Old Broken Crayons: Adolescent Artists with Autism in Art Education

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Abstract

This research engages a combined qualitative methodology of arts-informed research and critical descriptive ethnography to study thirteen adolescent artists with autism as they engage in art making across multiple art education contexts. This study revealed the perceptions of stakeholders about art and autism that informed the access these adolescent artists had to art education and art materials. These perceptions included varying ideas of competence, ability and struggle associated with an identity as ‘autistic’. In the examination of these adolescents’ experiences the engagement with art making and the role of art in the lives of these artists is explored. It is shown that art functions as communication and a way of connecting to the world around them, acting as a form of literacy through the visual text of their artwork. This study offers a paradigm for inclusive art education that operates within the social model of dis/ability and considers strategies for full inclusion with art curriculum and art materials. Recommendations for families, art teachers of students with autism and art teacher preparation are provided.
OLD BROKEN CRAYONS:
ADOLESCENT ARTISTS WITH AUTISM IN ART EDUCATION

By

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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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This work is dedicated to my amazing family and the “village”.
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Chapter One: The Problem and Its Location

I draw on the contexts of autism, dis/ability, inclusion, human development and art education to inform my work and explore the discourses on autism, adolescence and art education. I reject the paradigm of disability and embrace the paradigm of dis/ability as a way to see artists with autism as experts on their own experience. In this paradigm, I seek to share the stories of these artists as told by them and through their artwork. I look to expand the ways that we think about, support and value the art-making of individuals with autism. This research will consider the potential of art-making as transformative and try to find ways that we, in the field of art education, can re-imagine autism as dis/ability through looking at the art practices of people with the label of autism. The following will illustrate what has brought me to this study.

Background

It is Monday morning; I teach middle and high school art at a small K-12 private school outside of Atlanta, Georgia. I am right now hurrying down the hall, hoping I can check my office mailbox and make it back to my classroom before my seventh grade art class arrives. However on the way to the office, “JJ” approaches me. With an unceremonious beginning to our relationship, the sixth grader JJ launches into a rapid-fire description of the reading he had done over the weekend. His book is the “D” volume of the encyclopedia Britannica. As I stand listening to JJ’s description of the tyrannosaurus rex and other dinosaurs in this volume I am struck at the difference between this young man, excitedly reciting with minute detail the physical characteristic of the T-Rex, and the same young man I had seen in his own classroom, who was quiet, lost, and quite alone. JJ was a vivacious, passionate and very descriptive speaker. I immediately began to wonder what kind of artist he was.
After JJ heads off to class, I stop into my headmaster’s office to share my encounter with JJ. The headmaster, a man who still informs my view of the abilities of all students, rejoices in my retelling of JJ’s story, smiling, nodding and adding his own anecdotes. “He’s brilliant!” He has an “incredible imagination!” He’ll talk a “blue streak,” “loves to draw.” What was never said in that conversation, or any other conversation I had with the headmaster, was that JJ had the label of autism. That interaction with both JJ and the headmaster reoccurred with different students throughout my career as an educator and began the path toward my dissertation. In my view, and the views of others (his parents, family, teachers and friends), JJ’s behaviors and abilities were not subsumed under the label of “autism.”

My experience in general at that school, where I taught for 7 years, continually made me scratch my head. When I sat in parent-teacher conferences, when I talked with other teachers at lunch, when I listened to families recite sad stories of how they ended up at our unassuming little private school, I would ask myself, “Who are they talking about?” They cannot mean “John” or “Brittany,” or “Brian,” these kids are brilliant! They are amazing artists! I cannot picture them as “uncaring,” “apathetic” or “lazy!” as others describe them. It intrigued me how these same students that were “failing miserably” in school, and were described as students who were “loners” or “didn’t care”, could nevertheless walk into the art room and become transformed. They became creative, expressive, caring, problem solving and self-directed members of the art classroom community. Not only did they transform themselves but, in the art room, they

---

1 This phrase “label of” is an intentional resistance to the medical model of disability that can, at times, create a fixed and ascribed identity that eclipses all other aspects of the person. “Autism” is a condition determined by an outside medical source, it is not a descriptor of JJ’s person, only of particular behavioral and/or cognitive characteristics.
were also transformed in the eyes of others. Art for these students was transformative, allowing them to be seen as capable, competent, engaged, and personable. Art educator Doug Blandy (1999) describes this kind of experience as “art that transforms lives” (p.35). What follows are the stories of young lives transformed by their art making as told through this study.

It is important to locate myself within the field of disability studies as it relates to my research. The emerging field of scholarship known as disability studies is an interdisciplinary one that uses the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities as the foundation for all research. Disability studies also recognizes the important role that families and advocates play in the lives of persons with dis/abilities and seeks to explore and examine these perspectives as well, careful not to use these perspectives as replacements for the voices of people with dis/abilities, including people with cognitive and intellectual dis/abilities. I am interested in the cultural locations of dis/ability, in particular with relation to artistic practice, art and inclusive art education. Within this frame, dis/ability is seen as another form of diversity, both physical and cultural. Within these considerations of dis/ability as a construct of society and culture emerges the use of the term dis/ability. The slash inserted is representative of the delineation evoked by some scholars in disability studies and some people with disabilities as a marking of the construction of dis/ability by society (Davis, 1997; Gable & Danforth, 2008). However, in my work, I at times use the word disability (without the slash) as an intentional evocation of the medical model of disability, a view that is not grounded in the perception of dis/ability as a social construct but as a form of difference or deficit that is inherent in the person. In this view, I see dis/ability as a source of culture and identity. This belief is
also what leads me to evoke the use of “with the label of”. This phrase is an intentional resistance to the potential of disability status to create a fixed and ascribed identity. It is this perspective that I use to study the participants in this study as persons with the label of autism and makers of art. My own personal experience with dis/ability does not include the label of autism. My social and cultural location is situated within the sociopolitical model of dis/ability as an art educator, artist and researcher. My experiences as a teacher of students with autism, as an artist whose work is informed by my own experience with a physical dis/ability and my research that seeks to explore issues of dis/ability and art making, all inform the focus of my research.

**Dissertation Layout**

The structure of my dissertation work follows this format. Chapter 1 will introduce the significant areas of inquiry for this study. For this study I chose to focus on adolescence, autism, inclusion and art education. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature that informs my research question. Chapter 3 is a discussion on methodology and its surrounding issues. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 comprise the data gathered in the study. Chapter 7 is an analysis of my findings and implications; here I will also suggest further areas for research.

**Statement of the Problem**

Why adolescence? I chose to focus this work on adolescence, as it is an important time for cognitive and social growth that can influence ideas of self-concept, future lives and thoughts about others. Adolescence is often a time when individuals are presented with choices that can have an important impact upon the trajectory of their lives. Havighurst (1952) identified adolescence as a time when the importance of work and relationships are central in development. Levinson (1978) identifies adolescence as a time
that is focused upon changing relations and on exploration. Erikson (Erikson, 1968) adds that intimacy and identification of and commitment to goals become paramount during adolescence. The multiple areas of development that are central in adolescence combine with our Western culture of independence (Eckersley, 2006; Thompson, 1997) to have a profound effect upon the development of both individual and group identities.

Why autism? I also chose to focus this study upon adolescents with autism. As an art educator, I experienced an increase in the number of students with autism that attended my art classes. As an art educator teaching students with the label of autism, I became curious about the intersection of my student’s experiences with autism and art. It is for these reasons that I chose to focus upon adolescence with autism as they (and the stakeholders in this study) consider the role of art in their lives.

**Defining autism.** Autism spectrum disorder is by definition broad. It includes related dis/abilities such as Asperger’s Disorder, Rett’s Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD) and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PPD-NOS). Autism and ASD are labels describing students with a diverse range of abilities, and may include individuals who are also artistically gifted, as with any segment of the student population. Autism spectrum disorder is the name given by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR, 2000) to describe a wide range of behaviors and differences (deficits) in three key areas: Verbal and non-verbal communication; Social awareness and interactions; and Imaginative play (see Appendix A).

**Inclusion.** According to the US Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), 56% of students with more significant dis/abilities, including autism,
are attending general education classrooms (including the visual art classroom) for at least 80% of their day. This slight increase from the previous year represents a national effort to educate more children within inclusive environments. Efforts of inclusion within public institutions stem from legislative mandates like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Parents, educators and administrators who hold a philosophical belief in inclusive education advance these mandates. The U.S. Department of Education recently reported in the National Report to Congress that almost half of all school age children receiving special education services are in general education settings for at least 89% of the day (Education, 2008). This practice of educating students with dis/abilities within the general education classroom, with their non-disabled peers, is known as inclusion. While IDEA legislation was designed to make American schools more inclusive (Education, 2008) the culture from school to school and classroom to classroom can vary greatly and impact the extent students with autism are included.

The philosophical support for inclusive public schools also applies to extracurricular art education settings and spaces. While there is a great deal of research about the artistic development of non-disabled students in art education, there is very little research that specifically looks at the artistic development of young people with autism (Furniss, 2008). The arts provide a place of creative expression, a place where students with various backgrounds, abilities, strengths, gifts and talents can be successful as they produce and respond to art. National organizations such as VSA Arts (formerly known as Very Special Arts), and local initiatives such as the Syracuse University Art Workshops for Young People offer students with diverse learning styles and abilities the opportunity to participate in art education and art-making. These initiatives that happen
both in and outside the public school system allow for the possibility of changing perceptions about [in]ability and [in]competence of people with dis/abilities (Gadacz, 1994), including autism (D. Biklen, 2005). It allows for the changing of practices that present barriers to the participation and inclusion of adolescents with autism in art. By changing perceptions to presumptions of competence (D. Biklen, 2005; D. Biklen & J. Burke, 2006; D. P. Biklen & J. Burke, 2006) and demonstrating practices that are inclusive of the artistic production of these artists, inclusion of artists with autism can be moved from classroom to community and ultimately society. These changes may allow for the fullest opportunity for personal and artistic growth, social and expressive acts within welcoming and supportive contexts. For these reasons I am examining inclusion in art education in and outside of schools.

As more and more students with varying abilities are included in art education settings, art teachers feel unprepared to teach students with dis/abilities (Guay, 1994; Hillert, 1997). It is necessary for today’s art teachers to know how to work directly with students who have dis/abilities, and to know how to guide, support and collaborate with other school personnel, professionals and families. Unfortunately, what are absent in the literature on students with autism in the art classroom are the voices of adolescent artists with autism and their experiences in art education and art-making. I propose that their voices through the artwork they produce can offer additional glimpses into their experiences as artists and therefore inform the practice of art education for students with autism. In addition, increased awareness and understanding of the experiences of adolescents with autism has the potential to increase access and opportunity in art making for these artists. The artwork of people with autism has been described as something
more than mere representation of object but as an interpretation of the world around them (Furniss, 2008).

The incidence of autism, the inclusion of these artists within the contexts of art education, my own experiences as an artist, a teacher, and person with a physical dis/ability, and my coursework in disability studies have all led me to pursue research that seeks to describe the experiences of adolescent artists with autism in art education.

**Research Questions**

As established earlier, the voices of adolescent artists with autism are under-represented. While this study seeks to render visible the perspectives of the artists, I have included the voices of parents, teachers and other professionals to gain information about how art making transforms their perspective of the adolescents in this study. Therefore, in order to share the stories of these artists and explore transformative properties of art-making, this work focuses on several research questions. My research questions are organized into three central categories: art and art making; autism and perceptions surrounding this label; and access in and to art education. Questions 1 and 2 seek to describe how the participants in this study engage in the art-making process and what role art plays in their lives. Question 3 seeks to describe the perceptions that “stakeholders” (families, teachers, and other professionals) hold regarding autism and art-making. Question 4 asks how the perceptions of stakeholders about autism and art making inform access to art education.

**Engagement in and role of art:**

1.) How do adolescents with the label of autism engage in artistic production?

2.) What role does art making play in their lives?

**Perceptions and understanding of autism and art:**
3.) What perceptions do the stakeholders (teachers, other professionals and family members) have about autism and art?

Access to aspects of art education:

4.) What role do these perceptions and practices (about autism and art) have upon access to art education for these adolescents?

Locating Terminology in This Research

Many of the terms used in this research have disputed meanings in various contexts. What I seek to do in this section is to identify the terminology I use and locate it within the current discourses.

**Adolescence.** Adolescence for the purpose of this paper is defined using the World Health Organization’s (2004) definition: “a period of life between the ages of 10 and 19.” The definition of adolescence varies by culture, but by using the World Health Organization’s definition I am best able to capture the broadest range of this transitional period in a person’s life. I am focusing on adolescents and this transitional period because it is such an important time for identity formation (Blos, 1978; Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 2004).

**Art and artist.** With this, defining what art is can be difficult and elusive. The definitions of art are as culturally bound as any social construct and has shifted in ways that at their most basic level reflect or reproduce societal values. Art is defined differently in each social construct as either a system of production, communication or reflection (Pearse, 1983). Therefore an artist is a person who works to accomplish one of these acts in order to represent visually some aspect of their experience (cognitive, physical or otherwise). Art and art-making are meaningful ways to mediate the complexities of social interaction, communication and identity formation, which are all part of adolescence. I’m
using these open-ended definitions of art because they best reflect the unique experiences of the individuals who are the participants in my study. Each context and person is uniquely their own. Simply put, art making encompasses creative acts that visually communicate and illustrate intentionality and express personal meaning with a variety of materials.

**Defining artistic production.** Dilworth (2007) describes art making as “acts of intentional artistic expression by artists”. In this research, I wish to trouble the term “intentional”. This research does not seek to place me in a position where I am trying to determine whether someone is capable of intention. Nor am I attempting to measure intentionality. It is, after all, not uncommon for any artist to experience a serendipitous or unintentional engagement with a material that they may choose to accept or reflect as the aesthetic or artistic process. Questions of “intent”, “authenticity” and “authorship” become troubling terms for persons with disabilities. Biklen addresses these very issues in *Contested Words, Contested Science* (1997) as they relate to questions of independence, intelligence and ability. Biklen shows that marginalized people are often objects of inquiry regarding authenticity and competence (see also D. Biklen, Kliwer, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006). Cardinal and Biklen (1997) go on to show how the seeking of “truth” in dis/ability research should be considered not as “truths” but as representations of competing discourse and competing truth within conditions of uncertainty (p. 196-7). It is in this vein that I seek to do this research. My goal is not to name “truths” or measure “intentionality”, but to describe the experiences of these artists as they produce and respond to art with and without support.
To address how artists may change the ways that they engage with or appropriate materials with each piece of work I bring in the idea of “type and token” from Philosophy (Peirce, 1931)\(^2\). The distinction between type and token in philosophy is an ontological one, between a general sort of thing and concrete instances of it. Type is usually abstract, while a token is a specific particular. This theory enables me to talk about the universality of artistic process and the token or specific (individual) ways that each artist approaches a work. This idea also allows for a representation of the collaborative process that some artists utilize with supports (human or otherwise). This helps us to consider the ways that artists engage and collaborate with technology, materials and members of the artistic community. This idea offers a definition of art and puts forth an expanded way of thinking about the artistic production of students with dis/abilities in art making. In this study, artistic production by students with dis/abilities is seen as empowering them as able, competent participants in the art room, in out of school art settings and the world around them.

**Support.** Supports for people with dis/abilities can come in many sizes, shapes and fashions. Supports can be varied: human and otherwise, high or low tech, adaptive or modifying in nature, universal or individualized. They may include things like personal aids, motorized wheelchairs, assistive technologies, adaptive materials or devices or

\(^2\) This theory in philosophy is further refined by types as universals and tokens as “instances” of the type. However, Peirce cautions that “instances” are not to be confused with “occurrences” because not all tokens are types. The importance of this distinction is used in linguistics, philosophy, science and everyday discourse. An example would be, all copies of *War and Peace* are tokens of the particular type (the novel, *War and Peace*). If you own a Volkswagen Beetle, you have a token of the particular type (a beetle car) (Warburton, 1992). In contrast, the phrase “being white” is an example of a token that may not necessarily by of the type as it not an object (most common examples of tokens) and instead represents an abstract conceptualization with cultural, ethnic and racial ties to ways of being in the world.
simply additional time. The types of supports also impact the nature and effect of these supports particularly as they relate to art and art making. This research seeks to consider carefully both the types and nature of supports provided to individuals with dis/abilities as they relate to creative expression and art making.

**Dis/ability.** I have chosen to use the term dis/ability (with a slash) within my research because it best illustrates my own location about the discourse of labels. It is indicative of scholars in disability studies who define dis/ability not as a physical deficit or defect inherent in certain bodies or brains, but rather as a relationship of differential power and privilege (L. Rogers & Swadener, 2001).

Drawing on critical theory (Pothier & Devlin, 2006) dis/ability is understood as a discursive construction—a fictional ‘other’ to an equally constructed norm. Similarly, critical race scholars (Asch, 2000; Bratlinger, 2006; Gustafson, 2007) understand race to be socially constructed, rather than biologically determined. Although race and dis/ability do not have biological meaning, they do have social meaning and material consequences. In other words, I use the term “dis/ability” as “a way of thinking about bodies rather than …something that is wrong with bodies” (Bruggemann & Garland-Thompson, 2004).

Feminist disability studies (Begum, 1992; Berwald & Houtstra, 2002; Corker, 2001; DePauw, 1996; Garland-Thompson, 2006; Wendell, 2006) begin with the assumption that dis/ability is always inextricably linked to other social markers, such as gender, race, sexuality, and social class. Issues explored within this paradigm allow for wide-ranging and diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary locations.

**Person first language.** Kathie Snow (2005) defines person first language as language that puts the person first, not their dis/ability; it describes what people *have* or a
quality attributed to them, not what they are. It is important because the language used to describe people can have a profound impact upon their sense of worth and belonging in the world. When referring to people with dis/abilities, including autism, there is ongoing debate between “person first language” and more identity claiming language such as “autistics,” “autes,” and “aspees.” Many self-advocates and people with developmental dis/abilities still prefer to use what is called “person-first” language (i.e. “people with disabilities”) while others embrace identity-claiming terms as in the saying “I am disabled and proud”. As Jerry Kainulainen (2006) argues in, Why ‘Handicapped’ is not Cool, we can choose to emphasize people's similarities or differences through our discourse. The term ‘disabled person’ is a discursive misnomer regarding identity to the more psychologically sound expression, 'person with a dis/ability.' The latter places the person first, not the dis/ability. Placing the dis/ability first distorts and undermines whom people with dis/abilities are and how they want to be seen. This point can best be illustrated in that fact that we do not refer to people with broken legs as ‘broken-leg people!’

In direct opposition to person first language Linton (1998a) writes,

Over the past twenty years, disabled people have gained greater control over these definition issues. The “disabled” or the “handicapped” were replaced in the mid-70s by people with disabilities to maintain disability as a characteristic of the individual, as opposed to the defining variable…. Beginning in the early 90s “disabled people” has been increasingly used in disability studies and disability rights circles when referring to the constituency group. Rather than maintaining disability as a secondary characteristic, disabled has become a marker of the
identity that the individual and group wish to highlight and call attention to (p. 13).

Based on both of these viewpoints on claiming identity and person first language, I will use the term “person/student with the label of autism” to describe participants unless the participant self-identifies as being autistic first.

**Medical model of disability.** According to disability studies scholar and activist, Carol Gill (1998) the experience of disability has been historically viewed as a “tangible flaw located within an individual's physical or mental constitution.” This view is commonly referred to as the “medical model of disability.” The medical model holds that disability results from an individual person’s physical or mental limitations, and is largely unconnected to the social or geographical environments. It is sometimes referred to as the biological-inferiority or functional-limitation model. It includes the language of “impairment”, “disability” and “handicap”. This model seeks to “cure” and “fix” and “remediate” the individual. In the post-industrial and post-enlightenment era, disability, in Western society, has been regarded as an individual affliction predominantly cast within scientific and medical discourses. Since many disabilities have medical origins, it has been common practice for people “afflicted” with disabilities (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 2008) to be under the exercise and control of the medical professions. When an individual with a disability is in the role of “sick”, “ill”, or “impaired” under the medical model they become objects of pity, charity and in need of cure, remediation or medication. This model is most predominantly seen in disability public policy today, including the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act both of which heavily inform disability policy within the public and
private sectors. My work rejects the medical model of disability and instead embraces the social model of dis/ability.

**Social model of dis/ability.** With the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, however, dis/ability rights activists and others began articulating a “social model of dis/ability” which de-emphasizes “the significance of individual impairments (such as, paralysis, blindness or learning limitations) in causing the problems persons with disabilities face” (Gill, 1998). It focuses, instead, “on such socially constructed barriers as exclusion, blocked access and dis/ability prejudice as the ‘real’ problems of disability” (Gill, 1998).

This is not to say that there is not an inherent reality to the categorization of dis/ability as it pertains to services and supports. The legislation is necessary to formalize impairment status to access the services and supports that enable people to live independent, healthy and fulfilling lives. Grosz (1994) notes that when dissolving these oppositional categories, “we cannot simply ignore them, vowing never to speak in their terms again.” Critiques of the socio-political model of dis/ability argue that one cannot cleanly “amputate issues of impairment from the lived body” (Eisenhauer, 2008). I agree that these categories of impairment may have a very necessary role as it pertains to the access of services and necessary accommodations. I also believe that it is possible and necessary to change the more devastating and far-reaching exclusionary and discriminatory impact of these categories upon the lives and experiences of people with dis/abilities.

My goal with this research is to expand my own understanding of students like JJ, to learn exactly how art works in their lives by describing the experiences of these
adolescent artists with autism as they participate in and respond to art. The research questions for this study examine the perceptions of stakeholders about these artists and autism. Then to consider how those perceptions inform practice with regards to access to art education and art-making. Lastly, by examining the artwork and ways of engaging in art-making this study will help to show the perspective from the artist’s themselves. It is my intention to allow for the voices of these artists about and through their artwork to add to the discourse about art, adolescence and art education. It was important to me when I designed this study that the art making and artists were and remained central to the work, further supporting the importance of voice and narrative in qualitative and disability studies scholarship. My own location as an artist, educator and person with a physical dis/ability shaped my methodology, philosophical stance and guiding questions. The most important outcome of this research, as I see it, is to illuminate the artistic practice of these artists to better understand the contexts of art education that will best support students like those who participated in this study. This research also presents an opportunity to consider how art making is informed by the multiple aspects of these artist’s including those aspects of autism. Chapter two begins with a review of the relevant literature.
Chapter Two: A Review of the Literature

“Collage is the noble conquest of the irrational, the coupling of two realities, irreconcilable in appearance, upon a plane which apparently does not suit them.”

-Max Ernst

Within the practice of arts-informed research lies collage as method of inquiry. It is used personally, historically and theoretically to provide a context, strategy, tool, or example and can mediate understanding in new and interesting ways. The term collage comes from the French verb _coller_ meaning “to stick”. Within the visual arts, collage refers to a genre in which “found materials that are either natural or made are cut up and pasted on some sort of flat surface” (Knowles & Cole, 2008). The use of collage in this dissertation was attractive to me as I saw it as a way to “counteract the hegemony and linearity in written texts, increase voice and reflexivity in the research process, and expand the possibilities of multiple and diverse realities and understandings” (Butler-Kisber, 2008). As an artist doing this research, I found it impossible to turn off the part of myself that conjures up visuals, that organizes complex ideas into a readable picture in my head. Therefore, I will utilize collage in this dissertation both metaphorically and literally to represent the complex and conflated concepts of artistic practice and autism in this literature review. In the literal sense, I will also use it to organize and represent visually the data of this research. Metaphorically, I will use collage to juxtapose and combine the various areas of literature that inform this research, at times revealing or concealing the layers underneath.
This literature review, like Ernst’s description of collage, will examine the existence of two “realities”: art-making and autism. The relevant fields of literature will be organized around the central themes of art, autism, and access. Art will be examined both through the lens of art education and the historical concepts of art and artists. The realities of autism will be considered through discourses on autism, dis/ability and adolescence. Access will be investigated through the realities of inclusive education. Each of these fields have a role in this study and I will consider the ways that they interact with one other, and in fact occupy the same frame of inclusive art education. This literature review will draw upon the unexpected relationships of these areas as they inform the experiences of adolescent artists with autism as they participate in art education. I will consider the areas of literature not as a single or solitary element, but rather as a coalescent body of literature, overlaying them upon one another to examine the spaces and forms that are made through their collage. This way of considering the relevant literature is reflective of my philosophical approach to the field of art and dis/ability, seeing each as a socially constructed understanding of something personal. By this I mean that artwork created by an artist is something that is produced from a myriad of experiences and meanings specific to that artist, but is viewed by a ‘public’ that in turn constructs their own meaning of these same symbols and their composition. Dis/ability too is something that exists in a personal space of an individual body, yet is read and constructed by a ‘public’ to form meaning and understanding through the experiences of that person. To begin, I offer the literature on art and art-making as it was central to this study.
Art

Definitions of Art

The idea of defining art is also contested by those who believe defining art is impossible, as it is an open concept (Kimball, 2001). Definitions of art have and still change with prevailing philosophical, historical and sociological ideals. Here I will examine a few of the prevailing discussions of definitions of art.

Identifying art works. Some threads of identifying works of art may rely upon the ability to identify a work of art as having representational properties, expressive properties or formal properties. In the representational or mimetic definitions as put forth by Plato in the Republic (Janaway, 1998) artworks are dependent upon ordinary physical objects in non-physical forms. Art is perceptual and is only an appearance of what is real. In this paradigm art does not produce knowledge and is not created within knowledge, it is simply a representation of some other physical, “real” object.

For Kant art is defined as “a kind of representation that is purposive in it’s self, and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication” (Kant, 2000). In this tradition, art is valued strictly for it’s communicative (expressive) value. Considering art as communicative allows us to consider, as Rolling (2008) suggests, art as an information system. In this discussion Rolling offers ways to consider how the meanings communicated through art can vary from context to context, changing in reading and response. Within this idea, art offers a way to organize human experience, emotion and thought. Considering art as an information system opens the door for considering how digital media, visual culture and material culture also shape what gets constructed as ‘art’ and how it informs the ways that art is read and responded to in the artworld.
In contrast, when art is defined within the formalist tradition (Bell, 1914) it emphasizes the autonomy or primacy of formal qualities. These qualities (e.g. line, color, shape, texture) can be considered and enjoyed independently of representation of any kind. When these qualities are elevated to principal interest they begin to perform as representation. Here, the importance of art lies within its ability to perform an aesthetic experience for the viewer.

