my first student teaching placement, there were a few students with disabilities that were integrated into the art room, and I expressed to my mentor teacher that I felt unprepared. My mentor at the time offered to send me to a school that specifically serves students with intellectual disabilities to learn how to incorporate adaptive tools and practices into my teaching. I observed in these classrooms for a day and quickly realized that there was a huge gap in knowledge regarding best practices for working with diverse learners in the art room. From that point on, I started to interrogate public-school inclusion practices and policies, as well as preservice teacher preparation to figure out why this gap exists. When I started grad school, I took a self-reflective approach and began investigating my own disability experience, which led me to the field of critical disability studies. About halfway through my pursuit of a doctoral degree, I started working as a Visual Arts Coordinator at a center for adults with severe intellectual and developmental disabilities. Through blending together a mix of Universal Design for Learning

principles with adaptive tools and a Critical Disability Studies framework, I was able to create and maintain an inclusive environment there that was centered on agency and respect, where both educators and students could learn from one another. This has deeply informed the way that I approach education for all learners, particularly in higher education, and it has been a formative, invaluable part of my journey as an educator.

LG

What role does your artistic or creative side play in your life, research, and work?

AA

I would like to think that my creative tendencies play a role in every aspect of my life. I use the art making process as a way to think through complex theories and ideas within my research. I also feel it is imperative that arts educators maintain a creative practice in their own lives in order to stay connected to the content of their lessons and the ever-evolving visual arts field. I continue this practice through various art forms including but not limited to the visual and performing arts. In a way, I think creative expression keeps me centered—the joy of being able to make something from nothing, to be able to envision a project and have it unfold in sometimes unpredictable ways, and to have the patience and flexibility to adapt to challenges or unforeseen outcomes—I believe developing these practices is an incredibly important part of being an educator, artist and researcher.

LG

When you were in the art room as a student, how did you feel in the art room?

AA

The art room was one of the few places where I felt I belonged. Art was something I enjoyed because the projects were often open to interpretation. Of course, there are correct ways to apply a specific technique, but the content of what I created was my choice, and I had the freedom to speak my own truth however I wanted. Being able to sit in a classroom and listen to my own music while I created something original helped reinforce the art room as a very sacred space to me. I could explore new tools and materials at any time, and even the challenges inherent in learning a new medium were exciting because I was learning-by-doing. The art room was a space where I could collaborate with my peers, if I wanted, and talk through ideas when I felt stuck. It was a place where I felt heard and understood.

LG

How would you design your own art room for students with disabilities?

AA

I think the art room should be designed with all kinds of learners in mind. Firstly, I would make sure it is accessible to all students, so the placement of tables and access to entryways must be considered. I also use multimodal approaches to instruction, so I would likely have written and image-based markers around the room. I also believe creating designated spaces in the art room is important: nooks to read or to sit quietly in, places to tinker with blocks and other materials, an area for supplemental activities, etc. Keeping all art supplies organized, labeled, and in the same locations is important for both students and the teacher. I like having the option to play soft music in the classroom, but it also depends on the student preference. Adaptive tools and devices also need to be in a place that can be easily identified and accessed. Basic rules, expectations, and guidelines should always be visible and reinforced often.

Beyond the physical environment, however, is the classroom culture. I aim to create an inclusive space where students feel that they can be open and honest about their ideas and opinions, and where they feel that their identities are acknowledged and respected. Through a CDS framework, adopting an intersectional approach to identity can help build a culture of understanding and acceptance in the classroom.