When contemporary definitions of art are distilled down, they can be organized within two essential definitions, art having historical value and art having trans-historical, trans-cultural characteristics. Contributing to these definitions of art are institutional and historical definitions (Davies, 2006). Institutional definitions (Dickie, 1984) typically hold that to be a work of art is to be an artifact created by an artist to be presented to an audience. It states that something is a work of art if and only if it (a) has a subject and (b) has a rhetorical means that engages the viewer and requires interpretations within a historical art context (Danto, 1981). The historical definition of art (J. Levinson, 1979) states that something is a work of art if it is intended to support some well-established [historically established] regard of art such as a display of form, representation of cultural beliefs, or expression of emotion. While each of these definitions of art hold importance within certain contexts and histories, I offer this, more comprehensive definition as a framework for this study.

As I described in the opening paragraph, definitions of art are often contested on the basis of the subjectivity of art itself and the act of art making. Art making, as the process of writing may be done with varying purpose, context and communication. Artists may create a piece of work for very personal reasons, as a writer may write in a
journal. Neither of these people may ever intend for the work to see the light of day, yet both constructions could be deemed “art” and “writing”. Why then am I concerned with definitions of art? It seems worthwhile in this research to consider how the work of these artists can be likened and legitimized by formal definitions of art, to respond to the questions that artists of all types encounter, “Is this art?” However, this work is constructed within the experience of art education, therefore I wish to focus this consideration of art within art education as the objects, meanings, purposes and functions of the visual art students make (Freedman, 2003). In these terms I define art as what the artists in this study did rather than what their art is (good or bad; beautiful or ugly). However, no one definition of art seems to be perfect and have historically been debated, refuted and reconceptualized. In fact, many contend that defining art could result in a limiting of creativity. This limitation parallels the limits that are often put upon people with disabilities who operate outside of what is deemed “typical”, physically, cognitively, sexually or otherwise. For the purpose of this research I draw upon a more contemporary definition put forth by Marshall (2007) who considers the multiple historical definitions of art and offers instead a post paradigmatic definition of art that examines art outside of strictly aesthetic properties and expand art beyond the institutional structures that house and constrain the power structure of the artworld. Marshall encourages the contemplation of philosophical and scientific considerations of image and visual as interior or exterior; pictoral or conceptual. These ways of understanding art seem particularly relevant to this work as the visual data studied in the form of artwork from these artists was created within multiple contexts of art education, including more personal art making practice outside of formal art education settings. In Marshall’s theory she describes the way that
this contemporary paradigm has important implications upon the field of art education, and in my view to the art making of students with dis/abilities. Marshall states that this post paradigmatic view of art allows for the expansion of visual literacy to consider how knowledge and reality are constructed through image making. Secondly, she asks us to use a more transcultural examination of art history and how concepts are constructed across time and culture (also important with regards to disability history) and lastly this paradigm positions visual image in a way to function as research, inquiry and knowledge construction in all areas. This last piece offers legitimacy to artistic practice by those individuals who perhaps do not have other modalities in which to express their knowledge, except through artmaking. Marshall goes further to offer an expanded consideration of who is an artist. In a personal communication she offers this transformational definition, “There are different kinds of artists. There are studio artists who work with materials and develop their own style. These artists make images and objects that are expressive and/or beautiful. Then there are artists who investigate things like ideas, issues, people, events and experiences through their art. They don't have to make objects and images but often they do. These 'products' convey ideas or commentary. As a researcher and educator, I feel an affinity with this last group. To me, a good artist not only investigates and interprets his/her findings creatively, but also changes the way things are perceived.” (J. Marshall, personal communication, Jan. 8, 2011). While Marshall was not speaking specifically of artists with dis/abilities or even student artists, this definition seems to work well and have application to the artists in this study whose work functioned as investigations of their experience; conveyance of ideas and at times changing the way they (and their experience) was perceived. As I have stated
previously, in this research, I am less concerned with establishing the value of aesthetic properties of art or with establishing “intentionality” as it is complicated and conflated with perceptions of ability and intelligence. Rather, I am interested in the ways that these adolescents with autism participate in and experience art education and the role that art making plays in their lives. It is however important to consider how art is defined as it relates to this research, as these definitions, perceptions and operations of art help to frame this study.

Simply establishing a working definition of art is not enough. For art to exist, according to Dickie (1984), there must be an audience. Therefore, when we consider the artworld public (as put forth by Dickie) in the United States it is important to consider the ways that the public has informed definitions of art, and vice versa.

Art in the US was and still is viewed as a luxury by many and may not fit the pragmatic view of the pioneering US society. Art has not taken the same sense of cultural heritage of the nation in the United States as it has in Europe. The discouragement of art making can be traced back to the fundamentalist religious founding fathers and continues today with the scant governmental funding of the arts. The societal definition of art and artists, and the value that was placed (or not placed) upon them was reflected in the operating paradigms of art education. The artist was seen as a romantic rebel and placed in the vanguard of society. The cultural value of art would be expected to inform the placeholder of art education within the educational system. The question is whether art education was/is a reflection of the current state of art in the US or a reproduction of the narrowing curricular trends in general education that emphasized the rational and scientific over the creative and less frugal pursuits of the arts.
General Education and its Relationship to Art Education in the US

The three movements in general education post World War II included the expressionist, scientific rationalist and re-constructionist streams. The expressive stream was dominant between 1945 and 1960. This expressive nature of education was reflected in the ideas of Viktor Lowenfeld and Herbert Read.

Art as self-expression. As World War II ended the writings of Sir Herbert Read (1944) and Victor Lowenfeld (1947) were influential. Both made the point in their widely used texts that children's art was universal in its symbolic forms, that it could serve as an instrument of peace if such art would be allowed to develop freely, without the repressiveness of society which thwarted the unfolding of the child's personal vision. The child as artist was the instrument of salvation for world civilization (Lowenfeld, 1947). This was in stark contrast to the ideas of art as a discipline of study that stemmed from the scientific rationalist approach of the 1950’s and 1960’s.

Scientific method and discipline based art education. The scientific rationalist approach called for the formation of the core academic disciplines. This approach called not for science at the center of curriculum but for science to validate the curriculum. The accountability movement shifted the way that knowledge was considered. Educational success was determined by measuring how much of the teachers knowledge was passed on to the student, not by the insights, inventions or discoveries of the student, as suggested by Dewey (1934). Popkewitz, Pitman, and Barry (1986) described this in terms of a shift from the “productive” aspects of knowledge, with its focus upon inquiry and discovery, to the “reproductive” aspects of knowledge, with emphasis on the monitoring of student performance to measure mastery of existing facts. This general education movement called for accountability, and this accountability translated to the arts.
When the Russians launched Sputnik in 1957 it sparked a change in the curriculum, and the purpose of education. National defense would be secured by advancement in math and science, an initiative we are still feeling today. Members of the scientific community were in a position to recommend changes in curriculum content and organization, with many serving as consultants on curriculum development projects. As the disciplines became the focus of curriculum reform, a hierarchy was established elevating some studies to the status of disciplines. Others not so designated were relegated to the status of mere subjects. Philip Phenix (1968) asserted that all “curriculum content should be drawn from the disciplines, or, to put it another way, that only knowledge contained in the disciplines is appropriate to the curriculum”. In this new environment art had to become a discipline itself or lose its legitimacy (Efland, 2004).

Barkan (1966) conflated artistic activity with scientific inquiry arguing that studio activity was a mode of inquiry, and that art history and art criticism were modes as well. For Barkan, all three modes were treated as equivalent candidates for curriculum attention, however some argued this triarchial approach to art curriculum reduced the overall importance of studio activity in the art curriculum. In a sense, it was no longer enough for the artists to create, but they must “share the stage with two other actors, the art critic and the art historian” (Efland, 1990).

The Getty Center for Education in the Arts (GCEA) was formed in 1982 for the express purpose of improving the quality and status of arts education in American schools. Freshly infused with the monies of its past patriarch the Center undertook the task of turning art into a discipline, specifically a discipline that would be recognized by the other “core” disciplines. This event was significant as funding for the arts had never
been plentiful, and such a concentrated effort in research and writing in art education was unheard of. The center chose to pour its resources into backing the Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) curriculum with the hopes of elevating the status of art education. This single-minded approach left many artists feeling disenfranchised. They believed that this movement would eliminate the rich diversity of artistic practice and teaching that made art education so valuable. Perhaps one of the most vehement criticisms of DBAE was that it was Eurocentric, male-dominated, misogynist, and elitist. These criticisms along with a cessation of funding led to the next shift in the art education paradigm to the re-constructionist movement during the mid 1990’s.

**Art as Social Transformation, Visual Culture and Material Culture**

**Critical analysis.** The re-constructionist perspective is founded on the notion that art education is a means for social transformation through the critical analysis of social values that are inherent in works of art (Delacruz, 1995). In this paradigm, students are taught the skills necessary to analyze the power structures they participate in that restrict the potential of other social groups and themselves (Sleeter, 1989). In this view, art education becomes a pedagogical tool that can be used across the school curriculum for the purpose of critical analysis, and ultimately, social reconstruction (Freedman, 1994). These skills are critical as students encounter a world fraught with visual culture and art educators reconsider what is necessary for the art curriculum.

**Transforming the canon of art education.** In more recent art education history tension exists between those art teachers that focus upon the content of art and those seeing it as self-expression. When art is defined as self-expression, students are frequently left to their own devices and not offered formalized instruction that could potentially expand a student’s repertoire of both materials and techniques. When art is
focused upon content and reflects the shift to instructional objectives in general education, students receive extensive technical instruction of materials and techniques with an emphasis upon technical mastering of these skills at times at the expense of independent expression and emotion. Striving toward a more synthetic pedagogy would suggest that we strike a balance between these two opposing tendencies. It is here within the considerations of power, culture, representations and identities that visual culture and material culture began to lay claim to territories within the paradigms of art education.

**Visual culture.** One thread of contemporary discussions that attempts to define art rely upon a material or visual culture lens that expands art education from studying art of the institutional artworld to studying art of the visual culture (Duncan, 2001). Here, the visual culture is defined as everything that we see and encounter visually. Today, visual culture has assumed an important role in the informal teaching of images and visual literacy. Visual culture to some art educators is a fundamental challenge to the content and structure of art education that has been in place for the past 100 years (P. J. Smith, 2003). Visual culture in its broadest sense encompasses the human-made or human-designed environment. More specifically, it examines the ways we read and make sense of the images that we encounter in our daily lives. Here in the daily barrage of images, people begin to develop a visual vocabulary and way of making sense of images that is outside of formal K-12 art education. Those that support the inclusion of visual culture, or even favor this paradigm over a more traditional form of art, see it as a necessary preparation for people who exist in our 21st century world. This approach emphasizes the power of diverse visual images to transform the beliefs and values of a culture. By providing students with a variety of perspectives of the human experience
through art, they will learn about the social and political forces that are reflected in a work of art. The inclusion of artworks that push back against the male dominated Eurocentric nature of traditional canons of art offer support for belief in the power of education to transform society that was seen in the ideal of the common school. Others who argue against this paradigm view visual culture as a shallow, uninformed study of “low culture” (Eisner, 1978) that undermines the more “serious” art (Tavin, 2005) of the typically European Canon. Using the lens of visual culture would by default expand the definition of art to a more inclusive definition that might occlude the delineation between high and low art that has typically separated popular imagery and the more established institutional artworld, therefore challenging its power, for this view also blurs the line between the aesthetic and capital qualities of images of material culture.

Visual culture, as described by Duncum (2001) has represented as big of a shift to the field of art education as the shift from self-expression to discipline based approach in the 1980’s. Those in support of the inclusion of foundation of visual culture in art education see it as an inevitable approach to the multiple images and media that today’s students are bombarded with. Those in opposition to the dominance of visual culture as the new canon of art argue that visual culture’s ever-expanding definitions of art undermine the high art that deserves consideration and appreciation. They do not see how Michelangelo’s David can be considered in the same realm as Mattel’s Barbie and Ken. This critique overlooks the underlying considerations of visual culture with regards to race, class, gender and production. It is not that visual culture is absent of any hierarchy of art, but it emphasizes the ways that pieces of visual culture are produced, read and
represented. Following the considerations of production and consumption are the ideals and considerations of material culture.

**Material culture.** Material culture includes the study of visual culture but broadens it to include all human made and human altered forms, such as snowboards and tattoos. How material culture differs from visual culture is in the ways that it includes the study of material forms and objects and their importance as they are pervasive and they embody and perpetuate ideas about cultures, regions, religions, nations and individual and collective identities (Burkhart, 2006). Using a material culture lens requires a complete contextualization of objects. This approach to defining art examines all the “relationships necessary for determining an object’s meaning” (Hodder, 1997). In this paradigm art is considered beyond its aesthetic qualities to include the affordability, availability and desirability of an object as it pertains to function, symbolism and cultural impact of the object (Burkhart, 2006). This change in thinking would also change what is labeled as art and how it is thought about and in turn valued in a culture, transforming the historical canon of art.

**Exclusionary paradigms and practice in art making.** If we consider each of these traditional models of art education, art as self expression, discipline based art education and art as social transformation, we can consider how each model is constructed in a way that does not include people with dis/abilities. For instance, art as self-expression is contingent upon psychological processes that are often not conceived of people with autism. The assumptions that mind blindness, inabilities to interact and respond to the environment, and lacking of more traditional literacy skills might preclude people with autism from expectations of art as self-expression. Research by Kluth (2003)
concludes that while students with autism are increasingly being educated in general education classrooms; they are often excluded from “rich and meaningful literacy experiences”. Kliewer (1998) suggests that in order for this sort of exclusion to end teachers would need to “reconceptualize the literate community”. This reconceptualization would require teachers to reject assumptions about the ability of students with disabilities and instead create communities where all students are encouraged to create and showcase [artistic] talents (Kluth, 2003).

A discipline based art education approach attempts to elevate art to an area of “core” curriculum areas or academic subject areas. When the visual arts are considered an academic area, concepts of ability, intelligence and competence might be harkened as a prerequisite for participation in the art classroom. Misconceptions of low intellectual ability and lack of competence in people with autism might pose to be a barrier to participation for adolescents with autism. When teachers hold perceptions that students with autism are incapable of meaningful engagement with content participation is relegated to minimal of partial participation in the form of using alternative materials or worse yet, a supportive adult that simply does the project for them (Giangreco, 1997).

Competing paradigms of participation in the general education curriculum are identified by Kluth and others in Access to Academics for All Students: Critical Approaches to Inclusive Curriculum, Instruction and Policy (2003) as either focused on social and classroom participation or focused on participation that is linked to content directly or that meet “standards of complexity or rigor”. Here Kluth, Biklen and Straut describe how those committed to meaningful participation through inclusive schooling are “moving beyond participation and considering ways to challenge and intellectually engage learners
with disabilities”. As in the previous paragraph, in order to avoid exclusionary practices in art education, broadened conceptualizations of inclusion, participation and art making must be employed.

Lastly, art as social transformation and art education that incorporates visual and material culture all have an effect upon the level of participation of students with autism. Art education that is routed in a social justice agenda requires the visibility of oppression of groups of people that exist outside of the dominant culture. While people with dis/abilities have historically advocated for dis/ability rights through a civil rights lens, it is safe to say that ablest beliefs that continually exclude people with autism (and other dis/abilities) are hidden by the privilege of being able bodied and/or neurotypical. Visual and material cultures are both influenced by a person’s ability to encounter and interact with those elements that constitute these paradigms. For an adolescent with autism, infantilism as well as low access to technology and popular culture can reduce the opportunities for adolescents with autism to participate in these transformative models. Is this then the reason that there are no fixed programs for teaching people with autism? Or is it that each person with autism is a unique individual who has unique needs and interests. Certainly it might be both, but if we are to consider how the contemporary models of art education can become more inclusive then it is imperative to start with the latter, students with autism are just that, students first. Students with autism, as with any other student, should be taught within models of art education that are inclusive of the rich and diverse populations that inhabit the art classroom. Students with autism would be interacted with on an individual basis without grounding those strategies or interactions
in the label of autism and its characteristics, perhaps offering them an identity as artist, even a multiple identity, like those held by many art educators.

**Artistic Identities**

*Artist and teacher as multiple identities.* For art educators, the role as decision maker is further complicated by the existence in two social constructs: art and education. As art educators we must make decisions for and about art as well as to consider current educational theories and pedagogical practices. With this in mind, the approaches to teaching art could be described as either process based, material based or content based. Pearse (1983) postulates that the three orientations that derive from the history of philosophy can be applied to the recent approaches in education and more specifically art education. They include the Empirical-Analytic Orientation, the Interpretive-Hermeneutic Orientation and the Critical-Theoretic Orientation. Here, I will draw the connections between the three approaches to art education and the three orientations that Pearse describes.

**Empirical analytic: Technical knowing.** Pearse postulates that the empirical analytic orientation has long been the dominant approach to educational research and seeks to measure the ways that a person’s intellectual and technical control of the world. Knowledge is defined in the technical knowing of objects in one’s world. This idea can be seen in a process-based approach to art education where the goal may simply be replication not creation.

**Process based approach.** When focus is on the process it can alter the production and purpose of art making, especially for students with dis/abilities. In this approach, where process of art making over rides any other reasons for art making, art can be limited to a therapeutic approach. Art making becomes “arts and crafts” and serves as a
way to reframe the values of art education. These shifts toward a more therapeutic approach cannot be a solution for an inaccessible curriculum.

At times educators and those professionals working with students with dis/abilities can make decisions that alter the intention of the artist or art educator. When access to processes is denied or expectations are lowered for students with dis/abilities the opportunities in art can be negatively affected. Often these decisions are made for students with dis/abilities based on other people assumptions of the student’s purpose in the art classroom community (Causton-Theoharis & Burdick, 2008). These decisions can affect the type of curriculum taught and the materials offered.

**Materials based approach.** An integral part of the art curriculum is the use of art materials. When utilizing a materials-based approach the objective of art is focused upon the use of particular materials, such as pastel, acrylic paint or clay. This approach guides art making toward the “product” of art. The goal being to “know” the material and in turn understand the technical skills required when working with it.

When considering this approach in an inclusive art education it is important to consider the decisions made with regards to materials for students with disabilities. When materials are inappropriately replaced or altered it can have dramatic effects upon the artistic production of the artist. Thoughtful and appropriate substitution of materials however, can provide access to art making that would not have been possible otherwise. Student artists may voice their own desire for modifications or perceived need for support in the “mastery” of materials or processes. It is important to offer opportunities for this to occur and to help students, all students, and feel safe enough to seek support. It is sometimes appropriate to allow for natural peer support in a community of artists. In
Broer, Doyle & Giangreco’s (2005) study, adolescents who had paraprofessional support described their relief when support was appropriately withdrawn. This sentiment promotes the importance of planning for students to have opportunities to work collaboratively and in support of one another. These connections to one another become increasingly important in Pearse’s interpretive hermeneutic orientation.

**Interpretive-hermeneutic: Situational knowing.** Aoki (1978) describes this as the relating of man to his social world in a way that is reflexive and phenomenologically based. In this sense, the “communication” of art is what relates one to their social world. The interest here is in experientially meaningful, authentic inter-subjective understanding. Understanding is defined in terms of meanings people give to situations and experiences in their everyday lived world. This type of description harkens Barkan’s description of art as a mode of qualitative inquiry.

**Art as communicative.** Art has been described as a communicative cycle in which the artist draws upon two unusual gifts—a capacity for vivid personal experience of the world, and a capacity to express that experience through a particular artistic medium. A work of art is “a bit of ‘frozen’ potential communication” (C. Taylor, 1989) that can be received only through direct personal experience of it. Unlike most communication, which takes place through discourse, art communicates through felt experience, and it is the personal, subjective response to a work of art that imparts intrinsic benefits (McCarthy, 2004)

**Art as expression.** Currently, more inclusive practices and expanding definitions of literacy have allowed art to be seen as a mode of expression, particularly for students who fail to display the language required for successful participation in schooling (Siegel,
2006) as is common for students labeled with autism (Howlin, 2003). When considering art produced by students with disabilities the issue of communication can play a role in the way that the purpose of artistic production is understood. Blume (1997) proposed that, historically, others have spoken for people with autism including parents and professionals, which creates an image of people with autism as being unable to advocate for them self. Therefore it is important that the communicative value of art is understood and accessed to its fullest extent. A shift from mystical and mythical notions about art, such as authorship, subjectivity, genius and originality to recognizing the social value of art as a form of communication is characterized as part of the shift to postmodernism (Lovejoy, 1990). These changing perceptions of what constitutes art in a postmodern world and the social validation of works of art play heavily in to our concepts and constructs of community, inclusive or otherwise. These changing perceptions and shifts in paradigms can lead to the transformation of communities and artists.

The critical-theoretic orientation: Transformative knowing. This orientation can be described as the reflective element of art that relates one to themselves and their social world. Its fundamental interest is emancipation and improvements of the human condition by rendering transparent and tacit and hidden assumptions through transformation. Several scholars in art education have identified that need for art curriculum to be guided by standards but steeped in the belief in the transformative power of art and critical inquiry (Blandy & Congdon, 1987; Carroll, 2006; Efland, 1995, 2004; K. Freeman & Stuhr, 2004; Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002; Greene, 1991; Jagodziniski, 1997).
**Art as constructive.** Art teachers have sought to develop curriculum where students can arrive at their own knowledge, beliefs, and values for making personal and artistic decisions. The art curriculum has been identified as the pivotal link between theory and practice (Sullivan, 1989). In today’s over-constricted education system that often focuses on knowing the one right answer, students need guidance in reclaiming their capacities for conceptual, imaginative investigation of big questions. This inquiry, investigation and decision making process has long been integral to the artistic process. From deciding on material, technique, and subject matter to the ways that art is displayed, accessed and represented all play into the ways that are is read, and subsequently the way the artist can be read by others. Blandy (1994) predicted, “students with disabilities will no longer be content with themselves and their artwork being designated as ‘special’” (pg. 184). It is this malcontent with the traditional views of art education for people with dis/abilities that can help us begin to re-imagine dis/ability in art education.

**Re-imagining Inclusive Art Education**

**Art as equalizer.** There is a prevailing belief that the arts are “the great equalizer in education” (Gregoire & Lupinelli, 2005) and that the arts represented, unlike other disciplines, something that was assessable to all students regardless of native language, ability or dis/ability (Gregoire & Lupinelli, 2005). This belief reflects many cultural assumptions about art education including considerations of art as a “universal language” (Pappalardo, 1999), art making as “therapeutic” (Blandy, 1989; Eisenhauer, 2007) and that art is often positioned outside of the “content” areas in schools (Ohler, 2000) deemed a “special” subject in the same way that some students who do not conform to the perception of “normal” students are considered “special needs” or as requiring “special” education. Therefore some assumptions about the accessibility of art education are made
when art is viewed as existing outside of the content core, implying a different skill set than those used in core content areas are used in art, therefore implying students with disabilities can succeed in art because it is not really a class or subject. In the book *Exiting Nirvana* (2001) Clara Park describes the art classes taken by her daughter Jesse in middle and high school as “something she could take with normal children”. It is true that art education can be made accessible in the same way that any course or content can, through conscientious planning by teachers who are committed to both the physical accommodation of students with disabilities and to the creation of art making contexts that “discard those art education practices that are incongruent with the sociopolitical orientation” (Blandy, 1991). However it was shown in the previous section that Blandy’s recommendations might not have been actualized because when the most recent models of art education are examined critically we find that they are perhaps constructed in ways that are exclusive to some groups of people.

**Inclusivity in art education.** Inclusion in art education has mirrored trends in other areas of education. Ferri and Connor (2006) describe schools as “shaped by domoniant cultural forces, which define (a) which knowledge is represented in the curriculum and (b) which students gain access to which curriculum”. With that in mind, there is a small body of research that has examined the inclusivity of art education over the past century, with particular interest in the last twenty five years as federal legislation advanced inclusive education mandates that began with the passage of PL-142 (see Appendix B). Each of these researchers has made important contributions to the re-imagination of each aspect of inclusive art education. With the inclusion of students with dis/abilities in the art classroom, researchers examined the perceptions of teachers, administrators and other
professionals as they planned and implemented curriculum. Freeman (1998) explored how, with proper training, art teachers and special education teachers could implement expressive movement in art to act therapeutically for students with dis/abilities. Kaggen (1997) then looks at the artwork of artists with physical disabilities presented to the artworld outside of the therapeutic setting. Others (O'Sullivan, 2001; Waites, 1995) considered how art-making could represent an expression of intelligence for learning dis/abled students. As more and more students with dis/abilities entered the art classroom, research began to explore how specific teaching strategies could best support art-making by students with dis/abilities (Blandy, 1989, 1991; Guay, 1994). As legislative mandates continued to expand and therefore include more and more students, some researchers considered how these legislative mandates would impact the experiences of students with dis/abilities in the artroom from the student’s perspective (Kraft, 2001; D. L. Taylor, 1995). A common thread throughout the research on inclusion of students with dis/abilities in the artroom and general classroom is how inclusion impacts the social wellbeing of the student (Kinder & Harland, 2004; D. L. Taylor, 1995; Tsukada, 2007). Recently, the integration of technology into the arts and it’s implications for students experiencing dis/abilities (M. Taylor, 2005) has begun to consider ways to expand the participation of students who are experiencing more significant physical dis/abilities. Other low-tech supports have also been considered including adaptive devices (Zedarayko, 1999) and paraprofessional support in the art classroom (Causton-Theoharis & Burdick, 2008). In the past few years, specific attention has been paid to those students who are experiencing autism or are on the autistic spectrum (Kellman, 1999, 2001; Schleien, Mustonen, & Rynders, 1995; Schleien, Ryners, & Mustonen, 1988) presumably
in response to a more concentrated national attention to this disorder with particular interest in the phenomenon of the artistic savant with autism (Hou, et al., 2000; Pring, Hermelin, & Heavey, 1995; Sachs, 1995). In order to more fully re-imagine inclusive art education it is necessary to examine its components through a critical eye including art educators, curriculum and contexts of the current studies (Ashby, 2008; Mirenda, 2003; Rossetti, 2007) examine the perspectives of the student, especially those students whose dis/abilities who do not allow for more typical communication patterns that would be most common to qualitative research methodologies, such as interviews and narrative accounts. Some popular literature has emerged over the past five years that offers the perspectives of individuals with autism (Jackson, 2003; Robinson, 2007). None of the academic studies nor popular literature specifically addresses the experiences of adolescent artists with autism as they participate in art making. This research seeks to both provide the perspective of the students who are participants in this study and draw upon the rich descriptive narrative of the art they create. This perspective will address a gap in the literature on art education as it relates to individuals with autism with a critical perspective.

**Critical perspectives on inclusive art education.** Critical theory reflects on the tendency of educators to take for granted the “bias” they hold and how their practices reproduce and maintain them. Thus, critical theorists attempt to penetrate and expose social relationships based upon the dominance of one social group over another. Until now critical theory has had less of a direct impact upon art education than phenomenology and tacit learning. Vincent Lanier’s writings, decrying the tendency of art educators to impose elitist conceptions of art upon students, while ignoring popular, folk
art forms, come close to exemplifying his critique (Blandy, 1994; Efland, 2007). Blandy (1994) points a more direct finger at art educators regarding students with dis/abilities. Blandy takes a social reconstructive stance and advocates for art teachers to redefine their art program to include students with dis/abilities within the context of multicultural education. This call is just one more way that dis/ability can be re-imagined to be included in a cultural context and considered in ways that recognize and honor diversity. Fedorenko (1996) calls for art curriculum development focusing on multicultural content and the diversity of students’ abilities that includes methods that are accessible to all members of the student population. Each of these authors has contributed to a larger voice that calls for the re-imagination of inclusive art education. Art and art-making are an important frame for this study as I seek to consider the participants in a person first approach. Additionally, the participants’ commonality as adolescents became another powerful component within the scope of this study.

**Adolescence**

In a 1987 address, Caroll Gilligan put forth a call to reconsider the ways that adolescence is understood, interpreted and conditioned. She stated that the changing experience of childhood and the lack of consideration for the differences in experience for girls both require re-consideration by the field of psychology and subsequently education. More importantly, Gilligan says that the overriding value psychologists have placed upon independence, autonomy and separation do not accurately represent the conditions required for a democratic society in which individuals interact, collaborate and build relationships with others (Gilligan, 1987). These relationships rely heavily upon the individual and group identity formation that occurs throughout adolescence.
Identity Formation in Adolescence

**Individual identity.** Adolescence is a time of exploration, transition and change when the pieces begin to come together to make up one’s identity. Developing an individual identity typically involves an individual making conscious choices about the attributes and traits he or she incorporates into this identity (Molloy & Vasil, 2007). Some of the choices that go into the outward expression of identity include clothing choices, hairstyles, music, and popular culture consumption. Other outward identity markers such as race, class and gender all play a part in the ways that we are read by others. But other, less visible, makers also influence our identity. Particular gifts, talents or interests, learning styles, cognitive or neurological diversities can all inform the ways that we make meaning of our lives and selves. This identity development in one’s self can lead to the establishment of a group identity.

**Group identity.** In addition to these individual identities we tend to seek out a group identity or sense of belonging with something outside of ourselves. Ward and Meyer (1999) argued that some adults with autism or Asperger’s disorder have employed new technologies to frame a new identity that is different from the medical discourse of “disordered” and have moved toward the development of a cultural group understanding of the identity of a person with autism. In fact, Linton (1998a) argues that disability as a term, while routed in medical terms is best understood as an identity marker. I would argue this same claim could be made for teens as well. Most teens in today’s technologically driven world have some access to computers and other technologies. These technologies provide avenues and opportunities for teens with autism to create or access a coalition of people who share some or many of the characteristics and behaviors associated with autism. In fact, recent authors have highlighted the increasing use of
Internet technologies by people with autism as both a forum for self-advocacy and as a “safe” way of meeting other members of the “autistic community” (e.g., Blume, 1997). Within this cyber community, autism becomes a positive attribute that leads to a positive sense of belonging within the autistic community. However, many of these same people on these Internet sites discuss how this positive sensibility does not always translate to communities outside of the autistic community (see: http://isnt.autistics.org/; http://www.coultervideo.com/neurotypicalessay.htm; http://thiswayoflife.org/blog/) known as “neurotypical” communities. This is due to the social meanings that are constructed around particular identities.

Social overtures and identity. It is true that particular identities carry with them social overtures that can be either positive or negative (Hodson & Esses, 2002; Leary & Tagney, 2003; Williams, 2002). It is precisely these positive and negative overtures that create the “in” the “out” and the “other” that is the basis for identity formation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In this literature review I have identified how the medical model can create a negative sensibility about autism when it frames it within the deficit model. The social model that frames autism not as a deficit but a form of diversity counters this negative attitude. This duality or contradiction is not the only identity that experiences this dichotomy. The artistic identity is one that has shifted historically but has often been related to an elevated cultural status yet can carry lowered economic capital, illustrated in expressions like “the starving artists” or “con-artist”. For some, a person with artistic

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2 Neurotypical is a term evoked by people with autism and autistic spectrum disorder to describe those people who do not share this label or are without neurological and cognitive disorders. While originally coined among the autistic community as a label for non-autistic persons, the concept was later adopted by both the neurodiversity movement and the scientific community (Sinclair, 2007).
ability and gifts is an enviable identity. However this identity can be supported or
eclipsed by an additional dis/ability identity. These kinds of intersections, complication
and conflations become important in the lives of adolescent artists with autism who are
seeking individual identities of artist and a sense of group identity.

**Social Identities, Bodily Identities, & Multiple Identities**

**Social identity.** Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) states a person has
not one, “personal self”, but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of
group membership and are comprised of four fundamental elements: categorization,
identification, comparison and psychological distinction. Within these four elements an
individual considers the ways that they are similar to or differ from those around them.
When these similarities and differences are identified, the individual may identify with
the group that is most similar, which in turn accentuates difference from the outer-group.
For a person with autism, categorization may come from both external systems (i.e.
special education label, families) and internal systems (self awareness, isolation). In the
comparison component the individual considers how membership to the in-group may
offer positive feelings of belonging. These positive feelings constitute the psychological
distinction that typically provides individuals with a positive self-esteem, sense of
membership and belonging. Group identities can revolve around any attribute or
characteristic. For example, there are several categories that provide a group identity for
some artists with dis/abilities like autism. As early as 1948 the group of artists known as
*art brut* or “raw art” was coined by French artists Jean Dubuffet. This terms was used to
describe art that was, as Dubuffet described, “Art not meant to lie in the beds you create
for it” (Dubuffet, 1992). Simply put it is art created by individuals who create artworks
outside of the fine art tradition, often without formal training, simply creating art in its
most raw form, art that operates within its own realm of creativity and expression. More recently there are “Outsider Artists”, “Intuitive Artists”, and “Naïve Artists” each of which describe artists who have either not had formal training in the arts and/or have little interaction with mainstream society and the artworld. In 2008 a non-profit organization named, “The Society of Artists for Autism” was formed. This organization, comprised of artists and advocates who are committed to creating healthy, inclusive, creative spaces within communities is one of many organizations who claim the an autistic identity that is comprised within a cognitive diversity model. Members of this organization celebrate the principles of neurodiversity\(^4\) and believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to grow and thrive as a member of their local communities regardless of the way they process the world. Groups such as this one call upon elements of bodily identity that rely upon dis/ability.

**Bodily identity.** Bodily identity refers to those attributes and traits that are embodied within the physical self. Within an essentialist perspective, identity is contained within and written upon the body (Butler, 1990; Mairs, 1996). This was seen as an undesirable view within the postmodern construction that sought to consider bodily identities as constructed and performed. Within disability studies, ongoing debate considers how agency of bodily identities shapes the meaning of dis/ability with relationship to bodily identity (Davis, 2006) attempting to recognize the living with dis/ability within the construction and performance of dis/ability. For adolescents with autism the claiming of a bodily identity that includes autism or ASD (autism spectrum

\(^4\)Neurodiversity describes features of neurological difference associated with individual or community identity that is a more or less elective choice of those experiencing neurological difference (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2006).
disorder) requires them to consider both the validity of their label, the categorization of this label as dis/ability and the attributes of self in relation to the label (Molloy & Vasil, 2007). These questions in conjunction with the decision to disclose and the impact that such disclosure (or non-disclosure) will have upon their experience all play into the bodily identity of claiming and/or performance of autism (Nadeson, 2005). In research (Daley & Wlsner, 2008) the unwillingness of students to identify as disabled was very evident. In this study, children easily identified the social barrier that they experienced and were often open in complaining about the treatment that they received. Rather, many of these individuals wanted to be seen as “normal, though different”, and actively resisted the definition as “disabled” (Watson, et al., 2000). The social model has not successfully negotiated the reconciling the dimensions of gender or race (for example) alongside dis/ability (Morris, 1991; Vernon, 1996). Shakespeare (1996) sees the identity politics of the dis/ability movement as one of its fundamental failings, citing there are too many variations among those who are dis/abled. Shakespeare furthers his argument by highlighting the occasional disconnect between a person who experiences impairment and a person who claims a dis/ability identity. This tension between the claiming of dis/ability as an identity and a resistance of dis/ability as eclipsing other identities is one that is continually debated in the feminist dis/ability literature (Garland-Thompson, 2002; Linton, 1998b; Wendell, 1996). A question remains whether a bodily identity is privileged within multiple identities.

**Multiple identities.** Identity construction is not an exclusive act. That is to say that it would be rare for a person to claim one singular identity. Rather, we may privilege or perform one identity over another based upon the context in which we are within.
Privileging of identity however requires agency, for privileging of identities is a direct result of the stereotyping of some identities. For example, popular media representations of people with autism such as *Rain Man* (B. Levinson, 1988) might be considered to have a substantial other-ing effect upon someone who shared the label of autism with the character portrayed in this film. This perhaps undesired other-ing of oneself may influence an individual to “pass”\(^5\). Multiple identities, while offering individuals opportunities for multiple group identities based upon these multiple (self) identities can at times produce conflicting identities, or identities that are, at the very least in flux (Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady, 1999; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). The conflation and contradiction of multiple identities is amplified during adolescence, a period of development that is marked by transition and change.

**Change and Transition**

**Change.** Biological, cognitive, academic and social changes are hallmarks of the transition from child to young adulthood. In the same ways that multiple identities can complicate the experiences of people the complexities of autism are deepened with the onset of adolescence and its period of change and transition. The many biological and emotional changes that are part of the typical adolescent experience can be further affected when an individual may not have the social support system or language ability to navigate this new and unknown territory. These issues can be further influenced by early maturation, late maturation or general awkwardness of motor skill, all of which can all

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\(^5\) Passing is a term evoked in dis/ability studies (Siebers, 2008) to describe the ways in which people with dis/abilities attempt to appear as “normal” (Davis, 2006) as possible in order to minimize the impact of identifying as a person with a disability. Passing is a complex situation more commonly addressed via the parallel terms ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ disabilities. Autism uniquely bridges these two concepts in that it does not typically possess obvious bodily markers that can at times render it ‘invisible’, only when contexts reveal cognitive and behavioral diversities does it become more ‘visible’.
impact the experience of adolescence for any teen. With these biological changes come developing ideas relating to gender, sexuality and physical relationships. Some authors have attempted to address this sometimes-taboo topic (e.g. Jerry and Mary Newport; Wendy Lawson, Lynn Moxon). These biological, cognitive and social developments typical in adolescence ultimately work toward the building of relationships with others. They are important issues for all adolescence but are “not experienced in the same way as neurotypical adolescents” (Lawson, 2000). These issues can directly impact the ways and kinds of transition and relationships experienced by adolescents with autism.

**Transition.** Transitions in adolescence can be both external and internal. For example, when transitioning to middle and high school additional considerations are necessary with regards to the amount of change in all aspects of the school environment from the elementary school. Often, changes in social and academic demands, physical changes, changes in social development and classroom environment, including sensory stimuli (e.g. noise, tactile and scents) can be unsettling and may create excessive stress and anxiety for the person with autism, as it can for any one (Myles & Simpson, 2001). Additionally transitions can occur with the relationships in the lives of adolescents with autism. Relationships with peers can move from plutonic to romantic, relationship with family members can shift from dependent to independent and relationships with schools and academics can transition from participatory to vocational. Each of these relationships plays an important part in the larger role of construction of self.

**Relationships**

As expectations, academic and social environments change for adolescents, the ways that teens relate to parent or authority figures, the importance of peers, acceptance, intimacy and belonging (Resnick, et al., 1997) also change. These kinds of transitions can
bring on feelings of uneasiness or even fear for some (Sicile-Kira & Grandin, 2006). Questions as to future vocational, living and loving experiences can make some adolescents, especially those with communicative and social challenges, worry (Al-Ghani & Keward, 2009). These feelings of anxiety may manifest themselves in many different ways causing some teens to act out behaviorally, exhibit self-injurious or isolating behaviors. Shifts in the kinds of relationships that adolescents typically have can lead to increased desires for independence and expectations of autonomy, resulting in strain in the parental relationship dynamic.

**Relationships with parents.** One way that adolescents typically seek independence from their parents is in acts of self-determination. Ironically, the relationship with a parent can play an important role in the development of self-determination and self-advocacy skills through modeling of behavior (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008; Bronlow, 2010). Parents can provide important examples for advocacy and choice making that is essential for decision-making that accompanies a more independent existence outside of the home. Additionally, parents sometimes find themselves playing the role of a “social coach” to their adolescent with autism (Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil, & Dillon, 2008) orchestrating social encounters and supporting their teen as they participate in these encounters. As with typical teens, parents may experience separation anxiety as their teen begins to shift their focus away from the parent (Hock, Eberly, Bartle-Haring, Ellwanger, & Widaman, 2001). This feeling may be compounded in parents of teens with dis/abilities as they ponder the increased effect of social situations. Another heartbreaking reality for parents is that they, as parents, may not be the connoisseurs of cool that their teens are looking for. Teens
with autism have desires to be a “cool guy” just like many other members of the adolescent population (Burke, 2005; Jackson, 2003).

There is one way in which the parental role of a parent of a child with autism may differ significantly from that of the parent of a teen who is not labeled with autism and that relates to the expectation of involvement in services, supports and therapies related directly to autism. The notion that parents of children with ASD should be involved in their treatment, and that this involvement should come at an early age, is not a new one (Lovaas, Koegel, Simmons, & Long, 1973). There is, however, mounting evidence that the stress of this role on both parent and teen, coupled with the significant shift in dynamics outweighs therapeutic benefits for either. In the film, Including Samuel (Habib, 2009) Rachel Habib is the mother of a young boy with cerebral palsy. In the film she addresses this idea stating, “There came a time when I began to feel more like Samuel’s therapist than his mother, and I was not all right with that”. Here she refers to the common expectation for people with dis/abilities that everything becomes about “outcomes”. There is rarely a time when life is about the act of living, and becomes about progress toward a “goal”. The emphasis in special education today is upon the attainment of outcomes (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Park, 2003). This emphasis carries to the parent in efforts to increase the connection between school and home. Critics of this emphasis look instead to place emphasis upon the quality of life aspects of I.D.E.A. as it pertains to full participation and equality of opportunity in lieu of such strict emphasis upon academic goals.

Lastly, relationships with parents during adolescence are directly impacted by the communication between parent and teen. Communication patterns could be inhibited in
teens with autism (Boushey, 2007) whom may not possess the typical language patterns that might address concerns in adolescence like sexuality, friendship and belonging. Additionally, it is considered “typical” for a teen to decrease the amount of communication with parent(s) as they instead look toward friends and peers as guiding forces in decision-making (Collins & Larursen, 2004).

**Relationships with peers.** One of the most talked about aspects of behaviors associated with Autism is the perceived lack of social competence. Social competence refers to the ability of one to forge close emotionally based relationships, hold meaningful friendships, participate in group and social activities and engage in family life. Some studies have found that adolescents with autism and Asperger’s Syndrome Disorder have poor quality friendships that fail to provide feelings of security or companionship that can offset feelings of loneliness (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). Social competence, in particular the experience sharing relationships aspect of social competence is the basis for meaningful friendship among peers. The adolescent literature clearly views adolescence as a time when the importance of the relationship with the parent, shifts to a focus upon relationships with peers (Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1982; Sabatellim, Anderson, & 1991; Zimmero-Gembeck & Collins, 2003). The specific challenges of certain characteristics of autism as it relates to peer interaction might inhibit both opportunities for initiation of friendships and the deepening of those friendships that may be expected during adolescence based upon a more reciprocal relationship among peers.

However, research shows that many adolescents with autism participate in community based programs (e.g. educational, therapeutic, vocational, etc.) that help to
provide a context and opportunity for formation of friendships that exist outside of the family and orchestration by parents or other family members (Orsmond, Wyngaarden, & Seltzer, 2008). This is conjunction with more inclusive educational practices can both provide increased opportunity for the formation of friendships in a setting independent of the family or home structure.

**Independence**

The adolescent with a dis/ability must be allowed to develop independence and an identity as an individual in an atmosphere that, although mindful of risk, assists and promotes change and growth (Dickman, 1989). Although the words autonomy and independence are often used interchangeably, in the study of adolescence they mean slightly different things. Independence as a cultural construct has specific meaning and significance within American culture, in particular for people with disabilities.

**Independence in America.** Ideas about independence and dependence have been central to several paradigms of dis/ability including the economic, medical, social and professional (Goble, 2004). These ideas are woven into the larger concept of normalcy and support the structure of an industrialized society (Oliver, 1993). Within the professional model, independence is a term that is often included among goals or outcomes of educational documents. In the economic model, economic independence and self-sustainment is sited as a goal within the I.D.E.A. legislation. The medical model calls for independence as a weaning from medical services and supports while the social model looks for independence to stem not from the individual but from the removal of the barriers inherent in society. Another important distinction within the social model of dis/ability and ideas of independence is that it should not be a sole requirement for citizenship (Goble, 2004). Instead, the social model resists requirements of independence
and it is problematized through an individualistic model and offers acceptance of
tolerance for support and services as dependence that supports independence (Morris,
1998). Independence for a teen with autism may conjure ideas of “freedom” from
sometimes constraining external rule systems (e.g. parents, schools, teachers). For
parents, independence may also encompass a sense of freedom from care-giving duties
and everyday life management that typically are taken over by children as they mature.
For other parents, independence represents a relief from worry about care-giving,
economic sustainability and development of support systems outside of the family, a
topic identified as a source of stress and worry (Krauss, Leiter, Anderson, & Wells,
2004). Independence generally refers to teens’ capacity to behave on his or her own. The
growth of independence is surely a part of becoming autonomous during adolescence, but
autonomy means more than behaving independently. It also means thinking, feeling, and
making moral decisions that are truly one’s own, rather than following along with what
others believe.

**Autonomy.** Ironically the idea of autonomy is in direct opposition to the role of
conformity in adolescence as it relates to self and social development. Therefore,
independence is an expression of autonomy rather than a reflection of the relationship
with parents or families (Lerner, Lerner, & Finkelstein, 2001). Youth with autism, whose
approach to thinking is different and who find communication challenging (Grandin,
1992; Janzen, 1996), may have difficulty understanding the concepts of life planning and
self-determination in the same manner as people without autism. When individuals are
empowered to contribute as fully as possible to their life planning through choice making,
accessing supports and services that support their interests and goals and fully
participating in their daily experiences these acts help to build the foundation for their identity formation and growth of self.

Adolescence as Time of Growth

At its core, adolescence is a time of growth and development, both physically and psychosocially. For teens with autism, as for any teen, this means a negotiation between the internal self and world in which it operates. The challenges for adolescents with autism are not different than their neurotypical peers, but can certainly be deepened, complicated or conflated by the ways that autism influences the areas addressed above: relationships, independence, and development. Therefore, adolescence should be a time of careful consideration and meaningful support for any young person, including those with autism. Participation in the visual arts and art making is one way that support and consideration can be given to the adolescent with autism while supporting artistic development and growth.

Artistic Growth in Adolescence

The review of this literature has shown that art and art-making have importance in the lives of people, including adolescents. It can be a vehicle of communication, a mode of expression and a way of being in the world. Art communicates visually what words do inadequately. Art can affirm our faith and challenge our beliefs. Art invites us to consider things in new ways, take another’s perspective. It can become an even more important part of being in the world when you have a dis/ability.

Art has the ability to transform our world and can change the way we look at the world and the way the world looks at us. The stories of art create histories and provide insight into worlds that are not our own. Art is important in its power to empower. Although some adolescents with autism may not possess typical ways of interacting and
communicating with the world around them, art can make a difference. Art offers opportunities to demonstrate literacy, competency and ways to participate with and in the world. This is why the issues of access to and participation in art education are so critical for adolescent artists with autism.

Additionally, this literature review illustrates that the experiences of adolescent artists with autism have not been adequately described, and certainly not in their own voices. There have been many related studies that have examined such topics as the perceptions and perspectives of art teachers as they encounter and teach students with dis/abilities in the art classroom (Guay, 1994). A commonality in each of these studies was the finding that art teachers felt ill prepared to teach students with dis/abilities. This was due to a lack of personal experience with people with dis/abilities and a perceived lack of training in teacher preparation programs and pre-service teaching. In response to these findings, others studies have attempted to provide philosophical standpoints for inclusive art education (Blandy, 1994) that have offered curricular and theoretical basis for imagining an inclusive art education setting that would recognize and support the imaginative and expressive capabilities of students with learning dis/abilities. Allison’s (2008) qualitative action research study examines how critical theory defined and guided her practice as an art teacher educator while she provided inclusion training for seven pre-service art teachers during their student teaching. Allison’s recommendations include honoring narratives, articulating a broader notion of inclusion, and using context-specific instructional tools while pre-service teachers are completing fieldwork with students with dis/abilities. These changes in the ways that art teachers are prepared and the philosophical changes that are necessary to carry out inclusive education mandates are
just some of the ways that students with dis/abilities are made to belong in inclusive art classrooms. An attempt to both honor and support the artistic expression of students who are not considered typical was further explored by O’Sullivan (2001) where he examined the ways that art teachers considered artistic expression to be a representation of intelligence for students with learning dis/abilities. The willingness of some teachers to expand the more expected notions of intelligence to include art making begins the conversation about how art and literacy may be connected. In a study by Peterson (2002) it was hypothesized that art integrated with reading instruction would increase the self-esteem of a female adolescent with a learning dis/ability. This study found that this subject was able to adapt art activities and skills to increase reading abilities. Others have examined the coexistence of learning dis/abilities such as dyslexia and artistic talent. Daniels (1996) examined the coexistence of dyslexia and artistic talent through the case studies of two living artists. These successful artists reached a level of achievement of international renown that occurred concurrently with lifelong issues of dyslexia. Another study (Albertson, 2001) also examined the successful art careers of 6 living artists who identify themselves as having dyslexia. In this study, Albertson discusses how the experiences of these artists, in both their artistic success and school failure can enlighten the teaching practices and attitudes for those working with students with dyslexia. Albertson suggest that the beliefs and practices that would support artists with dyslexia would support all students. This more universal approach to teaching reflects a more holistic approach to art education (Galindo, 2002) reveals that art’s role is subordinate to yet integrated with the primary goal of empowering the child through art-making practices. Consequently, art does not have an autonomous formal identity but an organic
social function of fostering self-directed creative exploration and social inclusiveness. These transformative properties of art as described in these studies underscore the importance of opportunities for art-making for all students. These kinds of opportunities require educators with a commitment to the policies and practices that enable inclusive art education to happen. In a study by Kraft (2001) she examined the ways that the language of educational policy with regards to students with dis/abilities was translated by art educators, the art learners with dis/abilities and the art classroom itself (e.g. art learners without disabilities). Kraft identifies barriers to the practice of inclusive art education in spite of compliance with the letter of the law. These barriers included the class's exercise of an inclusion-defined-as-proximity paradigm (especially regarding the student experiencing severe disabilities). Additionally, and in support of previous findings, teachers have inadequate resources for teaching students with dis/abilities because they lack adequate opportunity for collaboration between the special and art educators in developing successful inclusion strategies. Fedorenko (1996) further exemplifies the importance of collaboration with her findings for the importance of collaboration between special educators and art educators but also partnerships between universities and schools. When an inclusive education model is based only on proximity and not on belonging, or stakeholders are not provided adequate time for planning and collaboration, the active participation and involvement of all stakeholders in the art classroom community is compromised. This also can affect the ways that teachers and non-dis/abled peers viewed students with dis/abilities and their artistic abilities. Taylor (1995) describes a classroom where the philosophical standpoint on inclusion carries over to the other stakeholders in the class, thereby creating a classroom community where
ability is defined as simply “being able to do something” and tolerance, respect and interaction all become essential to the inclusive classroom. In particular, the artistic abilities of students with autism has recently been examined by Koo (2008), Furniss (2008), Weed (2005) and (Morrell, 2006). Each of these studies looked specifically at the artistic practice of people with autism. Furniss (2008) examined the early work of Jessica Park, a now adult woman with autism identified as an artistic savant. This study demonstrates that the early art-making of Jessica represents her unique thoughts, feelings, life experiences, and ways of understanding her world at large, which are significantly different from those of a typically developing child artist. In a study by Powers (2006) a narrative case study investigates and discusses the use of a behavioral approach to developmental art therapy as a therapeutic approach for a young child with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In a narrative study by Weed (2005), she considers what made the artwork of her young participant, and the work of other young artists “special”. Weed concludes that what was special about his work was that he had drawn upon something important in his life and transformed the experiences of thinking and learning and playing into art that conveyed his interest and ideas to others. Koo (2008) reexamined the creative artistic ability of children with autism by investigating the character of the expressive content in their art. Koo identifies the limited research on the role of artistic expression for children with autism; and that educational administrators, art teachers, and parents lack information and resources for encouraging creative art activities for children with autism.
Autism

Autism and the Medical Model of Disability

**Autism defined.** Autism is defined in section 299.00 of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-TR (Association, 2004) as “delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of the following areas, with onset prior to age 3 years: (a) social interaction, (b) language as used in social communication, or (c) symbolic or imaginative play.” The specific diagnostic measurement involves a complex matrix of observable behaviors in specific combination. This diagnostic tool is used to identify a broad definition of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) that include related disabilities such as Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder, Rett’s Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD) and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PPD-NOS).

**Incidence of autism.** The incidence of autism is rising. In the US Department of Education’s 2005 annual report, an increase in the number of students labeled with autism was noted, and it was increasing at a rate greater than the increase of students within the thirteen general categories of disability as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004). The number of students with autism in K-12 education increased 19.8% as compared to the 2.8% increase in the twelve general I.D.E.A. categories. The identification of individuals on the autistic spectrum is based on the medical model of disability and has been the prevailing model for many years.