LG

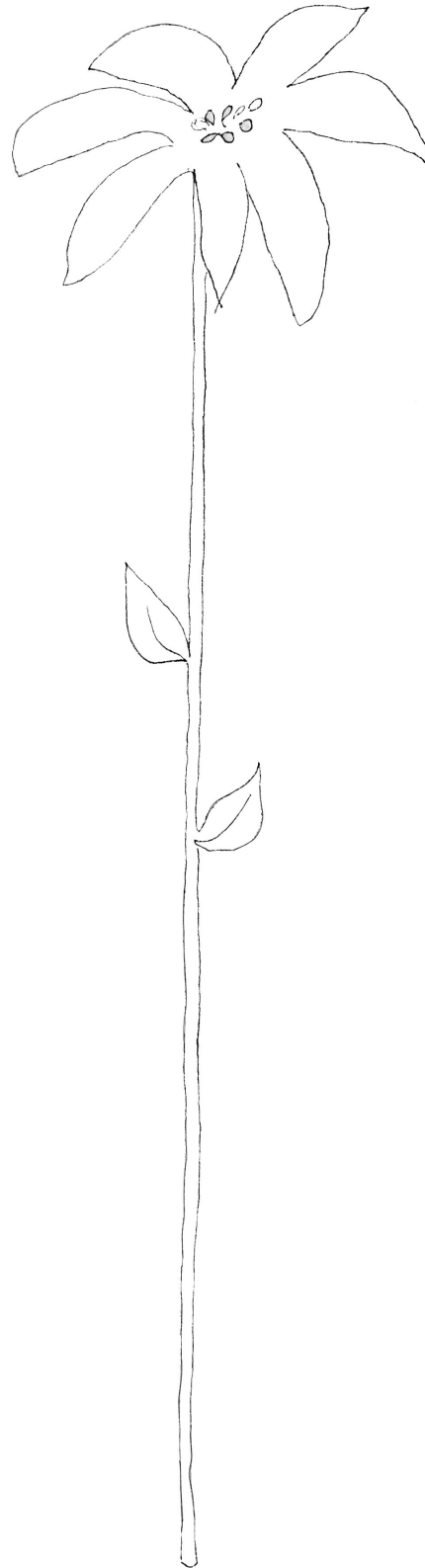
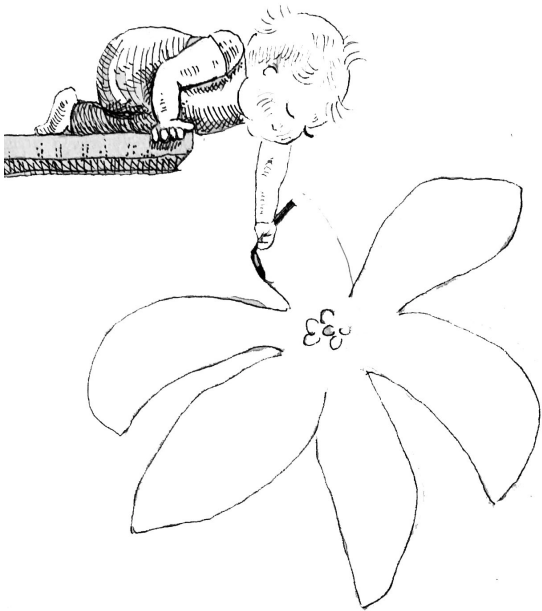
How would you define a person with a disability?

AA

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines a disability as any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person to do certain activities and interact with the world around them. However, I tend to distinguish disability beyond impairment, by which the disability is what is experienced when met with socially constructed barriers, and not solely based on the medicalized notion of impairment. However, disability is a socially constructed, intersectional identity category, much like gender and race; therefore, disability is a relative, cultural experience, which resists a fixed definition. Most importantly, an individual should choose if and how they would like to be defined. I choose to self-identify as neurodivergent.

In thinking about a more inclusive pedagogy one that is inclusive of students with disabilities there is much to be gained by looking at matters of time. Time is, of course, something we as a society revolve our lives around. From school and onward, we are taught to be conscious of time. But in school classrooms the time it takes for one student to complete a task can be quite different for a person with a disability. Crip Time Theory presents a very different way of viewing time and especially in the context of students with diverse learning abilities. Alison Kafer (2013) developed this theory which argues that instead of people with disabilities having to conform to normative time, time can now bend to them. As Aishwarya (2020) As A Disabled Person, Embracing ‘Crip Time’ Helped Me Define My Own “Normal”, explained his way of coping with time, “I have spent all my life living by a timeframe that was built for a non-disabled person, and all my time and energy was spent in ‘keeping up’”. I can also relate to this notion of constantly trying to keep up and be ahead of everyone else so I would not fall behind in school. This is a theory of not leaving people behind just because a time frame suits only a portion of our population, but a theory that can help people with disabilities.







## Chapter 4

# Another Language

In my pedagogical practice, I have seen how students can create art by pushing beyond their boundaries and comfort zones. While there have been definite challenges in teaching online art classes with just a few markers and paper, my students have created work that expresses their emotions. I believe that all students should have materials to experiment with and make art that will speak to others and ultimately express in visual ways who they are.

Creating art is a vulnerable activity, and choices and decisions constantly occur when making art. When we look at an artwork, we see a visual message, a language spoken in another way. It is a language not composed of words but with a vast array of materials. It is essential to focus on how the artist is presenting their message within a work of art. Whether the artist uses their creativity to share a feeling or share a personal story with the audience, we as people all have one thing in common- the ability to communicate. However, communicating does not necessarily mean using words; we can also use shapes and colors, this is another language spoken worldwide, especially by those who use art as their primary means of communication.

As an artist-educator, I believe it is essential to focus my teaching on all children and allow them to speak their thoughts and make art to comprehend what is happening around them and their lives. Art can offer students the opportunity to use their voices to express emotion and their thinking process. Just like Elle, many other artists have disabilities. I have selected just a few whom I find inspiring not just as individuals; but as artists.

Stephen Wiltshire is a talented artist who creates cityscapes using pen and ink. When he was a young child, Stephen did not speak and was diagnosed with autism at the age of three. While Stephen was quiet, he knew how to communicate through art. Stephen created drawings of cars and animals and eventually draw extraordinarily beautifully detailed buildings. These cityscapes set him on a famous career path, and a commission from the British Prime Minister at only eight

years old. Wiltshire traveled all over the world to create pen and ink drawings of cityscapes. Clearly, drawing was his way of communicating with people around him and how art can be used as a language. While many can talk before they can write, some learn to draw their language before talking.

**“Do the best you can and never stop”**

*Stephen Wiltshire.*

Painting has its own very distinct way of telling a story. Reading may well come easy for many people, but for some, this is not the case. For instance, painter Rachel Deane is among many who have dyslexia. She graduated with a MA in Art and Design Education from Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Rachel uses her art to communicate the emotions associated with trauma, shame, and healing. Her work is influenced by how she sees and processes the world and the way she absorbs information. Deane describes how she is a visual learner, not as a ‘memorizer’, “I understand things visually, by finding them in paint” (personal communication). While there are difficulties involved in disabilities, art can always be an outlet and form of communication.

In my teaching practice, I have shown students the work of artists with disabilities. Huang Guofu was one artist that inspired me and whom I added into the presentation for my students. Guofu lost both of his arms at a young age, but it did not stop him from creating. He now uses his paintbrushes with his mouth and his toes. He stated in an interview with Eugene Kim (2011), “When life closes one door to you, it must have

opened another at the same time” (nd). I shared this quote with the students to inspire them that even with a disability, they can achieve anything. Expanding students’ knowledge by showing them new artists and artists with disabilities has the potential to develop in students an understanding of others and, importantly, an understanding of themselves.

**“When life closes one door to you, it must have opened another at the same time.”**

*Huang Guofu.*

## **Art and Voice**

I would like to highlight my grandfather. Seven years ago, he had a severe stroke, which disabled the right half of his body, sections of his brain, and his speech. He had always liked art, but had never taken the time to pick up a paintbrush before his stroke and was right-handed his whole life up until that point. While I sat with him in the day-center painting, I realized how calm my grandfather was. There was no need for him to talk, as he focused on staying in the lines and choosing colors to put on the canvas. Using his left hand to paint, this would be the first time my grandfather would make a painting. It made these moments of creating even more special. His day center in England had an artist come in every week to help people with disabilities paint and draw. Art can influence a person’s mood and take a person out of reality to a place of creativity. I realized there were similarities between my grandfather and me. His speech was difficult to understand, and some

of the time, mine was as well. However, we knew what we were saying, but everyone else did not. The only time we did not need to communicate verbally was through painting. Throughout my life, art has shown me just how important art can be for someone who has always painted and for someone who had never picked up a paintbrush before. Seeing my grandfather paint with his non-dominant hand was inspiring and led me to believe that this would be a way to push creative skills in a new direction for not just someone with a disability, but for everyone.

Art is, I believe, much more than a beautiful image to look at; it is also a voice. It tells a story and has the capacity to express intense emotions. Art can help people who have experienced trauma or a disability. As I observed at the day center where my grandfather attended, the serenity in the participants' demeanor was encouraging and motivational. Knowing how much calmer and motivated one can be after creating a work of art is truly inspirational. I want to teach and help people understand that art-making is not just a physical activity but a way to show what they feel and what they want to say.

# Project Open Door

I have now come to the end of my year of teaching for Project Open Door (POD), RISD's college access program for urban teens. I can now reflect on what I have discovered as a result of teaching small groups of high school teens. My thesis adviser, who is also the director of POD, gave me the opportunity during my MA degree to teach students for six weeks in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. Although the classes have been taught online as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, this experience has opened my eyes to the infinite possibilities teens can come up with in their work.