**The medical model.** The medical model (MMD) (Brisendon, 1986) holds that disability results from an individual person’s physical or mental limitations, and is largely unconnected to the social or geographical environments. The MMD places the source of the problem within a single impaired person, and concludes that solutions are found by
focusing on the individual by pathologizing difference and understanding in terms of deficits. This model imposes a paternalistic approach to problem solving, which, although well intentioned, concentrates on "care" and ultimately provides justification for institutionalization and segregation. It is likely that the MMD still holds a substantial influence upon the ways that societies, schools and individuals think about dis/ability. Most recently the socio-political model (social model) of dis/ability has challenged the medical model (Blandy, 1994).

The Social Model of Dis/ability and Artism

The social model. The social model of dis/ability (Oliver, 1996) offers an alternate way of framing dis/ability. It is not a fixed or unchangeable set of ideas, considering dis/ability not in terms of suffering, tragedy and pity but instead as another way of experiencing the world, a way that can be celebrated, embraced and revered. Like other paradigms it is not without its critiques or dissentions. For instance, there are those who root the disabling and oppressing aspects of dis/ability within the capitalist framework, thus creating an emphasis upon the political standpoint of dis/ability as it exists in the economic realm. Others rely upon a feminist perspective (Garland-Thompson, 2002; Wendell, 1989) that emphasize the psychosocial elements of dis/ability and consider how the socially constructed barriers create limitations within ourselves as to who and what we are. Finally, influenced by postmodernism are others who warn that an essentialist perspective on dis/ability cannot possibly capture the diversity of the global dis/ability perspective. In this perspective, dis/ability cannot be separated from other forms of inequality such as gender, race and class. In this theoretical framework there is a call (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002) for a new “toolbox” that will not sacrifice the radical edge that has shaped the social model of dis/ability and will be both valid and
accessible in its attempt to adequately embody dis/ability. What each of these models does share however is a resistance to the medical model of disability by rejecting a purely deficit, sympathetic or pitying response to dis/ability. It is important to distinguish that the social model of dis/ability in its resistance to the medical model of disability does not deny the significance of impairment related concerns, appropriate medical intervention or significance of culture (Barnes, Oliver, & Barton, 2002) but attempts to

“…politicize disability in order to provide a clear and unambiguous focus on the real and multiple deprivations that are asserted upon people whose biological conditions are deemed socially unacceptable in order to ring about radical structural and cultural change” (Barnes, 2003b).

The social model of dis/ability (SMD) views dis/ability as a consequence of environmental, social and attitudinal barriers that prevent people with impairments from maximum participation in society. It rejects the “personal tragedy” view of dis/ability (Oliver, 1990) in favor of a more emancipatory construct of dis/ability. “While environmental barriers and social attitudes are a crucial part of our experience of dis/ability- and do indeed disable us- to suggest that this is all there is, is to deny the personal experience of physical and intellectual restrictions, of illness, of the fear of dying” (Oliver, 1990). One example of this type of resistance can be seen in this excerpt from online dis/ability blogger Joel Smith, who identifies himself as a person with autism and an advocate for the autistic experience,

“It’s not the ‘OH MY GOD, I AM SO BROKEN AND LIFE SUCKS AND I WANT TO BE NORMAL BECAUSE EVERYTHING WOULD BE
WONDERFUL AND I WOULD HAVE LOTS OF MONEY AND A GIRLFRIEND AND A NICE CAR’ view of disability.”

(http://thiswayoflife.org/blog/?cat=0)

Smith’s views as expressed here are a clear response to what he views as the popular view of dis/ability and clearly states his own perspective on what dis/ability has meant in his life. The focus upon the social view of dis/ability is an important component of the social model of dis/ability that deals directly with the civil rights of an individual with a dis/ability.

The SMD philosophy is rooted in the US Civil Rights movement. Barnes (2002) states that the “social model of dis/ability, transformed disability from medical fact into an outcome of relations of power.” As such, some dis/abled people were now able to identify their own areas of oppression. Agreeing with this, Thomas (2004) states that to disabled people, the SMD transformed their lives, allowing a self-vision away from the oppressed ideas, it increased the self-worth of a disabled person, and gave all disabled people a self-identity and shared political fight. It is this very idea that empowers artist Donna Williams to coin the term “artism.”

Artism. Artism is a term coined by Donna Williams, an adult woman artist with autism. She defines the term in the quote found on her website below:

My use of the word 'ARTism' came from my description of the relationship between autism and art and I've been using the term since 2000. There's an interaction between autism and artism on so many levels. I believe the artistic personality may occur commonly in people with Autism, particularly those with a constant pattern of mood extremes and who are constantly fixated with...
lines, structures, colors, textures, patterns and spend their time fixated on the different variations of flicked water, sound rhythm patterns, the ways light catches color, or the multitude of varieties in which a leaf shreds, how sand falls in constantly changing patterns, or how grasses can be made into mini bouquets. (http://www.donnawilliams.net/artist.0.html)

Williams’ idea about the way that her “autism” interfaces with her artistic identity and self is an example of the many ways that dis/ability can be re-imagined. In a video posted on YouTube, a public web video forum, Williams shows us a visual example of this transition in her experience and way of thinking (see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekW3IfEMf9w). In this video Williams juxtaposes seemingly ‘normal’ pictures of her throughout childhood with paintings she has created in her adult life that describe her experiences as an adult woman with autism. The photographs from her childhood look as if they could be of any young girl. The images of her artwork created as an adult often depict a solitary figure, with saddened expressions and sorrow filled blue hues crouching in the corner of the frame. It is important that Williams posts both her work and her philosophies on the Internet, potentially providing access for many individuals that she may not typically have opportunity to interact with. In addition to her website, Williams regularly posts videos on YouTube.

YouTube is what is defined as a “User Generated Content” with millions of video producers and consumers (Meeyoung, Haewoon, Rodriguez, Yong-Yeol, & Sue, 2007). Recently research has examined the ways that YouTube has served as a source of medical information for parents and families (Keelan, Pavri-Garcia, Tomlinson, & Wilson, 2007). Other researchers have considered how YouTube plays a role in literacy development
(Hartley, 2008) and social networking (Lange, 2007). YouTube in particular has provided artists with dis/abilities, families and others the ability to share information about their work, their lives and experiences with others. With just a quick search, hundreds of videos appear with stories of and from other artists with autism. The search mechanism on YouTube allows the user to type in key words, much like other search engines (i.e. Google). In my search I used “savant”, “autism” and “artist”. These key words, chosen by me, are tagged (attached) to all kinds of videos. They can usually be found in the text descriptions of the videos, but I cannot be certain who puts those words there. There are videos from a variety of creators, those posted by parents of children with autism, by adults with autism, by artists and researchers. The intended audience of YouTube is certainly the public, but it is privileged by access to technology and the Internet. In this way, YouTube provides an avenue of agency for artists with dis/abilities by providing a platform where personal content or representation can be uploaded. This content can then be targeted to particular viewers with keywords, titles and descriptors. With this, aesthetic values, cultural forms and creative techniques are normalized via the collective activities and judgment of the social network “forming an informal and emergent art world specific to YouTube” (Burgess & Green, 2008). It is precisely this artworld that artists with autism like Stephen Wiltshire and Donna Williams among others have accessed.

For Williams, it is clear in her YouTube vlogs⁶ that she has claimed an integrated identity of artist and autistic with her coined “ARTism”, but is this true for

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⁶ Vlog is the term applied to the combined approach of videography and blogging. These video posts differ from traditional blogs in that they incorporate videos. Vlogs differ from straight video posts in their nature of communication, meaning they may incorporate
others? I saw this as an important question that related to identity formation and ascribed identities of the participants in my study. A significant factor in the history of people with dis/abilities has involved them being the recipients of policies and practices legitimating models that exoticize, oppress or pity people (Barton, 1996). Often these responses are based upon stereotypes, myths and misconceptions about people with autism.

**Myths and Misconceptions**

**Savantism.** The idea of savant-ism (Snyder & Mitchell, 1999) and artistic giftedness for people with autism (Happe & Frith, 2009) are important as they relate to the many myths of and around autism. The myth that all people with autism are savants was popularized in the 1988 film “Rain Man,” (Levinson, 1988) and is still held by many. According to Treffert (2009) about half of persons with savant syndrome have autistic disorder, while the other half have another developmental dis/ability, mental retardation, brain injury or disease. He says, “... not all autistic persons have savant syndrome and not all persons with savant syndrome have autistic disorder”. Donna Williams, a person with autism refutes this statistic saying,

Savant skills generally occur in around 1% of folks with autism and many of these same people are considered 'mentally retarded' or otherwise unable to show or express their functional skills. Around the same percentage of folks with Asperger’s Syndrome are also thought to have Savant skills. So that still leaves 99% of each group who don't. In other words, whilst very interesting, it's not common. Nor are Savant skills specific to folks on the autistic spectrum. Savants are found in all kinds of ‘disability’ groups, including those with the loss of sight or hearing, those...
with acquired brain injury, some people with bipolar or mental health conditions and I would say that if severe Cerebral Palsy didn't so often severely effect motor ability to the degree that expression can be very severely impaired, we'd likely find a fair share of Savants in that population too. Let's not forget that there are some so called Neurotypical's with Savant skills too.

Research that relies upon the misconception of savantism as an automoatic compoenent of autism attempts to attribute the artistic giftedness of a person with autism to their autism rather than considering that talent in art may be simply an aspect of their self. Stuart Murray (2008) in his book *Representing Autism* describes the public’s “facination” with the subject of autism and how the “figure of the autistic savant is presented as the normative mode of autistic subjectivity”. Other researchers state that although autistic traits and savant skills may be linked, they challenge some earlier conclusions about savant syndrome as “hearsay, uncorroborated by independent scrutiny” (McMullen, 1991). This resistance to the misconception that all people with autism are artistic savant is furthered by Lorna Wing (1996) who writes of “the gifted artists with autistic disorders” who are of course gifted artists first, and people with autism second. The term “Savant” dangerously implies support of a dis/ability narrative that assumes a person with autism would be unexpected to possess talents, in art or any other cognitive area (Baird G, et al., 2000; Kielenin, Linna, & Moilanen, 2000). Or it may encourage a perception of talent existing only within the savant syndrome, rather than in any other realm of their personhood. Instead some artists with autism, like Williams and Bissonnette, ask us to consider autism as interfacing with artistic behaviors that are already present. When questioned about what he would want people to know about him, Bissonnette responds
with “only when work that I spend my time on is seen as personally motivated and not derived from autism will I be satisfied” (Klar-Wolfond, 2006). Clara Parks speaks about her daughter’s work and the interface of autism and art making in this way:

Her art is autistic in other ways too. Autistic literalism has its visual equivalent; Jessy’s eye acts like a camera….No shading. No nuance. Like her speech…There is no shading in the way Jessy apprehends the world. Nuance means shading. Call it a metaphor or her autism, or more than a metaphor…. But if Jessy’s painting bespeaks her handicap, it is a handicap not surmounted but transmuted into something rich and strange… Here is autism in its core characteristics, literal, repetitive obsessively exact- yet beautiful. In her paintings reality has been transfigured… Would she have been a painter-or a mathematician- if she had not been autistic? Who can say how heredity and environmet and disability come together? (pg. 130-131)

In this description Parks comparison of the qualities of her daughter’s art with the qualities of her autism ends with an invitation for a consideration of causality. Carrying this idea even further again, I offer the words of artist Larry Bisonnette as he described how he hopes that his art will make people “want to listen to his artistic voice rather than his autistic voice”. The important distinction between Parks and Bisonnette here is to acknowledge the difference between first person narrative and outsider understanding. Often-times medical based research and public lore about autism does not rely upon first person experience or narrative and instead relies upon what Biklen (2006) describes as an outside perspective that can “never definitively know what the other person experiences or understands” (pg. 46). Here the direct reflections of artist’s with autism seem to refute
the common misconception about savantism and autism. Following this common misconception comes the myth that people with autism do not possess theory of mind.

**Theory of mind.** One of the most recurring descriptions of autism is that people with autism lack a “theory of mind,” that they have a limited understanding of the emotions of “neurotypical” people (those who do not have the label of autism) and that they have no ability to understand thoughts outside their own (Sodian & Frith, 1994). These assumptions and perceptions are often based on a desire to project our understanding and pre-conceptions of how the mind should function on people with autism, and when we don't see those manifested we assume that there is nothing, or very little, going on in those minds (Lerman, 2005). However, measuring “theory of mind” usually privileges typical communication (i.e. oral speech) and can exclude entire groups of people such as those with autism. In deed the tests used to measure the presence of or lack of theory of mind may not accurately measure the abilities of persons who lack typical literacy practices and ways of thinking (Happe, 1999). One possible solution to the exclusion of such groups of people is to utilize measures that rely upon non-verbal paradigms, thereby making the instrument more accessible to people with autism that may not possess more typical communication patterns. This method of measurement expands the ways that people with autism might push against the assumed mindblindness or lack of theory of mind.

The theory of mind is clearly contradicted in works like that of Dr. Douglas Biklen’s *Autism and the Myth of the Person Alone* (2005). In this book, Biklen offers a presentation of the voices of autistic persons speaking not only for but also as themselves. In other words, they communicate their stories directly with communication support such
as facilitated communication\textsuperscript{7} to describe their life as they experience them with autism. This book offers examples of writers, artists, and “regular folk” who like more well known artist’s Donna Williams, Larry Bissonnette, and researcher Temple Grandin who, as adults with autism, have begun to describe their own experiences with autism using narrative. First person narratives such as these are foundational in the field of dis/ability studies, as the field seeks to provide socio-political-cultural examination of dis/ability from the perspective of the person with the dis/ability, not the non-disabled ‘other’ (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). Narratives like these challenge the prevailing perceptions of pity (L. P. Ware, 2001), impairment (Hughes & Patterson, 1997) and non-citizenship (Kliwer, Fitzgerald, Meyer-Mork, & Hartman, 2004) that dominate some conversations about people with autism, allowing us ways to think about how we can re-imagine dis/ability. They directly reject the “theory of mind” by sharing experiences of relationship, interaction, and connection with others. They describe the following of intuition when painting and the narration of experience with artistic expression. These descriptions counter descriptions of deficit and lacking that dominate literature on individuals with autism. Rather than rely upon the quantifiable measurement of mindedness within the constructs of normalcy, we can see individuals through a lens that accounts for the ways that individuals with autism express intention and control over their enviroment. Linneman (2001) invites us to consider difference not as an attribute of

\textsuperscript{7} Facilitated communication or FC, is one form of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) that has been an effective means of expression for some individuals with labels of autism and other developmental disabilities. It entails learning to communicate by typing on a keyboard or pointing at letters, images, or other symbols to represent messages. Facilitated communication involves a combination of physical and emotional support to an individual who has difficulties with speech and with intentional pointing (i.e., unassisted typing). (FCI, Syracuse University, 2009)
a person but as a consequence of society’s application of standards or rules. Instead we can see the experiences of these individuals as accounts of diversity in the human experience for when we re-imagine autism as a form of cognitive diversity and not a deficit, we can begin to view persons with autism as people and not manifestations of their dis/ability.

Re-imagining Dis/ability

The new dis/ability studies. Disability studies scholar and dis/ability advocate Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (1999) describes the “new disability studies” as “attempting to build the scholarly, pedagogical, and institutional structures that will enable us to understand in fresh ways both the fundamental human experience of embodiment and the meanings we have given to bodily variations and changes”. Thompson goes on to call this new dis/ability studies a way to re-imagine dis/ability. She is joined in this call by others who suggest that it is necessary to consider dis/ability studies not as a segregated curricula (Barton & Oliver, 1997; Erevelles, 2005) but to consider how disability studies could instead be framed as ‘normalcy studies’ (Davis, 1996) and consider the ways that dis/ability is represented within the social, pedagogical and human frames (Mitchell & Snyder, 2001). What each of these authors concludes is that reimagining of dis/ability is more than any one single change, but rather should represent the systemic, cultural and linguistic elements that make up the current picture of dis/ability. The picture of dis/ability is not any one snap shot, or view, but instead a collage of representations that depict the many aspects of dis/ability as narrative.

The ‘voice’ of dis/ability. It is important to think about the ways that dis/ability gets narrated, conceptualized and becomes part of the dominant cultural discourse and
practice. Narration, discourse and cultural practice are important because they can greatly impact the extent to which the voices of disabled people are taken seriously and how they experience the benefits of real citizenship (Finkelstein, 1981; Kiellinen, et al., 2000; Oliver, 1993). That is, although new knowledge and imagination will be essential in the creation of communities in which individuals with dis/abilities might thrive, these efforts cannot begin until we acknowledge our complicity with past constructions of dis/ability that have clearly limited our view of humanity (L.P. Ware, 2002). The narratives within social structures like education and the biomedical model pose powerful obstacles to imagining dis/ability in any new way. When narratives of people with autism are shared, as in Biklen’s book, it creates space for their “voice” to be heard, and helps to inform the discourses and cultural practices about people with autism. In this way, dis/ability narratives can serve to disrupt the traditional narratives of disability and therefore re-imagination of dis/ability (B. Smith & Sparkes, 2008). How traditional (deficit) narratives take up these dis/ability narratives remains to be seen, but research and work that creates space for the voices of people with dis/abilities can only help to further such pursuits that would more fully represent the inclusion of people with dis/abilities, providing them with full access.

Access

For the purpose of this study the term access refers to multiple types of access: physical, curricular and legislative. The following components in this section of the literature review will address each of these things and discuss the various aspects that inform each. I will begin with a wider consideration of access, that of the term inclusion.

Inclusion

The term inclusion has become somewhat synonymous with inclusive education.
It is important, however, to take pause and consider what is meant by inclusion as something beyond legislation and teaching strategies, instead to consider inclusion as a set of beliefs (Villa & Thousand, 2005).

Inclusion is about diversity, about collaboration and about removing barriers (both physical and social) that prevent all people from participating in society to the fullest extent possible in ways that are valued by others. While inclusive education is one venue that has attempted to represent these beliefs for children in schools, participation in the community is equally as important.

**Inclusion in art outside of schools.** If community-based art education is defined as simply something that takes place outside of K-12 schools, it is not a new form of art education. Community based art education can occur in several contexts: community centers; intergenerational settings; museum outreach; recreational centers; and correctional institutions (Ulbricht, 2005). One of the foundational elements of community-based arts is knowledge and learning of art skills. The informal teaching environments of community-based programs can offer the same, and sometimes better, opportunities for the development of artistic skills and sensibilities. While the term “informal teaching” may refer to a lack of professional art education training on the part of community based arts teachers, many of these teaching artists have both the skills sets and the desire to share them with others, certified or not. There are networks of these informal teachers like the “Teaching Artists Association of New York” that offer points of entry for those individuals who might wish to pursue these informal teaching opportunities. Informal teaching, one of the basic tenets of community based art education, has been and is the dominant method by which individuals learn about art.
Outreach programs to empower special groups of people such as people with dis/abilities are another strong presence in community-based art programs. Historically, programs such as the ARC (formerly the American Association of Retarded Citizens, 1950); VSArts (Formerly Very Special Arts, 1974); Arts Education Partnership (1988); Art Partners (1994); Americans for the Arts (1996) have all played a part in the forming of outreach community based art programs for people experiencing dis/abilities. These organizations are just a sampling of the groups whose mission is to provide access and opportunities in the visual and performing arts for people with dis/abilities. Many of these organizations will partner with other cultural and educational institutions seeking to enrich and expand the art experience for persons with dis/abilities who might otherwise remain on the margins of the “art world” and society.

Another way that community based arts programs function is as a form of cultural ethnography. Public art created for and by communities can teach about the unique qualities of the community and serve as a narrative account for the values and histories that make it up. Each of these tenets, artistic development, community building and narrative accounts have a place in the lives of artists with autism and it is why I have chosen to include those art education experiences outside and within K-12 settings. By taking a lesson from community based art education, art educators in K-12 art education can look to the ways that experiences outside of school can build upon and reinforce those concepts covered in schools. In fact, K-12 art educators could adopt the stance of inclusion and outreach as it pertains to artists with autism to be more fully included in K-12 art education in schools. Inclusive art education in schools is based in the inclusive education movement.
Inclusive education. Len Barton (1997), a leading disability studies scholar, describes inclusive education as a model of education that is not an end, but a means to an end. Barton views inclusive education as a vehicle of change and one that is heading toward a more inclusive society. Barton sees inclusive education as a response and call to change. Inclusive education responds to the ways that students differ from one another and how these differences play out in classrooms. Barton also says that inclusive education is a distinctly political and in your face activity. It is not only about maintaining the presence of students in school but about maximizing their participation. Here Barton says inclusion is not about assimilation of students but about transforming schools to meet the diversity of students. Ultimately, Barton argues that inclusive education offers a way to create a more inclusive society. Including all students in schools models the ways that we engage and understand difference in constructive and valued ways. It is both a way of naming and celebrating difference. Inclusive education believes that all students belong in classrooms along side their peers, learning and living together (Hannan, 2007). Inclusion models the diversity that is present in our families, workplace and community. It provides accommodations, modifications and supports through a collaborative and team approach (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009) to provide students access and enable them to participate in the curriculum and classroom. Most importantly inclusion empowers them to be full participants in the classroom community.

However, the values of inclusion can sometimes be distorted to mean superficial “friendship”, “sameness” or acting as “one big happy family” (O'Brien, Forest, Pearpoint, Asante, & Snow, 2007). These interpretations can undermine the goal of valuing one
another, collaborating with and removing barriers to more authentic inclusive places of employment, schools and communities. These distortions can manifest themselves as contrived communities asked to perform the work that might otherwise be coordinated in authentic participation (G. L. Anderson, 1998; L.P. Ware, 1994, 2000). Inclusion in the visual arts empowers dis/ability narratives to be told through artistic practice (Eisenhauer, 2008; I. Rose, 2008) and works of art (Silvers, 2002).

**Inclusion in art in schools.** The inclusive education movement in schools has resulted in an increase in the number of students with autism that attend general education classes, including art classes. Legislative mandates that began in 1977, with the introduction of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), Public Law 94-142, have integrated students of varying levels and abilities within public school classrooms. In the 20 years since the passage of EHA, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Chang, 1996) schools have moved from providing segregated special education classes to inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classes. IDEA complements the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and in concert they “form the anchor that secures educational rights for children with disabilities” (Chang, 1996). These federal mandates were designed to ensure access to classrooms and curriculum for students with identified disabilities, including those with the label of autism. The visual arts offer ways for people to draw upon something important in their life and transform that experience of thinking and learning into art-making that can convey their interest and ideas to others (Miller, 2005). When opportunities and access to arts learning experiences are allowed, the arts can be an infinite and unconditional field, where people with dis/abilities are free to
express themselves in the visual arts without physical, social, or attitudinal barriers. When included, the visual arts provide resources and opportunities for personal, artistic, academic and professional growth (M. Barkan, 1962). Inclusion in the visual arts can also provide opportunities for personal, group and cultural identity formation. Inclusion in the visual arts can be potentially educative, transformative, expressive, emotionally exploratory, participative and involving (Feldman, 1970), involvement that can move outside of the walls of classrooms and schools.

It has become clear that inclusive education requires more than simply placing students in classrooms, it requires a commitment to the philosophy of inclusion, where all individuals are valued as important contributors to the rich fabric of our diverse society. Much of the failings of the inclusive education movement are grounded in a failure to uphold this philosophy. Sadly, the experiences of people with dis/abilities in the arts have mirrored the social devaluation of people with dis/abilities and their contributions. So, even though the art classroom was one of the first places that students with more significant dis/abilities were placed it was often for undesired effect. Participation in the arts was viewed as therapeutic, remedial and without artistic intention or development. This was a direct result of the prevailing model of special education that was rooted in the medical model of disability and views dis/ability as a deficit that should be cured.

**Special education.** Historically, special education has been based upon federal legislation that defined dis/ability through the medical model of disability. However, the ADA legislation that passed in 1990 was the first to consider the ways that dis/ability is constructed or conflated by the environment. ADA legislation deals specifically with physical access for individuals with dis/abilities but has had a longer reaching influence
upon subsequent legislation. When the social model of dis/ability is defined more generally it regards dis/ability as a social construction and uses a minority group framework. In it’s statement of purpose, the ADA language uses elements of the social model of dis/ability within its statement of purpose. However, the definition of dis/ability and some of the specific aspects of the law run counter to these notions (Taylor, personal communication, 2009). This contradiction between the statement of purpose of the ADA legislation and the foundational tenets (i.e. definition of dis/ability) is illustrative of the disconnect between the theory and language of legislation and the practice and/or application of policy. Special education services as protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004) requires that an individual be “identified” under one of 13 categories and meet “eligibility” to obtain special education services or related services (U.S. Dept. of Ed, 2004). While the language of this most recent reauthorization attempts to expand the considerations of dis/ability as it relates to cultural and influence it has yet to translate to many school settings, where the inclusion of students relies solely upon the areas of deficit with regards to their dis/ability (Grenier, 2007). When the discourse of including students with dis/abilities in special education relies upon teachers who remain uninformed about the social model of dis/ability it is difficult to make the kinds of changes that would best support full inclusion of students with autism (DeBoer, 2009; Pratt, 1997) including those students in visual art education.

**The influence of special education on inclusion in art in schools.** Special education literature has a long history of “interventions, therapies, programming and policies” for “serving autistic students” in the classroom (Dunlop & Fox, 1999; Ernsperger, 2002; S. J. Rogers, 2000). Historically, the art classroom was one of the first
places that students with more significant dis/abilities were placed. Special educators began to recognize the opportunities the art room provided to support curricular goals for individuals with dis/abilities. Art was seen as a teaching strategy (F. E. Anderson, 1978; Brubeck, 1981; Zamierowski, 1980). Participation in the visual arts for students with dis/abilities was a way to “train and reinforce deficient perceptual, motor and academic skills” (Dalke & Dalke, 1984). Indeed art education was seen as a “vehicle from which to enhance weak self-concepts in special children” (Dalke & Dalke, 1984). In some ways the art classroom acted as a test case for inclusion. Students were first included in art to see if they could “make it”, and if they did, they were often included in other general classrooms (Schiller, 1999). The emphasis upon these more therapeutic and remedial aspects of art furthered the confusion between art education and art therapy.

**The influence of art therapy on art education.** Because traditional responses to disabled people and the arts have been based upon the medical model of disability the experiences of disabled in the arts took on a paternalistic approach. Much in the same way that the medical model in its paradigm of deficit implies a need for cure, fixing and being cared for within a system of diagnosis and treatment (Shumaker & Wajda, 2007) art was given as therapy in the context of special schools, day centers and segregated institutions (Barnes, 2003a). There is a place for art therapy but it should not be the presumed venue for people with dis/abilities. Sutherland says, “Art therapy uses the forms of art for entirely inartistic ends. In particular it leaves out communication and it assumes that we (disabled people) have nothing to communicate” (Sutherland, 1997) focusing instead upon the therapeutic benefits.
The idea of therapy in the arts continues to be a contentious one. While art education and art therapy each have distinctive features, they are not totally separate entities in the educational field, since overlap occurs in setting, subjects, training, theoretical orientation, and program content. While it would be completely appropriate to say that art making and artistic expression can be therapeutic, art education has sought to remain separate from the field of art therapy. Art therapy, which by definition positions itself within the medical model drawing upon the field of clinical psychology, can be defined as a therapeutic technique that uses art materials and is primarily done diagnostically (Dalley, 1984). This diagnostic outcome of the art production done in art therapy is what separates it from the focus of this research.

**Dis/ability and art education.** Art education, like other content areas has been influenced heavily by the legislative mandates of IDEA (1987/1997/2004); Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990). These mandates form the nondiscrimination framework for children with dis/abilities in public art education. These mandates coupled with the established benefits of participation in the arts (Eisner, 1998) and the border crossing of art education in and out of school are just some of the reasons why access to and participation in art education is so important for young people today.

**Conclusion**

The literature discussed above has intended to situate the many layers that have informed and shaped this study. They are at times intertwined and at other times unbound. Ultimately each of the bodies of literature has one common element, art. The role of art and art making in our lives can be seen in a multitude of vocational, therapeutic, recreational and educational settings. Art can serve as a resistance, reflection,
and/or reproduction of our selves and the world around us. Art itself has been an integral part of communication, daily life, rituals and pleasure since ancient time, and it continues to be a source of each today. The methodology used in this inquiry follows.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This study was conducted using a combined qualitative methodology of arts-informed research and critical descriptive ethnographic methodology to explore the experiences of 13 adolescent artists with autism as they participated in a variety of art education settings. In the previous chapter I described the theoretical stances surrounding adolescent artists with autism and their art making and identified the need for more research on students with autism in art education (Furniss, 2008). In particular, more research that allows for the “voices” of these artists to have a space and place to be “heard” (Ashby, 2008; Rossetti, 2007). The methodology created for this study was designed with students with the label of autism in mind. Specifically, the expanded definition of text to include artworks as a data source, participant observation and inclusion of informal interviews of people important in the lives of these artists, all aimed to address communication challenges that would be encountered with more traditional qualitative methodology.

In response to my own social location my approach to this research was arts-informed, narrative and interpretative. As a researcher who does not have the label of autism, I came to this study with an attitude of respect for my participants. I viewed them as artists first, communicating to the world through their art. I believe that the label of autism carries with it unique qualities that are not defined solely in terms of deficits but in strengths, gifts and talents. Outlined in this chapter are details regarding (a) the rationale for this approach; (b) research design; (c) participation and recruitment strategies; (d) data collection procedures; (e) data analysis and (f) the role of the researcher.
Rationale for Approach

This study will employ the three tenets of qualitative research as described by Pugach (2001) as participant observation, interview and document analysis. These are used in order to provide a critical descriptive ethnography of these adolescent artists with autism. Additionally, combining arts-informed methodology with a critical descriptive ethnography was a logical way to reconcile my own multiple identities as artist and researcher. This combined approach of using a more traditional qualitative methodology and the newer field of arts-informed methodology provided an essential form of gathering and analyzing information in the following ways.

Traditional qualitative research is an appropriate methodology for this study as I seek to describe the experiences of adolescents with autism and the meanings they bring to inclusive art classroom settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) from the perspectives of the artist participants and the stakeholders in their lives as artists. Merriam (1998) emphasizes that the basis of all qualitative research is an understanding that an individual’s reality is constructed by that individual’s interaction with his or her social world. Using qualitative methodology, researchers seek to understand the meaning that people have constructed in their world through their experiences.

As this study focuses upon adolescent artists it was imperative that the art making and artistic production of these artists play an important role in this research. By expanding the notion of “data” and “informants” to include the artwork of these artists this research supports Eisner’s (1974) assertion that the evaluation and information that qualitative research in the arts offers would extend beyond the limits imposed by
traditional, psychometrically based models of evaluation. Expansion of “informants” included the perspectives of the stakeholders in the lives of these artists.

**Arts-Informed Research Methodology**

Rolling (2009) makes the following distinction between Arts-based Research and Arts-Informed research. Arts-Based Research (McNiff, 1998) involves a sustained and pervasive studio practice that more fully develops a studio representation of the data. Recent examples of this in doctoral research include a 2006 study by Carol Lipszyc where she explores the interconnectedness between personal and professional practices of writing and teaching through lyrics, short stories and poetry. In another example Holmes (2006) dramatized narrative of teachers where Holmes explores “who teachers are these days” and the nature of teaching itself expressed as poetry, recipes and images. Drew (2006) an African American artist and secondary art teacher tests the theory of personal culture with an exploration of process and studio production through photographic documentation reflection, media manipulation and self-study. Arts-Informed Research, on the other hand, is a way of representing research in a novel or creative way that is inspired by a work of art, art methods, or a body of work. An example of arts-informed research that draws upon mask making is presented by Durocher (2009) where he provides an inquiry into the ways in which gay teachers perform gender and sexuality as they perform ‘teacher’ within heteronormative structures and institutions such as school. In this study six participants and the author explored through mask making the ways and reasons that gay teachers mask their sexuality. In another study entitled *Leaping Pedagogy* (2005) the author employs a collaborative community arts project that includes stories, artwork and writing about salmon to illustrate how human and other –than – human interactions can work synergistically for the betterment of each.
In this research I employ an arts-informed approach inspired by and represented in the form of collage. Collage as an art form represented the collision of painting and sculpture an intersection of two and three-dimensional form. This study represents the collision of art and autism and naturally fits the collage form. As in collage form, when mediums combine, some are rendered transparent, others opaque. This relates directly to my questions of how autism was rendered transparent or opaque by art making, at least in some art education contexts. This approach of collage allowed me to integrate my identity as an artist with my identity as researcher empowering me to create my view through an artistic lens that is undeniably my own. This aligns with the reality that ethnographic research is situated and informed by the bias, location and power of the researcher.

Arts-informed inquiry and in this case collage allows the reader, (the art public) to re-imagine the relationship among art and autism and to reconsider the ways that they “appear” to the viewer. For me, arts-informed research allows for research that connects my artist self and researcher self, my work and my life. Arts-informed research empowers me to acknowledge the complexities of the world around me: the social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of the human condition and the multiple ways that we as humans have of engaging with the world, through the visual, the literal, the oral and them embodied (Knowles, Luciani, Cole, & Neilsen, 2007). Always in my mind, as I did this work, was the “image” of this study, the expression of emotion, the communication of ideas and desire. Not surprisingly, there were times when the images that played in my head came easier than the words on this paper. Even now, as I type I see the way that my participants looked as they created art with and around me, I see how
they focused on their piece, unaware of the world around them, engrossed in the process, the medium, the content. It seems a far richer picture that I can paint with my words. It was here, in their act of creation, that I hoped to show you the reader, the art public.

Arts-informed methodology, while considered by some as “new” to the field of qualitative research, represents a long and rich history of dialogue and collaboration between artists and scholars (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). What is new, however, is the specific use of arts-informed research in education as a means to illustrate the rich relationship between teaching and learning while challenging the stronghold of the academy as the great divide between theory and practice. Arts-informed research, in its creative representations (e.g. film, photography, 2 and 3 dimensional art) offer a form of accessibility that lifts theory from the pages of academic texts and brings them into the view and experience of many. The idea of accessibility is central to my work as a teacher and researcher and student of dis/ability studies.

**Critical Ethnography and Descriptive Ethnography**

In particular, critical ethnography allows for consideration of the interconnected attributes of context and culture. In this study, considerations of culture as they pertain to art and dis/ability are not exclusive of one another and mutually contribute (Yin, 2003) to our understanding of adolescent artists with autism. Critical ethnography, as a methodology, works directly to one of the aims of this research. As established in the review of the literature, more research is needed that allows for the voices of adolescents with dis/abilities to be ‘heard’. Conventional ethnography speaks for its subjects, typically to a field of fellow researchers. Critical ethnography, in contrast, speaks to an audience on behalf of their subjects as a means to empower them (J. Thomas, 1993) by raising awareness and authority to their ‘voice’. This, to me, seemed particularly
important as the many of the artists in this study do not communicate in what would be
demed ‘typical’ ways.

**Descriptive ethnography.** One way that this study created ‘voice’ for these
artists was through the use of descriptive ethnography. Through traditional qualitative
methodology and analysis additional descriptive ethnography techniques allowed for
maximum discovery and description rather than systematic theory testing of any
hypothesis. Descriptive ethnography, in this study was approached from the point of view
of art and cultural exploration, and as a descriptive and critical rather than analytic
endeavor. The description of critical descriptive ethnography captures this study’s
description of the experiences of these adolescent artists with autism and the inclusion of
the perspectives of stakeholders. Descriptive ethnography can explore the experiences of
the participants in this study within the social context of their art making and art
education. Within this critical ethnographic approach, this study seeks to consider how
knowledge of autism; art making and art education is shaped by the beliefs and
perceptions of the stakeholders in this study. These two approaches in combination with
one another and in concert with arts-informed research can illuminate the connectedness
of these areas of inquiry and consider them within the context of power, privilege and
value.

**Study Design**

This research design is molded by the qualitative methodologies described above
and responsive to the art education contexts in which these artists worked in, and most
importantly carefully considers the artists who are the participants. The research design
of this study includes the scope of the study: Adolescents artists with autism participating in art education.

Research Scope

The scope of the sample includes various art education settings: Public art education settings; Private school art education settings; Community based art education; Private art education settings and in-home settings. These multiple settings provide a sample of many experiences for these adolescent artists. No one setting is considered the “best” setting. Rather, this study examines the multiple ways that adolescents with autism experience art education. The scope of the setting included myself acting as the sole researcher for data collection, with a protocol that was employed across multiple and various settings with an attempt at a consistent and equitable approach. However there were variances in the number of hours that participants were observed and the methods employed that were due to access granted, the length of art classes observed and the communication patterns of the participant. Visual ethnography (Schwartz, 1989) that included photography (Bogden & Biklen, 1992; C. Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and videography (Shrum, 2005) provided additional methods of collecting data that enabled me to capture the art produced, the methods and materials employed by these artists. Additionally, analysis of artistic processes and art works provided ways to further understand the characteristic attributes of people, objects and events (Prosser, 1998).

The Nature of the Data

When designing qualitative research the data considerations are many and complex. Traditional data sources for qualitative studies might rely heavily upon interviews with participants. In this study, considerations of the communication patterns of the participants dictated a more comprehensive approach to data sourcing and
collection. The sources of data for this study included participant observation, photographs of students’ work and art making practice, interviews, analysis of audio transcripts of art education settings, analysis of interview transcripts, and analysis of visual texts (artworks). Admittedly, my own interests and experiences as an artist drove my desire to include these visual “texts”. For the purpose of this study, “text” is a multi-modal definition (Group, 1996) that includes the visual art image, human action and artifact, social interactions and anything else that can be “read” (Miller, 2005). In this study, the artwork produced by these students became a source of data as a text to be read, interpreted and analyzed. It is here in the text, not limited by alphabetic resemblance, but in the communication of ideas through symbols, gestures, form and line that a work of art becomes a text and a narrative of the author. Here in the reading of these alternate texts the practice of hermeneutic inquiry is important to understand.

In order to ‘read’ these visual texts I relied upon the paradigm of hermeneutic inquiry. Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting text. This subjective reading relies upon personal and scientific accounts of the text. Personally subjective readings include the ways that I, as the researcher, interpret and make meaning of the texts. The scientific accounts of the text can appear in the objective description of contexts, materials, processes and artistic practices. Actions and discourse can be seen as text because they become fixed within history. Art and art making are highly personal experiences and can provide glimpses of the artist, therefore it is appropriate to include artwork as text. By reading the visual texts of my participants’ artwork, I more fully represented the experiences of these artists. Thunder-McGuire (1999) writes of the importance of artistic
expression as text of personal narratives in this way, “Children’s narratives come from their own experiences, interpreting their lives into personal meaning”.

These rich and diverse data sources allowed me to record more than just the spoken words of participants but choices in material, visual expressions with art mediums, communication through art, and approaches to their environments. It was important to employ these strategies for generating data in order to fully represent the scope of the study’s settings and participants.

**Recruitment, Setting, Population and Participants**

**Recruitment and snowball sampling.** Recruitment for this study was accomplished in three ways: first, through my contacts with local art teachers and second through an advertisement run in a local newsletter and lastly through the word mouth of parents and teachers. My connections to local area art teachers stemmed from two places: research I had recently conducted on paraprofessional support in inclusive art classrooms and my role as a supervisor of student teachers in art education for Syracuse University. During my study of paraprofessional support I became aware of several students in the surrounding schools that were both labeled with dis/abilities and interested in art. These sites and these artists became an important starting point for recruitment.

The process of recruitment consisted of:

1. Contacting art teachers who worked in inclusive settings;
2. Contacting families to obtain permission to recruit students (minors)
3. Contacting students to gain consent to study them and
4. Contacting districts to obtain permission to observe student’s in art classrooms.

I began recruitment with an introductory letter (see Appendix C) to the teachers and administrators (stakeholders) who had participated in my previous research on
paraprofessional support in the art classroom. In this letter I outlined the purpose of my study and the criteria for participants as adolescents with the label of autism (or identification on the autism spectrum) who were participating in art education. These stakeholders were the starting point for recruitment and were people who (a) worked within the field of art education and (b) worked with students who met the criteria of being adolescents with autism (and related) disability labels. For each teacher (stakeholder) who agreed to participate, the researcher then contacted the family of that teacher’s student with the label of autism. Often the teachers acted as a liaison between the families of the student and me. The letters to families (see Appendix D) included all the details pertinent to their participation in the study and provided response forms and pre paid postage return envelopes. Within this letter to families were the consent and assent forms for students (see Appendix E). I required parents/guardians to read these consent forms with their child, and obtain all required signatures prior to participation in the study. When the parent or guardian of the student and the student all agreed to allow the minor to participate in the study then I contacted the student, usually by email or phone by way of introduction and confirmation of consent/assent. After I had obtained consent from stakeholders, participants and their families I began my work to obtain district permission to observe these students within their art classroom.

To obtain permission to observe students within a district’s art classroom I was required to provide the district administrative office with much of the same information that was required of the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix F for an example). Of the 8 districts that represented the home districts of my 13 participants 6 districts allowed me to observe the participants while in school. While I did
not receive permission from all districts that my participants attended, I was able to observe each of the participants in some other context of art education.

**Snowball sampling.** As described earlier, my initial participant(s) were identified from a previous study I had conducted about paraprofessional support in the art classroom. During this previous study I consensually observed paraprofessionals as they supported students with various dis/ability labels as they participated in art education. One of the paraprofessionals in this study supported a student named Karl. Karl attended a public urban high school where his teacher had shared with me some of Karl’s drawings. She went on to describe him as a “prolific” artist with the label of autism. With her help I was able to contact his family and he became my first participant. Karl took private lessons from a local artist, Ms. D whom I contacted and recruited for this study. Ms. D became a great resource for recruiting 3 additional participants. My other network of local art teachers were those I had become acquainted with through my supervision of student teachers. I contacted these teachers with my introductory letter and described my study to them. They also were able to identify potential participants and were great supports at making initial contact with families.

Secondly, an advertisement ran in the local “Autism Society of America” (ASA) Newsletter and the strong networks of parents and families of children with autism proved to be instrumental in number of participants who responded to my inquiry and became participants in my study. It was through these contacts that snowball sampling occurred and enabled me to obtain an adequate sample of participants.

**Settings.** My original research design was to observe students as they participated in K-12 public school art education settings. However, I quickly decided that art
education settings outside of school were equally important and intriguing. Thus my focus expanded to include art classrooms in schools, community based art education settings, private art education settings and some home visits. While my home visits were initiated in response to the denial of access to participants at their school, I did not limit them to those students for whom I was not granted permission to see in their school art classes. Many of the student artists regularly made art at home and it seemed relevant to observe them in this setting as well. In my home visits I brought art materials with me and conducted informal interviews with participants as we created art together. To me, these visits were some of the most valuable providing an intimate setting that centered on unstructured artistic production and often yielded not only beautiful art work but incredible insight into my participants.

Population and participants. My decision to focus on adolescents for this study was in response to the unbalanced research in the field of dis/ability, in particular dis/ability as it relates to inclusive schooling. A great deal of attention is placed upon inclusion in the early years of schooling and then wanes in the middle and secondary grades. Several researchers (Ashby, 2008; Rossetti, 2007; D. L. Taylor, 1995) have identified the need for more research that offers the perspectives of middle and high school students with dis/abilities. Of particular interest to me as an art educator, were their experiences in art. The population for this study included 9 male and 4 female adolescents (age 11-18) of diverse backgrounds with the label of autism and autism spectrum disorder labels (as described in the DSMIV-TR, 2000), who attended suburban and urban public school art education; private school art education class; community based art classes and private art instruction classes in and around Upstate New York.
Throughout the recruitment process I was looking for a population that was balanced as close to 50% as possible in gender, race, class, ethnicity and was representative of the school settings where the participants attended. A chart of the student participants is represented in Table 1 and a brief summary of the student artists follows:
Table 1

*Student Artist Research Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>School Attended</th>
<th>Dis/ability Label</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Observation Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Urban Public</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5 hrs: In School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Urban Public</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5 hrs: Private Art Instruction Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Home School</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5 hrs: Private Art Instruction Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Suburban Public</td>
<td>PDDNOS</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>5 hrs: Community Based Art Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Suburban Public</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>3 hrs: Private Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 hrs: Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamel</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Urban Public</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>5 hrs: Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javon</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Urban Public</td>
<td>PPDNOS</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>5 hrs: Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devan</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Urban Public</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2 hrs: Public School (Observation Discontinued)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fagan</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Urban Public</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>3 hrs: Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 hrs: Home Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rinnah</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Suburban Public</td>
<td>Asperger Syndrome</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Jewish/Caucasian</td>
<td>5 hrs: In Home Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Suburban Public</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5 hrs: In Home Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brynn</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Private-non parochial</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>5 hrs: Private School Setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neko</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Suburban Public</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Japanese American</td>
<td>2 hrs: Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 hrs: In Home Setting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Artists

1. Brandon is a high school student who is being raised by his mother, Brandon’s father committed suicide when he was 3. Brandon has been recognized from a very young age for his artistic ability and continues to be identified for his artistic talent. Brandon has an older sister that also enjoys art. Brandon is interested in cartoons, animated films and trains, memorizing the schedules and routes for all of Amtrak’s trains across the United States. Brandon’s mother is supportive of his artistic endeavors and seeks ways to expand his art experiences in their community.

2. Karl is a high school student who is a prolific artist, has a wonderful sense of humor, perfect pitch and has already enjoyed some local commercial success with the sale of his arts at local art festivals. Karl enjoys television, movies and musicals. His family supports and enjoys the arts and he has a sister who is living in NYC and trying to make a career in acting/singing. Karl’s parents are very supportive of his art making and pay for him to take private art lessons. Karl’s’ private art instructor is working on getting him a support person so he can take art classes at the local university during his senior year of public high school.

3. John is a quiet, un-assuming young man who has been home schooled since he left public school after completing the 8th grade. John’s parents are very supportive of his artistic endeavors; his mother was an art history major in her undergraduate studies and enjoys looking at and creating art. John’s mother describes him as employing “selective mutism” since his voice changed in early adolescence. John has one younger sister who enjoys arts and crafts.
4. Christian is the younger of 2 boys in his family. He is a quiet but confident young man. Christian enjoys art tremendously and has had many opportunities to participate in art competitions and programs outside of his school art experience including local art competitions and community exhibitions at the local Children’s Hospital. Christian has some mechanical difficulty with speech but is very articulate when given adequate time to form verbal responses.

5. David is an energetic, tall young man who is very strong willed. He has definite ideas about his art and his behaviors often convey what his speech lacks. David lives with his father and stepmother. He has one older and one younger brother. David’s parents support his interest in the arts and provide him with private art lessons.

6. Jamel is a tall, well-dressed middle school student. While his physical size intimidates some around him, his loving nature and enthusiasm quickly charm peers and adults alike. Jamal, like other teenage boys is into looking good and makes frequent attempts to socialize with his peers in particular those of the opposite sex, although most of his interactions occur with his paraprofessional, who is never far away. Jamal works independently on his art and seems confident in his surroundings. Jamal’s speech is somewhat echolalic but he often initiates interactions with peers by calling out greetings.

7. Javon is a quiet, tall 8th grade boy. Javon is often content to sit quietly and prefers to work independently. He intentionally kept his distance from the paraprofessional assigned to support him, choosing to sit with peers rather than at the table with the paraprofessional. Javon enjoys technology and one on one conversation. Javon seems to be motivated to make art but is often too shy to ask for the help he needs to complete his work.
8. Devan is a tall, strong middle school boy. He has limited audible speech but does have access to assistive technology for communication when he chooses to utilize it. Devan loves Clifford books and enjoys carrying them with him wherever he goes. Devan is very attached to his paraprofessionale and focuses most of his interaction on her. When at home he is highly verbal, compliant for his mother and a very loving older brother to his younger sister.

9. Fagan is a bright, petite, red-headed, highly verbal self described “character” that enjoys any kind of technology, gadget or invention. Fagan is the only child of two college professors. Both of his parents are very supportive of the arts and thus support Fagan’s creative endeavors that usually include “series” of works. They often procure supplies (according to his specifications) and assist him as he researches his projects. Fagan also enjoys writing poetry, making photographs and composing music on his keyboard.

10. Rinnah is a petite, sometimes serious 11 year-old girl who lives with her two parents and her younger sister. Rinnah spends much of her time at home doing arts and crafts projects with her younger sister. Rinnah’s mother enjoys art (and crafting) as well. Rinnah also enjoys playing with her Webkinz™ stuffed animals and the accompanying website games. Rinnah has strong verbal skills and is very candid about her emotions.

11. Amy is a tall, dark haired, friendly and vivacious teen who enjoys anime and art of any kind. Amy has one younger brother and lives at home with her mother and father who is a professional artist. Amy enjoys pop music tremendously and has recently begun going to a few concerts accompanied by her father. Amy and her younger brother watch Naratuo, an anime television show, together every Saturday night. Amy’s parents are
very supportive of her artistic development and have advocated for her inclusion in the more advanced art classes at school.

12. Brynn is a tall, thin girl with an infectious smile. Brynn enjoys art and art making tremendously, especially in the company of her friends. Brynn’s parents are very supportive of her artistic development and continually seek ways to increase her opportunities. Although Brynn is non-verbal she is very expressive, smiles easily and is genuinely curious about her surroundings, exploring as much as she can.

13. Neko is a tall, dark haired quiet “thinker”. She lives at home with her mother, older brother and father. Neko’s home environment is a blend of Japanese and American cultures, both in décor and tradition. Neko has been drawing since a very young age and is confident in her abilities in art. Neko has a good sense of humor, and although her delivery is dry, it is always well timed.

    Each of the artists was as unique in personality as they were in their artwork. While they may have shared commonality in their dis/ability label, and other aspects of adolescence, their communication patterns, social behaviors and drawing styles were as different as one would expect of any group of young people. Their experiences in art education were varied, as were the support systems that surrounded their artistic production. It was this variation that necessitated the inclusion of the perspectives of stakeholders.

    The perspectives of stakeholders were included in this study as they are important people in the lives of these artists. The stakeholders included the parents, art teachers and other school personnel who spent time with the artists as they participated in and responded to art. Table 3 describes the stakeholder participants and their relationship to
the student artists. I do not describe the stakeholders in the same manner as the participants as I consider the role to be cursorily to that of the participants. Maintaining their presence in the background of the study allow me to focus more fully on the perspectives of the adolescent artist participants.

Table 2

*Stakeholder Participants in Relation to Student Artists*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Student Artist Connection</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. D</td>
<td>Karl, David, &amp; John’s Teacher</td>
<td>White, Female 50</td>
<td>Spec. Ed, &amp; Classroom Teacher Private Art Instructor</td>
<td>Urban Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. P</td>
<td>Amy’s Mom</td>
<td>White, Female 45</td>
<td>Office Job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. P</td>
<td>Amy’s Dad</td>
<td>White, Male 43</td>
<td>Graphic Artist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. H</td>
<td>John’s Mom</td>
<td>White, Female 48</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. G</td>
<td>Brynn’s Art Teacher</td>
<td>White, Female, 35</td>
<td>Art Teacher</td>
<td>Suburban, Private School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. B</td>
<td>Brandon’s Art Teacher</td>
<td>White, Female, 30</td>
<td>Art Teacher</td>
<td>Urban, Public High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. M</td>
<td>Fagan’s Art Teacher</td>
<td>White, Female, 38</td>
<td>Art Teacher</td>
<td>Urban Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. R</td>
<td>Rinnah</td>
<td>White, Female, 40</td>
<td>Office Job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. T</td>
<td></td>
<td>White, Female 56</td>
<td>Art Teacher</td>
<td>Suburban Private School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. S</td>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>White, Female, 47</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. C</td>
<td>Neko</td>
<td>White, Female, 40</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. L</td>
<td>Fagan</td>
<td>White, Female, 44</td>
<td>College Professor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. F</td>
<td>Jamel, Javon &amp; Devan’s Art Teacher</td>
<td>White, Male, 50</td>
<td>Art Teacher</td>
<td>Urban Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Race, Gender, Age</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. W Jamel</td>
<td>Devan’s Art Teacher</td>
<td>White, Male, 25</td>
<td>Art Teacher</td>
<td>Urban Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss A</td>
<td>Devan’s Paraprofessional</td>
<td>AA, Female, 58</td>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
<td>Urban Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. L</td>
<td>Brandon’s Paraprofessional</td>
<td>White, Female, 42</td>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
<td>Urban High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. N</td>
<td>Brandon’s Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>White, Female, 26</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>Urban High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. P</td>
<td>Jamel’s Paraprofessional</td>
<td>White, Male, 53</td>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
<td>Urban Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. I</td>
<td>David’s Public School Teacher</td>
<td>White, Female, 32</td>
<td>Art Teacher</td>
<td>Public Suburban Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. C</td>
<td>David’s Paraprofessional</td>
<td>White, Male, 24</td>
<td>Paraprofessional</td>
<td>Suburban Public Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. T</td>
<td>Neko’s Art Teacher</td>
<td>White, Male, 28</td>
<td>Art teacher</td>
<td>Suburban Public Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. K</td>
<td>Christian’s Art Teacher</td>
<td>White, Female 23</td>
<td>Art Teacher</td>
<td>Suburban Public Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. E</td>
<td>Christian’s Community Art Class teacher</td>
<td>White, Female, 27</td>
<td>Pre-service Art Teacher</td>
<td>Community Based Art Class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedure

Data Collection

Data was collected utilizing the following qualitative methods: participant observation, interviews and document analysis see Table 4 for detailed description of methodologies employed by participant.
### Table 3

**Data Collection Method by Participant**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Participant Observation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>note:</em> H= Home S= School C= Community based Art Class P= Private Art Lesson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audio Tape Transcript</th>
<th>Structured Interview</th>
<th>Video Tape Transcript</th>
<th>Document Analysis of Art Work</th>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Phone</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. D</td>
<td>X: P</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. P</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. P</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. H/Mrs. H</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. E</td>
<td>X:C</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. K</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. G</td>
<td>X:S</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. B</td>
<td>X: S</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. M</td>
<td>X:S</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. R</td>
<td>X:H</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. T</td>
<td>P:S</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. S</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. C</td>
<td>X:H</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. L</td>
<td>X:H</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Community Art Class</td>
<td>Private Art Lesson</td>
<td>Note</td>
</tr>
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<td>------</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. F</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. W</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miss A</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. L</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. N</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. P</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
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<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>John</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>David</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jamel</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Javon</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Faegan</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>Rinnah</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This table summarizes the various data collection methods according to subject. It includes all stakeholders and participants in the study.