I found that my fall semester group of students were still warming up to the idea of school being online, and in truth, I was too. However, with my use of a 'mood meter,' the teens seemed to open up. A mood meter is a chart of different words to express emotions that are arranged into four categories that represent high and low energy words and positive and negative words. At the beginning of a class, I had the students choose one to two words that they felt described their mood that day and insert those words in the Zoom chat. The words enabled them to notice how they felt and how others felt that day. These words would gather the teens together and would open up for more discussions regarding their drawings they did in class.



By Spring semester, I had gotten a much better idea of how to conduct each class. I used the mood meter to engage my students with their feelings and to use their chosen words as the basis of an artwork. In the second week of class, I decided to present works of art created by artists with disabilities and included artists who create portraits of people and characters from movies. For a warmup exercise, I asked my students to use their non-dominant hands to write their names and then write their names with their dominant hands. This strategy illustrates how uncomfortable it may be to use your non-dominant hand for the first time. I was not aware whether or not any of my students had any disabilities, but through this class, I hope they would better understand the difficulties one may face when one does have a disability. If any of my students did have a disability, this can build their confidence through art-making and realize other people's accomplishments even with a disability. Two of the artists I showed either had no arms or one arm, not their dominant arm. These artists used their paintings and drawings to help them move forward in their lives. After the warmup, each student would then create a self-portrait. Even though some had experience with drawing self-portraits, they had not done one with their non-dominant hand. For 30 minutes, I had the students create their basic shapes, colors, and outlines with their non-dominant hands. After, they switched hands and drew the rest of their portrait for the other 30 minutes. The students chose one or two words from the mood meter that represented how they wanted to feel after class. I asked the class if they liked this project, and many said they enjoyed it and admitted that it was also a challenge.

I decided to introduce this project to demonstrate to my students how they can adapt to difficult situations. Though some teens said it was not easy, they enjoyed the whole process because they tried something new. This was not a project based on performativity, but a project based on the process of the students' creativity. While they were challenged, each of the students used art as a way to process this new obstacle. I believe that art is a means to adapt to struggles and, importantly, create new ideas.

## MA Teaching

With my MA class Contemporary Practices in Arts Learning in the Spring semester, I taught a one-hour class with the MA students. I chose the title Art as A Language for this class which included both discussion and activities for each of my peers to take part in. Using a paragraph I wrote within this thesis, I took different words out of the sentences and exchanged some words for ones that sound familiar. I asked the class to read this paragraph and tell me after what it was about. One student gave a brief statement that correctly identified the message. But, there was also hesitation and question in her voice. Many of the students had to re-read the paragraph 2-3 times and wondered why they could not understand what I was having them read.

Two of my peers who spoke English as their second language told me it was challenging to read. They blamed themselves for not understanding the paragraph. The word 'blame' was used quite often in this discussion with the class. One student mentioned how the teacher is supposed to be the one providing correct information to the class. This was not the case in this piece I had them read.

I then had them read the correct version of the paragraph and asked them what it was about once again. The class looked relieved that it was not their mistake for not understanding this activity. I explained to them this is an example of how I read and hear someone talking in a room filled with many noises. This is a regular occurrence for me, trying to put words and sentences together that make sense and to re-read everything. This activity was to show the class how much they blame themselves for not understanding something clearly—also realizing it can take more time to re-read and figure out what the message is stating.

After we discussed the first prompt, I then had them draw with their non-dominant hand, like my P.O.D class. This drawing session was for 10 minutes and to draw a self-portrait. My peers came back for a discussion and explained how they had a more difficult time working with their non-dominant hand but also led to laughter. This prompt showed my MA class that there could be students with invisible and visible disabilities in every class.

I then had my peers pick a few words from the Mood Meter of how they felt that day and did a similar activity to that I did with the P.O.D students. I had each of my peers draw for 10 minutes describing the emotions they chose. After 10 minutes, each of them showed their work, and we as a class had to guess which emotions they picked based on their drawing. After, I asked the artist which emotions they chose and if we as a class guessed correctly.

This hour of teaching was to show the class the difficulties and struggles people have every day with disabilities. However, with these struggles, they become more creative in using art to express themselves; alternatively, if English is their second language, they can still communicate through art.

## Final Piece: Non-dominant hand, Pen no pencil

1. Grab paper and pen and colored pencils/markers
2. Put the pen or colored pencils in non-dominant hand
3. Start drawing... Draw a portrait of...you!

Scribbles, shaped, forms, objects

After you have done some fun and crazy forms...  
add some line work, make some shading, add some  
facial features!

Remember how you felt before class and how you  
want to feel after class. Choose one or two of those  
words and use those feelings to express yourself.

Prompt I chose  
for P.O.D students  
to complete  
Spring Semester 2021

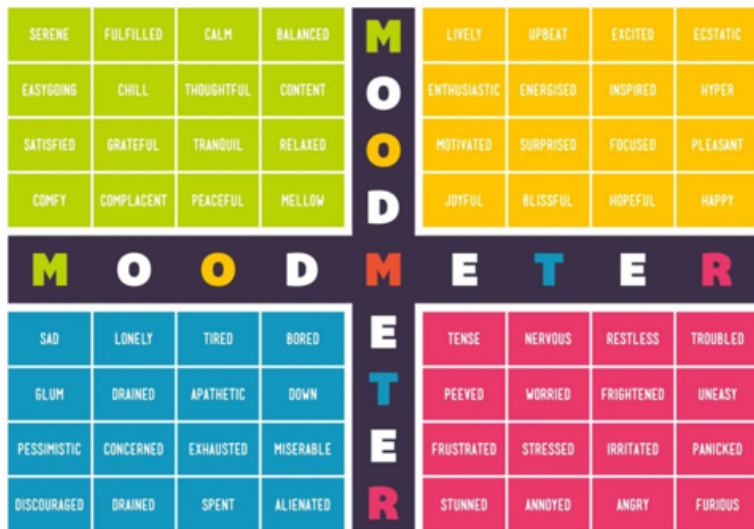


Figure 1: Mood Meter

‘How and I feeling? Mood Meter’ Paperzip  
<https://www.paperzip.co.uk/how-am-i-feeling-moodmeter/>

Non-dominant hand, Pen no pencil

Green and blue: Low energy

Pink and Yellow: High energy

Green and yellow: Pleasant emotion

Blue and pink: Unpleasant emotion.



# Results:

## Student Work



Figure 3: Anonymous, Self Portrait



Figure 2: Damon Drury, Self Portrait



Figure 4: Anonymous, Self Portrait



## Chapter 5

# Final Thoughts



Art is a way to express opinions, ideas, emotions, and oneself as an artist. Creating art heals people when they are faced with difficult situations. Just like Elle, her story is driven by the frustrations caused by auditory processing disorder and discovering art. It is her way of healing -- by this form of communication. My grandfather's way of calming down and finding peace after a severe stroke was painting. The process was the most important part, even without using his non-dominant arm. Art can also heal viewers. As we look at artists' work, something draws us to that particular piece that keeps us standing there in awe; it draws out intense emotions within us.

Art is a way of broadcasting our emotions and inspiration to the world. Stephen Wiltshire, Huang Guofu, and Rachel Deane all produce art that touches the lives of many. The inspiring stories of each of these artists influence me to keep searching for more artists with disabilities, and to discover more literature about strategies that can lead to the establishment of more inclusive art classrooms. Interviewing Alexandra Allen, and speaking with Alice Wexler, enlightened my understanding of students with disabilities and what art education means to them.

When students have access to art learning opportunities, they have the opportunity to thrive in an environment where nothing is impossible. In a classroom filled with possibility, each student can be empowered by ideas they can share with their peers. While many students struggle with confidence, the art room is a place that can empower them to initiate, design, and bring balance to their lives.



We can all thrive in the art room - both educators and their students. We can learn from each other. Art is a way of communicating our stories to one another. Just like my Project Open Door classes, throughout this year, I have learned from each of my students. They have shown me the infinite ways they express their ideas through drawings and sharing their emotions. These students also did not abstain from using their non-dominant hands and push their creative skills to produce excellent drawings and paintings.

Through my research and pedagogical journey during my time in the MA in Art + Design Education program at RISD, I have found ways to bring my own life experiences to the classroom. I have never been strong at writing, but as a result of this degree program and this thesis investigation, I have grown to realize how important this journey of experiences has been. I have found that my teaching is about introducing students to technical skills and skills that they can use throughout their lives. I hope they have been able to see that art can always be the outlet to express themselves. Finally, I have attempted in my teaching to enhance my students' understanding that they can generate art that is about more than what they see in front of them and that it can be a language as important as words.



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