These multiple sources of data outlined in Table 4 were important to this study to fully capture the use of materials and creation of artwork by these artists. This rich and multidimensional description of the setting and participants was necessary as many of the participants were either unable or unwilling to participate in a typical qualitative
interview (informal or otherwise). In these cases, I relied upon the multiple forms of observational data, context and art works to supply additional descriptive information about the experiences of these artists. I found email was another way I could communicate with my participants and interviewed them electronically. At times assisted by parents, I was able to use email to further clarify observations or ask additional questions about artworks and personal preferences.

**Participant observation.** Participant observation (Jorgenson, 1989) included a range from passive to total participation (Weatherford, Johnson & Avenarious, 2006). The particular strategy employed was often dictated by the setting (Bruyn, 1963). In school settings (both public and private) I was a more passive participant observer (DeWalt, DeWalt, & Wayland, 1998). This was due to the more structured classroom environment and the directives of school administration. The more relaxed structure of the community based art classrooms, and the smaller class size were more open to balanced and/or active participation. The small class size and open environment offered opportunities to engage directly with students and more closely observe the participants. In the private art settings and those one-on-one sessions in the homes of participants I engaged in active and total participation (Alexander, 1982). This was due to the intimate setting, the open and invitational attitude of the stakeholders and I believe to the comfort level of the adolescent artist participants in this setting.

While observing in school settings, I often sat near the student I was observing but not with them. I sat where I could hear the interactions with the student, see what they were working on but I wanted to keep some distance. I found that the proximity of an adult, including me, often directed the student’s attention and interaction to the adult,
rather than with peers. For this reason, I hung back (Ganga & Scott, 2006; A. Hatch, 2002) preferring to approach the student periodically during the class to clarify decision making with regards to the use of art materials, work, or artistic thoughts. When I observed in the community based art classes, my presence was more interactive. I often interacted with the teacher, as if her assistant, adding commentary to the natural flow of conversation in the class. When I observed in the private art setting, I was in much closer proximity to both the instructor and the student artist. This naturally led to a more interactive and participatory approach to the observation. Finally, when I was observing in the one-on-one studio settings (home settings) my presence was completely participatory, often making art alongside the student in the practice of parallel production. I found this technique to be very conducive to conversation and close observation of artistic practices. It was the students with which I had one on one encounters in their home that I felt I had the best rapport and knowledge of their lives. I utilized my digital voice recorder during all formal observations (Dicks, Mason, Coffey, & Atkinson, 2005) as a way to enrich my field notes that I would later transcribe.

Field notes. Detailed field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) were hand written in a small notebook during and immediately after observations and interactions. In this notebook I included informed descriptions of art curriculum (including physical space and art materials) and the art making practices of students with the label of autism. These handwritten notes were later typed and enriched (Richardson, 2003) to include audio transcriptions from the digital voice recording, still images of artwork and artistic production and observer comments.
In-depth interviewing. Along with participant observation I conducted semi-structured interviews (see Appendix F for interview protocol) with those stakeholders who exhibited typical communication patterns to explore their perspectives in greater depth as I was interested in understanding their perspectives on both art and autism. With that in mind I went into the interviews with questions related to the art making practices of the artist participants that I hoped with generate conversations to add to the descriptive intent of this study. The interviews I conducted were all done in the homes of the stakeholder, in a casual setting of the living room or around the kitchen table. Scheduled interviews were taped with a digital voice recorder. These recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed. On occasion, spontaneous or unplanned conversations would occur and I would then jot notes to myself immediately following the exchange. It was my experience in these interviews that the stakeholders required little prodding on my part to talk. It was my sense that they were often seeking validation from me of their thoughts, experiences and decision-making. Often, particularly in the case of parents, they were seeking shared experiences, looking for me to confirm their experience with the experiences of other families in the study.

Document analysis of visual text. The nature of qualitative research relies upon the analysis of data gathered in the field. Qualitative data is in the form of words and pictures rather than numbers. In this study, the data included these more expected forms of field notes, transcripts, and photographs and also included an expanded definition of text in the form of the artwork of these artists (Sullivan, 2009). The visual representations created by these artists offered, in my opinion, the same rich descriptions, emotions and expression of ideas and experiences that one would find in more typical qualitative
inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This expanded definition of “text” as borrowed from the field of multimodal literacy’s (Kellman, 2004) fits perfectly within the qualitative methodology. In this study I relied upon the paradigm of hermeneutic inquiry as outlined in the rationale for the approach to this study.

**Transcripts.** As noted earlier, interviews were digitally recorded. As the interviews often centered on story telling, this allowed me to have the most accurate representations of the narratives of the participants. Additionally, I used my digital audio recording device during participant observation. Because of the volume of data, I hired a transcriptionist to transcribe the semi-structured interviews, but transcribed the audio recordings from observations myself, as deciphering all of the additional background noises and multiple voices recorded would be difficult for a transcriptionist who was not present at the observation. As I transcribed these audio recordings I interjected observer comments and additional descriptive notes of the environment, body language of the participants, use of materials and artistic production.

Additionally, I transcribed audio recordings from observations. I utilized a digital audio recording device during participant observation as a source for thickening description in field notes. As I transcribed the audio recordings I used my hand written notes to enrich the transcribed conversations with additional observational data from events that happened in the setting. I found this method very helpful for both the accuracy of my notes and the extent to which I was able to describe observation settings. The resulting notes (transcriptions, field notes and interviews) are summarized in Table 5. During coding of this data I organized it into a matrix totaling 54 pages in length, an example of which can be found in Figure 1.
**Documents.** The documents in this study were one of two things; they were pieces of artwork created in formal settings, and pieces of artwork created in unstructured settings. Many of the families I interviewed had framed pieces of student artwork in their home, and often had saved a multitude of works over the span of their child’s life. Teachers often had portfolios of student work to share with me, and eagerly did so, both as a testament to the talent of the student and record of their teaching. I had a sense that it was important to them that I was an art educator and a researcher interested in dis/ability. I chose not to look at Individualized Education Plans, medical records, school records, or grades as I was interested in their experiences as they related directly to art and art making. I was less interested in the scripting of experience in these types of official documents than in the lived reality of the experience. The number of documents viewed was 673 and included paintings, drawings and sculptures. The analysis of these documents follows.

**Data Analysis**

My approach to data collection and analysis was inductive (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and in the tradition of grounded theory data analysis was continual and ongoing. Table 5 shows the multiple data sources and the amount of each type of data that was analyzed.
Table 4

*Data Source, Data type and Amount Analyzed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Data Generated</th>
<th>Total Amount of Data Analyzed</th>
<th>Analysis Applied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders, participants- all settings</td>
<td>Hand Written Observation Field Notes</td>
<td>243 pages (6 x 9 inch notebook)</td>
<td>Grounded Theory: Constant Comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders, Participants</td>
<td>Audio tape transcripts of participant observation</td>
<td>65 observations, 385 single space typed pages</td>
<td>Grounded Theory: Constant Comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders- see Table 4</td>
<td>Transcription of structured interview</td>
<td>10 interviews; 121 single spaced pages</td>
<td>Grounded Theory: Constant Comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders, Participants</td>
<td>Transcription of video tape</td>
<td>37 pages single spaced typed</td>
<td>Grounded Theory: Constant Comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants-All</td>
<td>Document analysis of drawing</td>
<td>107 drawings</td>
<td>Barrett’s (1994) four areas of art analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants-David, Karl, John, Amy, Rinnah, Brynn,</td>
<td>Document analysis of painting</td>
<td>16 paintings</td>
<td>Barrett’s (1994) four areas of art analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants: John, Amy Rinnah, Neko, Javon, Jamal</td>
<td>Document analysis of sculpture</td>
<td>31 pieces of 3-Dimensional work</td>
<td>Barrett’s (1994) four areas of art analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants: John, Karl, Amy, Christian, Neko, Rinnah, David</td>
<td>Document analysis of video</td>
<td>9.6 hours</td>
<td>Barrett’s (1994) four areas of art analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants-All</td>
<td>Documents analysis of photography</td>
<td>465 photographs</td>
<td>Barrett’s (1994) four areas of art analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders, Participants See Table 4</td>
<td>Email Correspondence/Response</td>
<td>46 single page emails</td>
<td>Grounded Theory: Constant Comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders- See Table 4</td>
<td>Telephone correspondence notes</td>
<td>6 pages of hand written notes</td>
<td>Grounded Theory: Constant Comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders, Participants See Table 4</td>
<td>Digital Voice Recordings</td>
<td>1953 minutes</td>
<td>Grounded Theory: Constant Comparison</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Field notes were read and marked by hand identifying and segmenting data. Next the segments were labeled with terms descriptive of the data passages; these descriptive terms became the inductive codes for this research. Next I examined the initial codes that I had applied to the data. For example initial codes included things like “value art, respect, ability, competence, art education” among others. Initial codes were checked for accuracy and co-occurring codes. After segmenting and initial coding was complete I collapsed the initial codes based upon the number of occurrences, saturation and additional careful reading. In this secondary close reading of the data I might see a segment could be coded in more than one way (co-occurring theme) or decide that one code is better suited over what I originally thought. In the next phase I cross-referenced the data segments with the research questions in order to apply a secondary code. These secondary codes correlated the segments of the data to the research question I felt it best related to. All of this information was entered into a matrix, a segment of which appears in Figure 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Code</th>
<th>Secondary Code (Research Question)</th>
<th>Data Segment</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value Art, Participate in Art-making</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“I really think of myself as an artist. It’s really important to me that I am working on my own art. I see a lot of art teachers, yeah, they have the education to teach art, but they aren’t doing their own art. I don’t think you can teach art if you aren’t an artist yourself.”</td>
<td>Ms. D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value art, How artists Engage in production</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>So I got some art books for John and I would sit there, and he would absolutely, just like when he was in third grade, didn't want to color outside the lines. He got so like obsessed with being perfect with how the eyes lined up. He wanted to start drawing girl’s faces and again it's that fear of not doing something perfect.</td>
<td>Mrs. H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How artists engages in production</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>You know, John's perception of what is real and what isn't, that’s why I think he probably started with the tracing and then started on his own afterwards. He had to do a project about Walt Disney and so I said well why don't you do a picture of Walt Disney with Mickey, and he was like panicking. And I said well here, -- here's this book; we got books out of the library.</td>
<td>Mrs. H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication of interests</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Here he's getting his aggressions out. That's Ambulocetus, the walking whale. That's that prehistoric whales, you know that</td>
<td>Brandon’s Mom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
business. He's into the prehistoric whales and stuff. You know how they evolved and everything.

Figure 1 Note. This chart is a sample of the coded date organizational chart.

At this point in the analysis, primary and secondary codes were again checked for accuracy and secondary themes were generated. Some primary codes were collapsed into the following themes: Ability, Competency, Participation, Engagement, Value, Expectations, Art Education, Autism, Inclusion, Artistic Development, and Communication. These themes were accepted as they adequately represented the data, allowing for saturation in coding. Periodically throughout the research process I wrote memos to my committee members on emerging themes, additional questions, and at times, pure emotional response to things I had observed.

The analysis of art documents in this study was done utilizing three of Barrett’s (1994) four areas of art analysis. These areas include, (a) pure description-answering “What do I see?”; (b) analysis- answering “How did the artist do it?”; (c) interpretation: answering “Why did the artist create it and what does it mean? What evidence do I have to support this interpretation?” Barrett’s fourth principle, (d) judgment, was not utilized in my analysis, as it was not important for this study to determine whether the art was “good”. By asking Barrett’s first three questions I developed a visual representation of the artist’s “voice”. In my analysis I found that even when each individual had their own unique way of approaching a piece there were some similarities in preferences for materials that are consistent with Kellman’s (2004) studies on artists with autism. There were also similarities that most likely had more to do with adolescence that autism, or
perhaps the interaction of both. My examination of the art documents in this study provided a rich and intricate source of data that offered additional avenues for analysis.

**Validity of Data**

The multiple sources of data collected was a primary strength of this study, allowing me to refine, enrich or validate one form of data with another. The multiple methods employed, in this study included participant observation, interviews and document analysis. The sources of data included photographs of students’ work and art making practice, interviews, analysis of audio transcripts of art education settings, analysis of interview transcripts, and analysis of visual texts (artworks). Each of these sources provided information from different perspectives and I believe, increased the validity of my data. Participants were provided with opportunities to review transcripts for the purpose of clarification and/or elaboration. Additionally, I contacted several participants after initial data analysis to ask further questions related to emerging themes. These were most often in the form of email correspondence, which I found particularly helpful as respondents were able to compose thoughtful responses that might not have happened in a face-to-face conversation where the pace is faster and response time somewhat limited within the conventions of conversation. Email, in particular, allows the respondent to address a question when they have the time (and space) to do so.

Multiple observations of participants were intended to provide richer descriptive data than single observations. Additionally, for some participants I was able to observe them in more than one art education setting when access was granted. This was useful as their responses (and art) were often varied within the varying contexts. Often, spending time with students in their home was far more descriptive of the social context of the
artist than the classroom was. Also, I had a sense that students were more comfortable interacting with me and with being studied when they were in their home environment.

Lastly, the opportunity to discuss my research with my colleagues and committee members helped me to maintain my grounding in the data, and at times, helped me to identify bias on my part as the researcher. In particular, my advisor helped me to stay open to the multiple ways to interpret my data, and offered many suggestions for the structuring of the subsequent data chapters to best represent my findings.

**Writing Up the Analysis**

One of the challenges in critical qualitative research comes during the analysis and writing up of the data. This struggle made itself evident to me in the field while collecting data and later in the writing up of my analysis. On more than one occasion I considered the response of stakeholders’ as they will read what I have written. However, this consideration kept me true to the intent of this study, to tell the stories of these artists. This means that at times the narrative isn’t nice, or ideal, but instead can serve as a call for change and provide an opportunity to re-imagine inclusive art education. Historically emancipatory work, such as this, requires much more than a simple proclamation. In order to truly liberate student artists with dis/abilities from the restraints of exclusionsary practices in art education art educators (and other stakeholders) must consider the multiple layers that fix individuals within frames of exclusion. Like the layers of a collage that can eclipse or obscure what is underneath the cultural narratives, prescribed identities and power relationships that construct the curriculum, approaches and support for student artists with dis/abilities can limit the opportunities afforded them in art education. Affording opportunities within education are foundational tenets of the social justice movement in education. Yet, even within this movement is a call for specific
considerations that will afford real opportunities as opposed to theoretical ones (Nieto, 2006). The same is true in the field of inclusive art education. While I hope that this work will be emancipatory it is my desire to continue in work that it will lead to improved practice in the field of inclusive art education, in particular for adolescents with autism. Specifics with regards to the materials, processes’ histories and teaching strategies must be rendered visible and constructed with thoughtful consideration for access and opportunity for all students. This is continually reinforced to me in my encounters with the teachers and others that I have met in the field and here in the academy who also share my commitment to what I believe to be important work.

In attempting to keep the art and artists in my study central to the work I chose to embed the images of their artwork into the text of this document, rather than placing it at the end. Additionally, I took the process of collage as arts-informed research as my approach to organizing and analyzing my data. Many of the books available about writing the dissertation discuss the importance of the role of the committee and more importantly the chair. This was absolutely the case in my doctoral research. My advisor had the unique ability of listening to my ramblings about the multitude of interesting, intriguing and at times disturbing themes and distilling them down to ask good questions of me, pushing my work to a level of clarity that would be impossible in isolation. She and my committee members listened to my organizational crisis and guided me as an artist building the a collage, with each committee member and each conversation acting as another piece layering and adding to the bigger “picture”. It was here in the concept of collage that the connection between the ideas of transparency, intersection, and the eclipsing nature of the multiple identities of artist, adolescent and disabled became
Even more importantly, the concept of collage enabled me to capture the very nature of contextual variance, intersection and juxtaposition that I saw within my data, and was able to reinsert the concept that art can represent so clearly the ideas, words and concepts of our thinking. Collage perfectly reinforced the ideas of art as inquiry and arts-informed research that I have drawn upon for this dissertation.

**The Role of the Researcher**

My role as a qualitative researcher made me increasingly sensitized to nuances of behaviors, body language, and artistic expressions. Students witnessed a collegial relationship and professional rapport between myself and the other stakeholders I encountered.

There was mutual acknowledgment between the students and myself when we saw each other in contexts other than the art education settings where I observed them, such as in the grocery store, at art exhibits or in the neighborhood. When the end of my data collection was drawing near, and I explained that I would be ending my observations, several students asked when they would see me again.

In my role as a researcher I attempted to make my presence as natural as I could (J. A. Hatch & Wisneiwski, 1995) in the vein of qualitative inquiry. With each visit, the participants and I became more comfortable with one another and my presence was indeed able to become more natural. I still correspond with some of my participants on a regular basis with regards to resources, new research and general well being.

Although the nature of qualitative research can be both time consuming and labor intensive I can honestly say it is a labor of love on my part, a love for art, a passion for art education and a desire to share the experiences of adolescent artists with autism. I feel
blessed to have been let into the lives and worlds of these artists, teachers and families. In the following three chapters I present my findings followed by the final chapter that offers analysis and discussion. I have chosen to present this data in a particular order, beginning with the art of the participants. This decision is representative of my location in the social model of dis/ability and as a representation of the person-first paradigm. The data is presented in the narrative way it was collected, through pictures, words, and presence. Through these accounts I hope to describe the experiences of these artists.
Chapter 4: Engagement in and Role of Art

Guiding Research Questions, Engagement in and Role of Art:

1. “How do adolescents with the label of autism engage in artistic production?”

2. “What role does art making play in their lives?”

Introduction to the Presentation of the Data

I have organized these findings both by research question and methodology. As described in the methodology chapter, several data collection strategies were employed in this research and were responsive to the primary mode of communication of the participant. For example participants who used speech as a primary mode of communication were taped and the transcripts analyzed; while for those participants who did not possess typical verbal communication skills, analysis of images and observations were the prevalent modes of data collection.

The primary codes that resulted from data analysis of all sources, as outlined in Chapter 3, revealed three central themes: Engagement in and role of art; Perceptions and understanding of autism and Access to aspects of art education. These themes have become the titles for the following 3 data chapters. I chose to embed the artworks and images that were part of the data collection process within and along side the textual presentation of the data. I also present the data using these themes and drawing upon the metaphor of collage in their organization as it best captures the intersection of art and autism that are central to this study. Collage, which many art historians deem a modern art construction, is something more than a gluing of objects together. It was initially an exploration of the collision of painting and sculpture, a reexamination of what each medium gave to the other. Working within the metaphor of collage as a non-linear, multi-
voiced construct, these multiple aspects of art may appear contradictory or fragmented yet can combine together to simultaneously honor the complexity of art. And, as in a collage, the multiple voices of the participants in this study combine to speak to the myriad of ways that art collides with the world of these adolescents with autism.

This chapter will address the above research questions. Within this chapter readers will find that the artwork produced by these artists is central, as a data source and as visual examples. The inclusion of these artworks was intentional as a way of engaging the ‘voice’ of these artists. The artwork of these participants was a voice that was not always heard through verbal communication, but can speak through image. The analysis of the data for research question 1 and 2 revealed the following themes about how participants engaged in art: (a) through planned art curriculum; (b) through exploration of artistic preference (development of personal style) and (c) through personal exploration or unplanned art curriculum. The themes associated with research question 2 and the role(s) art making played in the lives of these artists included: (a) artmaking and artistic identity; (b) a form of communication and expression; (c) a source of pleasure; and (d) a source of connection. I will begin by examining question one.

**Engagement Through Planned Art Curriculum**

Adolescents in this study participated in art education in multiple settings, in school, out of school and in their personal lives. Therefore context becomes a framework for considering the ways that these artists engaged in art making. Within school contexts, or formal art education settings, these artists often engaged in art through planned art curriculum. However planned art curriculum also occurred within the community art classes, and the private art instruction settings. In this context, the artists in this study
were asked to create prescribed art works. An example of such an activity from one of
John’s private art lessons is pictured in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Pastel Drawing of Still Life by John

*Figure 2.* Pastel drawing of green ceramic vase placed in front of John and lit by a desk
lamp to create shadow and highlight. John was asked to mimic the highlights and
shadows using the range of pastels that Ms. D had laid out for him.

In this activity Ms. D provided the content and purpose of the drawing. John
created this drawing of the green vase in order to illustrate the areas of light and dark that
was created by the directed light source using pastels in varying colors that were provided
by Ms. D. John was not told to incorporate any thing outside of what he could directly
observe, and he did not. Figure 3 is a photograph of the still life set up by Ms. D, and
drawn by John in Figure 2 as part of this planned art curriculum.
Figure 3. Photograph of Still Life with Green Vase

Figure 3. This is photograph I took of the still life that Ms. D set up for John to draw from. She used dramatic lighting to help the highlights and shadows become more visible. She asked John to mimic the shading he saw in his drawing.

The example of planned art curriculum above in Figure 2 is a pastel drawing of the vase photographed in Figure 3. In this drawing John mimicked the highlights and shadows using different colors of pastel. He blended the under layer of color and then added shadows on top of this blended under color, but did not blend these colors in as he had the lighter colors of pastel. John attempted to ‘finish’ the drawing, but was urged by Ms. D to continue to represent the shadows and highlights. He complied somewhat
reluctantly as represented in the hurried zigzagged lines that went on last. These later lines were not blended in the same way as the previous pastel lines, indicating that he was beginning to lose interest. While John was willing to complete this task he did not seem to approach it with the same eagerness as other drawings I had seen him work on. John seemed to understand the importance of the technical skill of representing high light and shadow, as evidenced in his creating the drawing requested by Ms. D, yet his level of engagement was less than I had observed while he worked on other drawings. This drawing is an example of one of the ways that participants in this study engaged in art making. In this situation, Ms. D that asked him to develop and demonstrate a specific technical skill, chiaroscuro, the illustration of light and dark gave John a specific drawing task. While John may not ever choose to draw a still life on his own, the technique of illustrating light and dark is something that he may wish to use in the future when he wanted to create the illusion of dimension or depth in his own preferred subject drawing.

One commonality to the experiences in their participation in the planned art curriculum was that all of the participants created the expected or desired outcome of the art teacher, some to a greater extent than others.

**Engagement Through Exploration of Artistic Preference**

Some of the artists while meeting the criteria established by the art teacher, were able to incorporate some aspect of their own artistic preference or style into the planned art curriculum, either through the type of material used, subject matter or process of working. Figures 4 and 5 are two examples from Rinnah, figure 4 was created in her art class at school, figure 5 is an example of what Rinnah draws on her own at home.
Figure 4. For this assignment Rinnah was asked to create a seascape. She responded with realistic and controlled drawings in crayon that she then over-laid with a soft watercolor wash in a pleasing composition on the 9 x 12 piece of paper.
Figure 5. Rinnah created this painting during one of our in-home, one-on-one studio sessions. While creating this painting Rinnah worked on the floor, choosing not to use the water color pens as pens, but rather pudd paint on the paper and then blowing the ink around by crouching close to her work, using her breath to move the paint around the paper. She was deliberate in the placement of color, working quickly on the large (18 x 24 inch) piece of paper.

If the two pieces are considered using Barrett’s analysis outlined in the methodology chapter, Figure 4 is a seascape, (from planned art curriculum), a water color resist painting that was created to depict an underwater scene with many sea creatures living together. The octopus and jellyfish are surrounded by a school of smaller fish that create a pattern in the background. The bottom of the image is the bottom of the

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The analysis of art documents in this study was done utilizing three of Barrett’s (1994) four areas of art analysis. These areas include, (a) Pure description: answering “what do I see?” (b) Analysis: answering “How did the artist do it?” (c) Interpretation: answering “Why did the artist create it and what does it mean? What evidence do I have to support this interpretation?”
ocean, complete with valleys, sea plants, kelp and coral. In this image Rinnah created a community of sea creatures that seemingly live in harmony. The repeated shapes of the octopus, jellyfish and sea kelp provided repetition and balance in the image. Additionally the schools of fish provided elements of pattern and repetition. This image was in response to a request by the teacher to create a “sea scape” however it contains principles of design that are also represented in Figure 5. Figure 5 in an abstract piece (unplanned art curriculum) that used puddled liquid watercolor blown about the page by Rinnah using a straw. Blowing the paint puddles created the spider like tentacles that move away from the center of the color. The limited palette of yellow and green is spaced equally across the entire page, again creating a pattern. Rinnah created this piece during one of our home sessions. She had that day been introduced to the liquid watercolor brush tipped pens and spent a great deal of time exploring the response of the materials. Rinnah had demonstrated great interest in the layering and combining of colors. In this image her interest in creating non-representational pieces that focused upon color was again represented. Like her piece made at school, this work also demonstrated pattern, repetition and color. The spider like tentacles of the paint puddles being blown through the straw also could be compared to the tentacles of the octopus, jellyfish and sea kelp in her seascape. The quick, loose and non-representational content of this image seemed to represent an intimacy between Rinnah and the material. When she created this piece, she worked quickly, intently and methodically, seeming to forget I was even there as she became more and more absorbed in the response of the wet material. This painting was expressive and unrestrained, perhaps in direct opposition to the level of control and containment that Rinnah worked to achieve while in the presence of others, often to the
point of exhaustion and resulting in what her mother termed a ‘meltdown’. Later I asked Rinnah about the differences in the way she approached art making in her art class at school and what I saw her do at home. Rinnah described her art class at school in this way, “Sometimes it is stuff I already know to do. I don’t like it when they show us everything, it takes too long. And sometimes they draw on my paper.” While some of Rinnah’s classmates may share her view on long demonstrations that eat into production time in the classroom there were other aspects of these artists that didn’t mesh well with planned art curriculum. For some of the students the physical environment of the art classroom could interfere with their ability to participate in desired ways. Rinnah goes on to describe the materials in her art room,

Researchers: Do you have good materials at school that they let you use?

Rinnah: Not really. The drawing pencils really stink. They don’t have erasers. The crayons at school smell really bad!

Researcher: What do they smell like? Anything you can recognize?

Rinnah: They smell like waxy poop.

Rinnah’s sensitive sense of smell and her hypersensitivity to different auditory and tactile sensations also make using certain materials uncomfortable. Both Rinnah and Amy described their dislike of pastels. Rinnah disliked the “noise that the pastels make” on the paper when she draws while Amy described pastels as “smudgy, and they are kind of messy on my hands.” John’s mom also described his early dislike of many of the materials used in the art room describing it this way,

“It's a tactile thing that he didn't like painting. He didn't like holding crayons. He never used crayons. He never -- the only thing he ever did was a felt marker. And
he was meticulous about wanting to keep everything inside the lines, and he'd get very frustrated with himself if he couldn't color inside the lines.”

Like John, many of the artists in this study had a preference for sharp tipped drawing instruments, like Sharpie markers. In one observation Ms. D joked that she should have “bought stock in these things, we go through a lot of sharpie’s here!” It was clear that the preference for particular materials also led to increased skill, take Brandon’s work for example. Typically Brandon’s work with marker was very deliberate, even and precise. When I first looked at an example of his lettering I wondered if he had traced a computer print out because it looked that perfect (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Sample of Hand Lettering with Marker by Brandon.

Figure 6. This example of Brandon’s lettering was done free hand, no pre-drawing, erasing or guidelines were created prior to the use of the marker. Based upon this, it is very precise, evenly spaced and straight.

Amy also prefers to use sharp tipped drawing instruments. Here she is responding to my questions about what materials she has used and what she enjoys drawing.

Amy: I like watercolors. I like to paint shadows and reflections.

Researcher: When you draw your Japanese characters, what kinds of materials do you like to use?
Amy: No. 2 pencils, markers, colored pencils.

Researcher: Do you like to draw on paper with or without lines?

Amy: Without lines.

Researcher: What other materials have you used in your art class in school?

Amy: We did pastels. But I don’t like them.

Researcher: What didn’t you like about the pastels?

Amy: They are smudgy, and they are kind of messy on my hands.

Amy’s father also talks about her aversion to pastels and other media that are harder to control, “Yea, I mean it makes perfect sense about the pastels for her. They don’t suit the way she draws”.

Brandon’s mother talks about both his preference for pencil drawing and his subject matter, “He's still into pencils. See, he's doing his animal thing. Now, I don't know; it's pretty neat. So, I just supply him with paper or take him to Staples now and then. He picks out what he wants.” Brandon’s mother is pleased that she is able to keep Brandon well supplied with materials that he enjoys working with.

In addition to particular preference of materials some of the participants had particular ways of approaching a drawing. The following are excerpts from my observational field notes.

*John picks out the dark turquoise blue blends it with his left hand after drawing with his right hand.*

*John starts at the bottom of his drawing with the colored pastels. He colors with his right hand and blends with his left.*

*John adds darker color to the edge of his vase.*
He is taking a pastel in each hand. John draws in single smooth line contour from the top to the bottom.

As in this description of John, often the artists I observed were so driven and intentional in the work, it was as if there was no one else in the room. And because they did not use a lot of verbal expression they would work intently and silently, often for long stretches of time.

Karl picks up a pencil and immediately starts drawing. He draws smoothly, not picking up his pencil and I don’t see him erase. He starts at the bottom and draws upward. He works VERY quickly, he is resolute, and he seems to know exactly what he is going to draw with very little pause.

Researcher: Karl, do you ever do any erasing or re-draw any lines. Or do you find that they come out right the first time?

Karl: I think that they do come out the first time.

Karl is drawing quicky without looking up. He is seemingly not drawing what is in front of him, but drawing what he knows women’s shoes look like from memory. He then adds the contour of the fabric as an outline around the shoes, flattening the perspective. He draws very quickly, with smooth even pressured lines. There is not variation in his pressure or line variation.

Figure 7 is a photograph of the drawing Karl was working on during the above observation.
Figure 7. This is a marker drawing of a still life that Karl created with a pair of black strappy heels and a piece of black lace that was provided by Ms. D. He first drew the image in pencil and then went over it in his favorite medium, sharpy marker.

Figure 7 is a drawing that Karl created from a still life of materials provided by Ms. D. She chose these materials based upon Karl’s interest in women’s fashion and accessories. Karl arranged the items and then began drawing using pencil. He drew quickly and seamlessly, rarely looking back up at the objects as he drew. He then filled in the area of the drawing around the shoes with circles that represented the circular cuts in the fabric of the lace. There is a movement and sense of vibration in this drawing that is a hallmark of Karl’s style. Even these inanimate objects of the still life seem to have a sense of energy and almost appear to move on the surface of the table in his drawing. The quick way that Karl drew the objects seems to be indicative of his familiarity with the
subject matter, either through images in magazines and other media or through his visual memory of the objects placed in front of him by Ms. D. It seems that this image is a manifestation of Karl’s fascination and familiarity of women’s fashion. He was engaged in this image because he enjoys these objects, they interest and excite him. This interest of his is continually represented both in his artwork and in the things that he talks about. Karl can recall tremendous amounts of trivia about his favorite shows, stars and songs, regularly blurting these bits of trivia out during his art lesson. In Figure 7 Karl created a drawing of a still life (planned art curriculum) but was able to use his preferred medium (sharp tipped marker) and a preferred subject (something related to fashion). This example demonstrates how Karl engaged in art making through a combination of the assignment given by his instructor, Ms. D, integrating his own preference for drawing medium and subject matter.

Often these artists would work as long as they were allowed and often without stopping. They did not seek the input of those around them while they worked during my observations, but would they would respond to input when prompted. The following excerpt from observation transcription illustrates a session in which Ms. D held up several of the paintings that Karl had been working on with her, asking him to decide whether he was finished or would consider re-visiting them to add something more.

Karl: That’s a good one.

Ms. D: Is it done?

Karl: I think they are all done.

Ms. D: Ok, what about his one, some of these edges are painted and some aren’t. Do you want to leave the edges?
Karl: Leave the edges.

This example is just one of many that illustrate how these artists engaged in their art making with intentionality, a sense of aesthetics and clear ideas. In another in home session with Neko, she and I were creating some objects out of polymer clay. Neko, by choice had created her favorite platypus. In this excerpt from the audio transcript Neko has clear ideas about what steps to take to finish the piece:

Researcher: So, we have a couple of options, we could put a hole so it can hang at the top, or we can put a hole in the back so it could be on a chain, like a cool necklace, or something that you could hang it off if in your room, what do you think?

Neko: Decoration.

Researcher: This way? (holding up the platypus by the head)

Neko: By the tail, so it looks like it’s diving.

Researcher: What color do you think would look better?

Neko: Blue.

Researcher: Lighter or darker?

Neko: Darker.

Knowing that Neko was a woman of few words, I tried to pose questions to her that would allow her an avenue into decision making, without requiring her to formulate or articulate the details. So while I was limiting her to a couple of options in each question, the questions considered in succession allowed her choice in the project. By providing her with choices, it allows her to engage in the project with personalized intention.
Engagement Through Personal Exploration

In their personal art-making experience, the artists in this study were often very focused in their pursuits. They spent much of their time engaged in personally planned artistic endeavors. These endeavors were often very restricted in their content, material or method. Brandon’s mother described the hundreds of drawings of trains that Brandon had created, once joking with me saying, “Well like I said, I just throw stuff in bins. I wonder if, like, Picasso's mother, you know, just threw out their crap, you know, after a while? So we get, you know, just like tons, sometimes we do something with the really cool stuff, like I took this one, made copies and turned it into our Christmas card” (See Figure 8).

Figure 8 below is a marker drawing that Brandon created as a further representation of his beloved trains. This drawing illustrates a local train that is traveling around a mountain and coming toward the viewer. There are a variety of cars represented in the image, including an open boxcar carrying a Christmas tree and gifts. The sky is colored dark as if the train is traveling at night. The details included on the train are the actual route numbers from the Amtrak schedule. Brandon draws trains regularly, studies books about trains, watches videos about trains and talks about trains. His mother also described that his interest in trains is also connected to his deceased father, stating that he took Brian down to look at the trains when he was very young, around age 3. Brandon will still talk about those experiences of seeing the trains with his father. It seems this drawing is both an example of Brandon’s focused interest and may have a deeper more personal meaning for him as well connecting to memories of his father.

Figure 8
Other families also described the prolific work of their artist. Karl, Amy, Rinnah, Neko and Devan all drew incessantly at home. This sort of production required support from parents and families. Several of the parents in this study described the ways that they “provided” for the ongoing art production that happened outside of school art classes. Fagan’s mother talked about her frequent trips to the craft store for “supplies” for the ongoing construction of Fagan’s tape decks (See figure 9). Like Brandon’s drawing of the train, the tape decks created by Fagan seemed to play a dual role. They were a representation of something he was focused on, but he also shared a connection with both his mother and father around these objects. As described above, Fagan’s mother would shop for materials with him and actually sit with him to create these. She would cut some
of the elements that were difficult for him and assist him with labeling. Fagan also described to me how his father would help him find information about the tape decks on the Internet. Fagan’s father also shared his own history and stories about listening to music as a young man on tape decks such as the ones he recreated in cardboard. Fagan likely created these tape decks as a source of enjoyment but also as a way to connect to and with his mother and father.

Figure 9

*Figure 9.* Tape deck constructed from cardboard, sticky foam and marker, by Fagan

When his “focused interest”, as his mom describes them, changed to making photographs of food items in the grocery store she joked that her frequent trips to the grocery store were putting a dent in their grocery budget.

Amy’s parents regularly supplied her with professional level materials so she could explore new materials while keeping her well supplied in the “favorite” markers. Devan’s mother would supply him with reams of copy paper because she couldn’t keep up with purchasing sketchbooks for him. Karl had a weekly trip to the store for magazines and art supplies. John also bought and replenished art supplies, usually at the
suggestion of his private instructor Ms. D, but always willingly used. John would carry his supplies to and from the class in a large canvas bag, enabling him to access the supplies at any point in between their weekly lessons.

Each of these forms of engagement could at times be inseparable. It was rare for the artists in this study to limit their engagement in art making within the confines of a planned art activity. They would often attempt to find ways to infuse their own growing artistic sensibilities within those planned art curriculum activities, which were always welcomed by their art educators. The ways that they practiced and explored materials further developed their artistic skills. Their personal engagement in art outside of planned art curriculum also served to help them explore mediums, sharpen skills and develop a sense of artistic style. Each of these forms of engagement ultimately furthered the roles that art played in their lives.

Each of the artists in this study engaged willingly in the production of art. They had unique approaches and interests that were reflected in their work through content and use of materials. There were commonalities in their preference for sharp tipped drawing devices and some shared interests in particular elements of popular culture such as Anime and movies. The context of their engagement was observed across settings but every artist in this study did some artwork outside of these more formalized art education settings indicating that art plays a significant role in his or her life. This self-initiated learning is significant and offers insight for art educators to the motivation and engagement of these artists. It asks art educators to question curriculum and canons of art education that require students to create common pieces or “cookie cutter” projects when all project look similar. The unplanned curriculum of these artists that occurs in their self-
directed artistic production also offers opportunity to connect the art curriculum of the classroom to life outside of the classroom, something that benefits all students. The specific ways that art functions in the lives of these artists will be examined with Research Question 2 in the next section.

**Guiding Question Two:** “What role does art making play in their lives?”

**Artmaking and Artistic Identity**

As discussed in the introduction of this study, the participants as adolescents is significant in that this is a developmental time that is ripe with transition and change. According to Erikson’s psychosocial model of identity formation, identity must be perceived by the self, but also confirmed and recognized by others. Erikson (1959) also described the influence of the social world upon the identity of the individual, believing that the individual cannot be understood separately from the social context. Erikson writes, “Individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically related in continual change” (p. 114). Erikson describes the earliest stages of identity development as “identification” when the child adopts the characteristics or behaviors that are admired by their parents and significant others. Erikson then describes subsequent stages of identity development as the recognition of newfound skills and abilities that accompany cognitive and physical development; increased independence and autonomy outside of the family unit that allows the individual to explore vocations, ideologies, and relationships.

New expectations of adult responsibilities are gradually assumed as an adolescent matures and lead to the emergence of two essential questions of identity, “Who am I?” and “What is my place in this world?” (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). When an individual is able to assess their personal attributes and match these with outlets for expression available in the environment, Erikson (1963) would say identity has been
formed. The adolescents in this study represented various stages of the identity formation process identified by Erikson. Most were in the exploratory early stages of identity formation, as would be expected at the chronological age, and the connection to the social realm was evidenced throughout. Parents were an important and prominent social construct in this study and had the ability to support or suppress the formation of an artistic identity in the adolescent. Parents who valued the identity characteristics of an artist and/or personally held the identity of an artist, were eager to promote art as a strong force in the life of their child, thus supporting the formation of an artistic identity. They found themselves at times able to live vicariously by providing art education experiences for their child. John’s mother talked about the homeschooling art education experiences she provided John in this way, “I love doing it. So for me it was a labor of love... ...to let him do this stuff...” She described John as an artist, and as such his art education was not only enjoyable, but also necessary to support his artistic identity and artistic growth, “…because he wanted to learn about it. It was easier for me to teach him about history through art, about the artwork. I really try to focus on things that I think are going to help to give him foundation for the person he is.” In this quote John’s mom is clearly identifying him as an artist, “the person he is”. In this belief she finds way to incorporate art and art history into his general curriculum as a way to support something she recognizes as strength of John’s and views it as valuable.

When parents believed that art was valuable and valued the identity of an artist, they were more apt to seek out art education experiences for their child, going so far as to enlist the services of private art instructors, like Ms. D. Here art takes on a role in opposition to the legacy of autism. By this I mean that when adolescents with autism are
considered as artists, either by talent or commitment to art making, then that identity begins to eclipse their identification as “autistic”. This shift begins to happen when adolescents with autism have increased opportunity for artistic development through additional art education experiences. Below Ms. D describes what drives parents to seek out her services as a private art instructor.

Some parents are really pushy, especially for kids with a disability. They want them to have success; they see a certain status to being an artist. They can tell other people their kid is an artist, in some circles that is seen as a good thing.

Ms. D recognized how some parents, in their valuing of art, would privilege that identity over others, like that of being an adolescent with autism,

A lot of these kids have parents who are at the University. They don’t see autism as a bad thing, it’s a designer label and then if they can say that their kid is an artist too? Great.

All of the parents who held an artistic identity of their own and therefore valued art saw art making by their child as a fulfillment of a family trait. John’s mom talked about his artistic ability in this way,

…and that he [John’s grandfather] did a lot of artwork. That's from one side. My mother was a concert pianist, and painted, and she did a lot of painting. My sister had been an artist. So there's a lot of family history. History, but he just never really had the opportunity. But there's art in our family on both sides.

Sometimes art and the value attached to it were in direct opposition to the stigma and negative effect that a label such as autism can have on young people. Ms D. offered this observation about the parents of her art students with the label of autism,
They may notice some ability in art and are looking for programs, areas for their kid to be successful. They are looking for validation that their kid has talent. They come to me and ask me if their kid has “potential” or “ability”. I think if the kid has the desire to explore art at whatever level that is good enough for me! What is potential and ability anyway?

Another aspect of identity formation as described by Erikson (1968) and supported by Marcia (1993) who further refined Erikson’s work is the emphasis upon vocational direction. This was demonstrated in this study for John, Karl, Amy and Rinnah. Not only did these parents see the role of art as holding potential for vocational placement, but also as a way for their artist to have a social point of entry. If their child would be “seen” as an artist, then might they be included? Loved? Valued? John’s mom describes why she thinks art is important for her son below,

You know we studied about what it would be like -- what animators had to do and we looked at all the animation cells and when the Warner Brothers store was still up, that was one of the big places he loved to go and he would pour over all those animation cells, look at them and you know I said, someday you could do this if you wanted to.

For some of the older participants in this study there were more conversations about the role of art with regards to vocation and Erikson would argue identity as an artist. For Karl, both his family and his art teachers saw art as a means for him to support himself. Ms. D facilitated Karl’s participation in some local art shows and often talked with Karl about opportunities to make money from his art.
Ms. D: What do you think Karl, when you get a little older, and we’ve been talking about this as a career? Is there anything you want to focus on in your art for a career?

Karl: Is there anything I want to focus on for a career? House Critting.

Ms. D: I was talking about your art, maybe greeting cards, and posters?

Eventually maybe a graduate student or someone who could design a website that [you] could sell things on. What do you want to do when you finish high school?

Karl: Move to New York City.

Amy also talked about where art might fit into her future,

Researcher: So Amy, what do you want to do after high school?

Amy: Go to art school like my dad. Painting and Drawing.

Amy’s Dad (cynically): But you have to learn all different things.

Amy: I know Dad! (Exasperated)… I think that’s what I would want to be an, art teacher.

Younger participants also talked about their future endeavors in art, the following was an email correspondence from Fagan, “When I do art, usually I am thinking about what my hopeful career in the future will be (an inventor) so I do art about the stuff I plan to invent. Creative?” (Fagan, Personal electronic communication, 1-27-08). While the conversations with the younger participants were not all as far projected into their future as Fagan’s with regards to vocation they still made plans for summer vacations and other opportunities to do art outside of the academic year. Neko, Christian and Rinnah all had plans over the school breaks for various art experiences. In an even smaller sense plans for the future might be as simple as the next project to tackle
as Amy refers to here, “I’m probably going to make a graphic novel, but not until I’m done with 7th grade.”

At times potential for artistic identity was eclipsed by an identity as a person with autism. In one observation at Neko’s home the following exchange occurred.

Researcher: Are there other people in your family that do art?

Neko’s Mom [to Neko]: Does Charlie like to draw?

[Charlie is a first cousin who is identified with Aspergers]

Neko: Charlie does.

Corrie: Do you ever look at each other’s drawings?

Neko: No.

Corrie (To Neko): I thought your brother said that your Dad does some architectural drawings?

Neko’s Mom: Actually, we both have floor plan like experience.
I’m much more… I’m much better at that kind of thing than the creative side.

Corrie: Do you garden or do outside planning like that?

Neko’s Mom: When I have time.

Corrie: So I guess the better question is do you enjoy doing that?

Neko’s Mom: Every spring I go out there and create the garden but by the time the summer hits, things just fall apart.

Corrie: Neko, do you know what kinds of things your cousin Charlie likes to draw?

Neko: I really don’t’ know.
Neko’s Mom: Well, it really comes back to- he has Aspergers- so their conversations aren’t really…they don’t get into that depth, like "What do you like to do?" You know, ‘cause that’s not, not where they are at.

Corrie: Yea?

Neko’s Mom: (To Neko) When he was obsessing over Poke Mon, he drew a lot of poke mon didn’t he?

Neko: I guess.

What I found interesting in this exchange is how Neko’s mom automatically associated Neko’s love of art and drawing to her autism, and immediately connected it to her cousin who has the label of Aspergers. This seemed to imply that in her mother’s understanding of Neko, her autism trumped her developing identity as an artist. However, Neko’s mother still supported Neko in artistic development, serving as her Girl Scout leader and often planning and leading the craft activities. She also regularly enrolled her in camps and other opportunities for Neko to enjoy her art making.

When stakeholders are willing to advocate for art experiences because they value art and art making and thusly the development of an artistic identity it could promote additional opportunities for the adolescent artist. The more people advocate for his or her artistic development and identity as an artist the greater the chance for furthering their artistic practice. Karl is one of the lucky one’s, he has three advocates working to support his artistic endeavors and his future art education experiences, his two parents and his private art instructor. Here Ms. D talks about the plans for Karl’s continuation in art education:
[Karl’s] getting older and his parents are recognizing that art could be a part of his life after high school. So right now they are working with his school to see what kinds of programs they can get him into that are going to allow him to do more art.

Even when parents did not see themselves as an artist, as was the case for Brandon’s mom, they recognized art making as an opportunity for their child to do something outside of them, in a way representing the increased autonomy and independence described by Erikson (1968). Brandon’s mother talked about it this way, “His sister, oh she's a wonderful artist. Am I? Yeah… no! It just never -- I enjoyed art, but I don't think I was very good”. Brian’s mom was willing to support his art through art education experiences seeking out opportunities for him as she described here, “Well I signed him up. He took a course at the ‘Y’ first, which is the art gallery.” Brandon’s mother in spite of naïveté about art education understood that Brandon enjoyed art and could benefit from further opportunity to develop his skills. Brandon’s mom saw his taking art classes as a way to further his development as an artist, and consequently his artistic identity; this was the purpose of his participation. Ms. D is also careful to make the purpose of art making for her students clear, pointing to the development of an artistic identity for her students,

It’s not art therapy. But I do think that art can help you work things out. It helps you work on things too. The kids that I work with choose to be here. They want to do art.

When stakeholders, in this case teachers, value art and art making they tend to see an artist with autism as someone who has potential for an identity as an artist and
therefore is a valuable member of the community. These were teachers whom were sought out by parents, they were seen or known to be people who “saw” something in students with dis/abilities and they became something that parents wanted to get access to for their child. John’s mom made this a priority, “For me the best thing was to try to find him an art teacher who could help him discover his own desire to want to do art.” In addition supporting an identity as an artist, the stakeholders in this study often described art as a way that the adolescent with autism could communicate.

**Art as Communication**

In this study, art making could play the role of communicating those things that were troubling, important, interesting or new to the artists. Some of the artists’ themselves described to me their interest in particular content that they drew and described their purpose for exploring a subject through their artmaking. Additionally, several of the stakeholders in this study could look at a piece of art, and “read” what they perceived the message there to be with ease. In one particular interview with Brandon’s mother she pulled out one of the several bins of his work that she had stored at the house and we went through the drawings one by one. With each drawing she would tell me about what she understood the “message” of the drawing to be, describing the context in which Brandon created the piece and further describing his development at that point. Below is an excerpt from the audio transcript from that meeting and visuals of some of the images we were viewing. During our time together Brandon’s mother described one of Brandon’s favorite drawing devices, to attribute animal characteristics to the people in his life. During our time going through the bin we found this image of Brandon’s sister, the cheetah, shown in Figure 10.

**Figure 10.**
Figure 10. Portrait of Brandon’s Sister in Marker

In a written piece that accompanies the image Brandon writes:

“I think she's courageous because she runs track. She's faster than a cheetah. She wears special leopard shoes. She needs to drink water. She needs to practice. She practiced every day and she runs in circles. She's a hard worker.”
In Figure 10 Brandon has represented his sister as somewhat masculine in her musculature, yet feminine with the cropped top and jean shorts. He has included an extraordinary amount of detail including the cheetah pattern on her shirt and all of the seaming on the shorts. She has matching cheetah wristbands and the muscles in her neck are highly defined. Overall, this image is a very complimentary representation of Brandon’s sister, both in picture and word. Brandon made this picture in order to describe all of the characteristics of his sister that he admired. This image and the accompanying words are complimentary and seem to indicate the thing that Brandon admires in his sister. Perhaps this picture is a way for Brandon to let his sister know how he feels about her, without having to construct sentences to speak to her.

In another image we saw a picture of shark eating a small animal (see Figure 11).
Brandon created this marker drawing outside of any assignment. Brandon’s mother often views these kinds of drawings as a form of communication giving her insight into Brandon’s mindset.

Figure 11 is a dynamic drawing of shark as it tears through the surface of the water to take the unsuspecting ferret and likely chomp it to bits. There is a fierce quality to the teeth of the shark and the jagged edge of the water that the shark has broken through. In the color version of this image there is a blood red background inside of the shark’s mouth and surrounding his head, filling the space of the water with the same red stain. Brandon’s mom chuckles when she views this drawing and explains to me,
Here once again he's doing this -- my toilet humor of course, but there's -- there's a ferret, Farrit. You know John Farrit at the high school? If you ever met him, he's wonderful. He's still -- he's around. He was one of Brandon's paraprofessionals over there. Oh they just butt heads all the time! So here's John Farrit, the ferret. He gets eaten by the shark. Ha-ha, ha-ha, we got you, you know. *(Laughter)*

Brandon’s mom described how others would pick up on this device of Brandon’s to assign an animal to a person in his life and would ask her questions about what animal had been assigned to them. Once the speech therapist asked Brandon’s mom why Brandon had represented her as a guinea pig? Brandon’s mom told her to count her self “lucky, she could have done worse!” There were many times and occasions observed during this research when artists used their artwork as a means to communicate emotional or other challenges they were facing in their life. The stakeholders in this study often described how they interpreted the images and thought of them as a communication by the artist to tell them what was on their mind. One example of this is seen below in the image of a couple drawn by John. One of John’s favorite things to do is to draw pictures of women from a magazine. In this image, he has not simply drawn a woman, but a couple. In this image the man and woman are lying together, the man cradling the woman in his arms. It is a very intimate image and certainly smacks of a romantic encounter. The man appears to be topless, the woman in a camisole. It is almost as if they have fallen asleep after lovemaking. When I asked John’s mother about this image, she explained that she sees his interest in drawing beautiful women as him communicating his interest in “having a girlfriend” *(see Figure 12)*. This drawing pictured in figure 12 would seem to support an interest in a heterosexual, romantic
relationship. Something John’s mother says is currently absent in his life. She says that he also enjoys watching television shows like “The Bachelor” which to her also represents his desire for a girlfriend, and perhaps his desire to learn how to go about getting one.
Figure 12. Colored Pencil Portrait of a Couple, By John.

Figure 12. This drawing was done from an image that John chose from a popular magazine. He often gravitates to images of beautiful women models and couples like this, in romantic poses.

Amy’s interest in Anime was visible in the many drawings she created and hung on the walls of her room that create a makeshift gallery (see Figures 13 & 14). Each of the drawings on her wall is unique and represents a different character from the Japanese
Anime genre or her favorite television show *Naruto*. Also among her drawings is a framed award that Amy received in elementary school and a picture of Vannah White from the television show *Wheel of Fortune*. This wall represents the pride that Amy takes in her drawing and is also representative of the prolific amount of work she creates. These images that are hung up are only a small sample of what Amy has drawn. Yet even with the hundreds of drawings she has created she can describe in great detail the characteristics, powers and attributes of each character. It was clear to me that each drawing she created had significance to her.
Figure 13. Photograph of the Wall in Amy’s Bedroom.
Figure 14. Amy Drawing in Her Living Room.

Figure 14 is a photograph I took during one of our home sessions. On this particular day I had brought some new materials for Amy to try, including watercolor pencils, art stix and water-soluble oil pastels. Amy sat on the floor and worked at the coffee table for close to three hours without moving. When she finally did take a break she was stiff and her legs had fallen asleep. Those sensations seem to surprise her, as I believe she had no idea how long she had been sitting and drawing.

Amy’s family viewed her prolific art making as a way to help her process through things she encountered in her life. Amy’s mother says this about it, “Amy's art is her life. It's her chosen method of communication” (Personal electronic communication, 9-12-
Amy’s mother described a particularly tough time following the death of a beloved pet.

A few years ago, we had an awful first (and only) pet experience. Our lovebird "Andy" died unexpectedly (dropped dead in the cage) after only a short time. We had a funeral and my son gave a lovely sermon, we buried it in the backyard and grieved appropriately. Well, for months afterward, Amy drew pictures of birds in every conceivable size and stage of life, from egg to chick, eating, at birdbaths, hit by a car, to hitting a window. We were seriously freaked out because she would hide these pictures in places around the house, magazines, on the toilet seat...Everywhere. The worst was the picture of the bird all alone with its head down and tears coming out of its eyes. This theme went on for a long time. Drawing the birds was the only way she could work it out since she didn't like to talk about it. (Mrs. L, personal electronic communication, 7-23-2008)

In another example, Ms. D describes how Karl’s usually prolific drawing suddenly stopped following the death of his grandfather. Karl and his grandfather had been close and it seemed to Ms. D that upon his passing Karl was either “uninterested” or “unable” to draw. While he never verbalized this, after a few months (similar to a expected grieving period) Karl returned to his voracious drawing habits.

When John was transitioning from elementary to middle school, there was a marked decrease in his drawing. As I discussed earlier, this may be somewhat expected as it is documented in the literature that there is a drop in artistic production in preadolescence as students encounter a mismatch between a developmental need for realism and their still developing drawing skills. Just before John made the request to be
homeschooled he stopped making art all together. John’s mom talks about it in this way,

You know, we love to dress up and do all those kinds of creative things and then
sadly, as middle school years started to take hold and he started getting more
grown up and was more and more in the resource room and out of the regular
inclusive classroom. By eighth grade, he pretty well shut down. No more smiles,
no more talking, and certainly no more artwork, nothing. I don't remember seeing
any artwork at all through middle school. I don't -- I think he was -- he was
required to take a couple of [art] courses.

It wasn’t until John had spent some time at home with his mother doing home
school that he was, in her opinion, able to “heal” and his interest in art resurfaced.

In addition to communicating through their art, Rinnah and Brandon often utilize
different artist personas for different types of work. During one of my visits to his home
as we were going through Brandon’s drawing his Mom explained to me each of his
phases of drawing (with regard to focused interest or content). While we looked at
drawings we noticed that he had signed a drawing with “Rescott”, rather than “Brandon”. I
explained to his mother that during my last observation of Brandon in his art class at
school he had called himself, “Norbert”. Brandon’s mom explained it this way:

Brandon’s Mom (looking at the image from the bin): So he calls himself, you
know, Rescott.

Researcher: His alter ego? Today he was not Brandon; he was Norbert.

Brandon’s Mom: Oh, okay. So now they're in trouble! If he's Norbert, then
they’re is trouble.

Researcher: Oh really?
Brandon’s Mom: When he's Brandon Lion, the lion, he’ll kill people when he is the lion, but when he's Norbert, he's just retreating. He doesn't want to be a lion.

Researcher: So what or who is Norbert?

Brandon’s Mom: Norbert's [his] father [that committed suicide].

During one of my visits with Rinnah making art in her home after about 45 minutes of our time together Rinnah stopped drawing. At this point of our session, Rinnah brought out one of her favorite Webkinz™, a stuffed animal she calls “Waldo”. At this point Rinnah began drawing through (or as) Waldo (see Figure 15). Figure 15 is a photograph I took of Waldo “drawing”. Rinnah was careful to place the crayon in Waldo’s hand before drawing. It was clear to me that Waldo had a style of drawing that was unique from Rinnah’s. He didn’t talk to me, but Rinnah was able to describe to me things about Waldo like what he liked to draw, how he behaved and other personality characteristics of the stuffed animal. To me it seemed that Waldo provided an outlet for Rinnah to express things that she would not necessarily do as and for herself. Waldo also provided an outlet for “out of control” or undesirable urges that Rinnah knows are not “target” behaviors, but those behaviors that bubble up to the surface when she is stressed or tired. It was clear that Rinnah knew the ‘rules’ for good behavior but at times found it difficult to follow them. This was evidenced in the way that she corrected Waldo when he misbehaved.
Figure 15. This is a photograph of Rinnah’s stuffed animal Waldo making a drawing. Rinnah helps Waldo draw using crayons.

Rinnah went on to explain to me how much Waldo enjoyed drawing, and that he would create his own artwork (see Figure 16) that looked like “Potato People” (see Figure 17). Figure 16 is a photograph that Rinnah asked me to take with Waldo drawing independently, unsupported by Rinnah as in Figure 15. Rinnah was eager to direct me in documentation of our time together and often enjoyed an opportunity to take pictures with my digital camera during my visits.
Figure 16. Waldo drawing independently using crayon, while Rinnah watches.
Figure 17. Waldo’s Finished Drawing.

Figure 17. This crayon drawing has some of Waldo’s signature “Potato People”. Notice the facial features are asymmetrical, the body is truncated and the limbs are disproportionate to the body. The fingers are simplified and the expression seems stylistically happy.

Figure 17 is a photograph of Waldo with his finished drawing. Again, Rinnah posed Waldo next to his drawing and encouraged me to document this moment. Rinnah describes the people Waldo draws as potato people because of the uneven and lumpy characteristics of the head; body and limbs that look somewhat like a potato. This style of drawings looked like they were drawn by a person much younger than Rinnah, something typical of a preschooler, as compared to Rinnah’s usual, developmentally appropriate style of drawing (see Figure 18). In Figure 17 the eyes are uneven, there is an apparent absence of a neck and the limbs seem to sprout directly from the body, all of
which are developmental characteristics of a younger child (Kellogg, 1970). Rinnah seems to enjoy regressing into Waldo’s developmental level. In Rinnah’s mind this seems to be a place (or time) where behaviors are overlooked or sometimes seen as less “serious”. She also enjoys drawing in this style that is representative of a much younger child and proudly hangs the pictures around the house. Perhaps this was a happier time for Rinnah and something she re-lives through these activities. This may give some relief to the typical stress of transition into adolescence and the additional responsibility, increased expectations and other physical and emotional transitions that accompany this developmental period. Figure 18 is a self-portrait created by Rinnah and is much more representative of her developmental level. In this image she has created a figure with proportionate arms and legs. She has included details of ears, pupils, texture of the bark of the tree and beams of light radiating off of the sun. The colors are realistic and the expression on the figure is happy. The clothes on the figure seem trendy with flared legs on the jeans and a graphic t-shirt. She included a shadow inside the hole in the tree, so while the sun, tree and hole may be cliché, they are not completely stylized. The branches of the tree are asymmetrical and have bends and knots as a tree would in nature.
Figure 18. Self-Portrait in Crayon by Rinnah

This drawing is what would be developmentally expected for a girl of 11. It includes realistic color and detail, appropriate use of scale, implied perspective and good fine motor control.

Waldo also drew things, and wrote things on his drawing that were intentionally annoying or rule breaking to Rinnah’s mother. In Figure 19 Rinnah explains to me that Waldo has misspelled Rinnah’s mother’s name, even though he knows that bothers her.
Rinnah’s mom explained to me that Waldo often does things to annoy her and she has to discipline him at times, just as she would Rinnah for disrespectful or inappropriate behaviors—although with alternative methods (see Figure 20).
The above are all examples of how the artists in this study could use their artwork as a means of communicating with those around them. But not all artwork was intended as communication, nor had such an impact upon the viewer as Waldo’s (i.e. Rinnah). For many of the artists in this study their artistic production was related more directly to the role that art played in their lives as a source of pleasure.
Art as pleasure

Those around them described many of the artists in this study as having an “absolute passion” for art and art making. But perhaps the best descriptions came from some of the artists themselves. In one of Amy’s and my studio sessions in her home I asked her about art meant to her. She responded, “It’s like something’s going to burst out of me if I don’t create it!” Amy went to say “Oh, I think I will do art forever!” Christian’s mother also stated that he got “a lot of joy” from making his art, often choosing it over watching television or going on the computer (personal electronic communication, 1/7/2008). Fagan also described himself as a “very creative character” that had “inventions and creations” to make, things he “had to do” (Fagan, personal electronic communication, 1/26/2008). The pleasure that they took from making art often led to an increased engagement in art. This increased engagement and additional time that they spent on developing particular (focused) skills led to art playing a significant role in their lives in terms of the time that they spent creating artwork. This time was both in the home and outside of the home as many of the participants in this study were enrolled or participated in art making outside of the home that was intended to provide support for their artistic growth. These more social art education experiences played a role in connecting these artists to the world around them.

Role of art as source of connection

Art serves as an outlet for expression, a means of communication and a source of pleasure for these artists playing a role in connecting these artists to the world around them. First, the act of creating art, even when done in solitude is a social act, a way of representing symbolically what one has experienced around them.

“We’re going to enter this into the local contest in the paper (see Figure 21).
Figure 21. Portrait in Charcoal by John to be Entered in a Local Art Contest.

I really like this contest because anyone can enter, professional artists, kids, and hobbyist....” Ms. D enjoyed entering the work of her students who had a dis/ability label in this contest because it was not only for the work of disabled artists, but her students
with a dis/ability label were put up against and judged along side those without a
dis/ability label. This fact was important to her and to John. The work that John creates
with Ms. D’s support is work that develops his artistic skills but also it helps John to
consider the other things art does for him, like provide him with a venue to put himself
out in. By entering John’s work in the art contest, Ms. D is providing John with the
opportunity to be recognized for his talent and to connect with others like himself who
enjoy art. According to Ms. D, this may have increased significance for John who is
home schooled and does not have automatic access to the display of his work that is part
of typical K-12 art education in schools. Many public schools also include participation
in the Scholastic Art Contest, a national and well-respected art competition, as part of the
art curriculum. These connections with artists or teachers can become significant in the
development of these adolescent artists as is seen in this excerpt from an interview with
Brandon’s mother about a course he took with an artist at a gallery.

Brandon’s Mom: And he took a -- it was with the illustrator and he learned that --
because up until then, he would, you know, all his animal books, he would
perfectly, like perfectly, copy these pictures, or from the TV, or any of the nature
shows. They would be perfect copies. Up until then, they were perfect. But from
[the illustrator] he learned that not only you can copy these animals, but also you
can make them your own. So that was a turning point for him, I think.

For other artists, their artwork becomes a starting point for peer interaction as
described in this example from Amy’s mother.

Anyway, to answer your questions [sent to her by the researcher in an email] a
story may be in order...Amy had done an eagle with chalk outside of school a
couple years ago. All the kids went nuts over it and she positively glowed. The kids came over by themselves to compliment Amy during this recess chalk drawing she was engaged in. I received a phone call from the special education teacher that day informing me a couple of the art teachers came out of school to admire the drawing, and commented on how Amy should be nominated for studio art. When the time came to schedule studio art, I contacted the teacher. She informed me Amy was not ready for studio art since she was unable to give appropriate critique to other students (her language difficulties). She also felt her art was not as developed as the kids she nominated. Needless to say we were disappointed. Amy is ok with it (we were not so ok). John and I arranged for her to take regular art for a full year instead of half a year. This actually upset her since she didn't want to miss the other special she would have received. We had to talk her into it. Amy does use art to express herself, particularly due to her language difficulties. Amy has always drawn and it gives her a release. Lately, she mentions people at school comment on her artwork. It's nice she's noticing the opinions of others and looking to gain acceptance in the ways she can. Amy’s artwork has opened a lot of avenues that wouldn’t have been afforded her otherwise, especially socially.

The connections that are created by and through their artwork can serve to create opportunities for these artists for continued development of their art skills, and grow stronger connections to their artistic identity and the world around them. John’s mother puts forth her idea of the role that art can play as a mode of expressing themselves and their ideas here,
So you know, you know these kids have it in them. It's just how to access it and how to, beyond regular children and wanting them to -- express themselves creatively, how they can feel that this is right for them and how to feel comfortable in expressing what it [art] is for them selves.

**Role of Art and Identity**

What each of the stories above illustrates are they ways that an identity of “artist” can be something that is ascribed on a child by others, or something that the child holds for his or herself. In these two examples it is implied that stakeholders seem to be considering the ways that Amy, Brandon, Karl and others were viewed as having artistic talent that might be further developed, the beginning of an artistic identity. However, adolescence is typically a time when teens “try out” and explore multiple identities, perhaps not ever settling on any one until adulthood (and beyond). Individual identity is often constructed from self-concepts. I can say that many of the participants in this study recognized that they enjoyed making art, often dedicating much of their free time to their pursuits. But they were not developmentally in a place where that personal enjoyment has translated into a either a personal or group identity. Group identity functions to connect self with others who share similar beliefs, practices or traits. For the participants in this study forming a group identity would require connecting with others through interaction, something that was regularly compromised by atypical communication patterns and variance in access to peers. These patterns in communication coupled with the tremendous range in developmental characteristics of my participants made discussions of identity formation challenging. When I asked the question directly, “Do you think of yourself as an artist” I got varied responses. Amy talked about her love of “doing art” and how she could see herself engaging in art making for her “whole life”. Fagan did not
consider himself an artist, but rather a “creative fellow” who invented things. For others I attempted a line of questioning that focuses upon projected vocations or future aspirations, attempting to get at identity formation in this way. But, most of the participants did not articulate in expected ways a future in art (or any future), rather it was implied in their behavior or descriptions. For Karl, he spoke of moving to New York City, a hub of the arts, where his sister was attempting to break onto Broadway. Amy talked about going to art school or becoming an art teacher. David, Brandon, Quin, Neko, Jamal, Devan and Christian did not have ways to talk about where they saw themselves fitting into the world beyond the immediate, or any other aspect of their identity. Yet each of them enjoyed art making, and possessed artistic talents and behaviors that could be further developed and could very well result in a vocation or identity as an artist. As for an identity of a person with autism, again none of the participants in this study stated to me in any way that they identified themselves as a person with autism. In fact, in Neko’s and John’s case they did not wish to be identified in any way as such. So while I don’t have data where any participant says, “I am an artist” this is not unexpected given the communication patterns associated with autism. I do however have multiple examples of stakeholders who clearly view these individuals as “prolific”; “tremendous”; “talented” and “creative” people who spend “hours” making art and are represented in the subsequent data chapters. I argue that these stakeholders are indeed ascribing an identity of artist onto the participants and in so doing find ways to support their artistic growth and provide access to opportunities for art making.

**Negotiating Identities.** The challenge for individuals with a dis/ability can be how to negotiate an identity that is separate from impairment (Murugami, 2009) or one
that incorporates and identity of being a person with a dis/ability such as autism and any other aspect of self in a positive way (Stainback, Stainback, East, & Sapon-Shevin, 1994). For many individuals, an identity of a person with autism could potentially eclipse any other identity; much like an opaque material in a collage can completely conceal what is underneath. The only person who would know that anything was in fact underneath would be the artist his/herself. This analogy seems to be strongly connected to Brandon’s story where some stakeholders saw him as a person with autism first and that identity blocked or hid the artistic identity that lie underneath the surface (or alongside) of autism. This concept is addressed in-depth in the work of disability scholars like Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell and others in their collective work *Narrative Prosthesis* (2001) to name just a few. This concept of the way that the disabled body harkens a cultural location that interrupts and lies over the personal track of the individual and instead leaves a narrative of pity, incompetence and isolation. Isolation was evident in many of the observations for this study, something that prevented any substantial and meaningful peer interaction. With limited opportunity to connect to peers and the limited modes of communication it is no wonder that group identity held by participants in this study was practically non-existent. However, there were stakeholders who regularly described the ways that some (including the stakeholders themselves) would readily ascribe a group identity of “Autistics” upon any individual who may carry a label from the Autism Spectrum. Meaning, they would easily consider all people with autism to be the same, as was described by Ms. D when she talked about how many people think all people with autism must be savants in art, or worse can count cards like Rainman. This kind of essentializing of identity is yet another example of the ways that
identity is written on the body of people with disabilities, or in this case in the behaviors that may accompany disabilities on the autism spectrum. The ways that others read our outward markers of identity include many things beside a disability label that would be privileged to particular individuals but can also include the ways that we move our bodies, speak to others, whether or not we make eye contact or the clothes we wear. These elements of external markers of identity can be a significant part of adolescence and was no different for the participants in this study. Many of the fashion choices of the participants worked to further isolate them from their peer groups. Some parents described the style of their child as self-imposed uniforms consisting of a favorite style, color or inappropriate season of clothes. Elastic wasted pants worn “above the natural waist” did not create giant waves of peer acceptance. Yet Jamal, Rinnah and Amy were very aware of what their peers were wearing and regularly requested clothes that would be considered fashionable or trendy. Yet their clothes alone were not a ticket to peer relationships. Other markers of difference regularly resulted in isolation from and limited interaction with peers interfering with the formation of group identity and the recognition of self concept of “artist” by anyone outside of the participant.

Conclusion

I believe that the most powerful representation of art in the lives of these artists was in their act of creating. Some of the most beautiful, poignant and powerful moments in this research happened when I was simply in their presence as they created. It is these moments that I have hoped to capture in the short film that accompanies this work, in a sense making this a multimodal dissertation. These images and times were to me, indescribable in the text of these pages and sum up visually what I have attempted to do
in these data chapters. The following chapter will consider the perceptions of stakeholders about autism and art.
Chapter 5: Perceptions and Understanding of Autism and Art

Guiding Question, Perceptions of Autism and Art

3.) “What perceptions do the stakeholders (teachers, other professionals and family members) have about autism and art?”

There were four perceptions about autism that were revealed through the data: (a) People with autism struggle; (b) Autism as a construct; (c) People with autism are competent; and (d) People with autism can communicate. One singular perception was revealed about art: art is important. Each of these perceptions will be discussed beginning with the perceptions that people with autism struggle in multiple ways.

Perception one: People with autism struggle.

The concept of struggle was consistently evident in the perceptions of the stakeholders with regards to students’ difficulties with (a) transitions, (b) relationships and (c) communication. This perception may not be unexpected as the prevailing information on autism available to the general public is squarely based in the medical model of disability and therefore focuses upon the deficit perspective. This paradigm considers multiple aspects of a person comparatively to a neurotypical person and identifies and highlights shortcomings. The perceptions of stakeholders about the struggles of people with autism could be readily linked to the definition of autism found in the DSM-IV-TR (2000). These perceptions coincided with the main areas of behavior and cognitive function used to identify and label individuals with autism. One such area relates to life transition.

Struggle with life transition. Many of the stakeholders in this study regularly considered what a label of autism would mean for the students with regards to transitional
planning following completion of secondary education. John’s mother talks about his plans upon finishing high school,

…Now the other problem is his being 17. He's feeling that [high] school burnout. He wants to know when he can go to college because he really likes going over to [a local University speech clinic]. It makes him feel he's in college.

Teens and parents commonly consider aspects of postsecondary planning alike as the teen makes their way through middle and high school and begins to consider life as an adult. These transitions can be trying for anyone, and may be exacerbated for an adolescent with the label of autism. Youth with autism, whose approach to thinking is different and who find communication challenging (Denzin, 1996; Grandin, 1992) may have difficulty understanding the concepts of life planning and self-determination in the same manner as people without autism. John’s mother talks about it here,

…And he knows that this is all part of working towards being a person who's going to go to college, get a girlfriend, have a job, have a real life. And he says, you know, in so many words, you know, no offense mom, but I really don't want to live with you for the rest of my life. And he's heard me in the past say, and I've encouraged him to be, I want him to be more independent and I want my daughter to be because you know I don't want to be the 85-year-old mother driving him up for ordering chicken tenders at McDonald's drive-through.

In this passage John’s mother talks about her expectations for John’s continued independence and autonomy. She provides John with the opportunity to voice his concerns and options for him to exercise self-determination. She regularly talks with John about what he has available to him as he prepares for the completion of his high school
curriculum. All of this is in the hopes of preparing him for adult life. John’s mother is hopeful that part of this plan will include continued development of his artistic identity.

During a home session with Neko and her mother, Neko’s mother spoke about her visions of Neko’s transition from high school, “I can see her working with me at [her place of employment] making copies, sorting mail, stuff like that”. Neko also had a sense of where she was heading, or at least where she wasn’t heading. In this exchange she and her mother are discussing her older brother.

Mom: … He’s [Neko’s brother] really a cute kid, but he just doesn’t do anything with himself.

Neko: He’s going to end up working at McDonalds.

Mom and Researcher laugh.

Researcher: You are not are you?

Neko: (emphatically) NO!

This exchange illustrates that not only families consider transition from secondary education but artists do as well. Each of the families indicated that they were thinking about what might be next for their child, perhaps with art as a part of that transition, either as hobby or vocation.

Ms. D and Karl often discussed and planned for the marketing and selling of Karl’s artwork, Karl had even designed a personal logo that he put on every piece of work he created. Ms. D had also created business cards for him to use at the various craft and festival sales they held, with her own contact information provided in lieu of Karl’s. I joked with her that she was acting as his broker. They were also actively working on “getting him into some art classes at the University” with Ms. D acting as his support
person. Amy also talked about her desire and goal to “go to art school like my dad.” The academic and environmental transitions described by these participants with regards to postsecondary education and vocation all led to important and specific considerations by stakeholders with how best to support these artists through the perceived struggles they could encounter with regards to access and opportunity to the environments outside and beyond K-12 education. The stakeholder’s perceived struggle with transitions (of all types) were often intertwined with other perceived struggles connected with the specific deficits often identified in people with autism using the medical model, in particular with relationships and socio-emotional transition.

**Socio-emotional transition.** During adolescence, relationships move away from parents and toward social relationships with members whom the adolescent is attracted to. In particular, loving relationships with peers and members of the opposite sex were areas of concern for the parents in this study. This was also a concern for the teens as well. In one interview Brandon’s mom talks about it in this way,

I feel bad for him because he doesn't really know how, you know, to like, interact. I mean he knows, but he doesn't appropriately do it. I remember this guy, back when I was in school, he was in our classes and he’d just sit there and draw, he didn't really -- he would just tell you about his drawings and go on and on and on. And most girls just kind of blew him off because he was kind of weird and I would just listen to him and, but he always drew the same thing. And now that I look back on it, you know I think I bet he was autistic or Asperger’s. Because he was high functioning enough that he was in our classes and stuff, but he was, you
know he wasn't sought after. You know with the girls. He just kind of drew all the time. That's all he did…[like Brandon].

John’s mom also spoke about John’s developing interest in the opposite sex, in having a girlfriend and the ways that he “found out” about things.

...there's a real fear [for John] that …I'm not going to be a kid anymore. I'm changing, I'm scared, nobody tells me -wants to tell me- what I'm going to be, who I'm going to be, what it's going to be like… He will talk a lot up in his room, talking back to a video or different things that he’s watching, like “The Bachelor”. He likes some of these shows where they want to find a girlfriend…

[When he goes to the University to visit the speech clinic] He's watching the girls sitting on the couch and seeing what they're like, you know. And that's just that avenue of being delayed, but still having all the same normal urges, yearnings, and curiosity that a lot of kids have that are that age and even if he's 17, well in many ways he's more of a -- he used to be two years behind. Now he's probably three or four years behind. He's been, you know, more curious [at 17] about some of those issues that early teen boys are dealing with.

In this passage, John’s mother describes her perception that John feels frightened that he will not find a girlfriend, or that he won’t be “on his own”, living in his own home, working a job and in a loving relationship. This fear (whether it is hers or his) is based upon the transition away from family toward an intimate relationship that would typically occur during adolescence and a perception of how a person with autism could struggle with this sort of transition. She provided him with some social story books for teens that illustrate different relevant scenarios for teens with grown up cartoon-like
quality, offering responses that might be appropriate when one encounters those situations. In addition to the perceived struggle some parents held with regards to emotional transitions for their adolescent there were also perceptions of struggle with the kinds of relationships that would typically develop during adolescence.

**Struggle with relationships.** Perceptions of struggle with relationships included those interactions that were enduring or fleeting. Interpersonal relationships, according to psychological theory (Argyle & Henderson, 1984) are dependent upon the following components of interpersonal relationships: Skills, Rules, Goals, Roles, Conflicts and Activities. For some of the stakeholder’s perceptions of struggle with relationships was the result of a perceived lack of interaction skills. It would be difficult to consider these components separately because they are interdependent. For example, poor communication skills, or as in the case of people with autism, atypical skills, can lead to struggle with other components such as rules and goals.

**Struggle with interactions skills, rules and goals.** While interaction skills were clearly impacted by limited use of verbal speech and interpretation of social cues there were other aspects of interpersonal relationships that participants also struggled with. Many of the participants struggled with interpreting the “rules” of interaction and the “goals” of relationships. These struggles were most often encountered in less structured interaction time at school, such as lunch and recess. Struggle in these ways often led to increased stress for some participants. Stakeholders described situations where their student or child had struggled, and ultimately they raised concerns for personal safety. One mother shared this with me during an interview:
…I worry about him at school; he would give anyone his lunch money if they asked him for it, no questions asked. And if he did tell them he didn’t have it I worry they might try to take it from him [physically] or hurt him [in an effort] to get money off of him. There are definitely assumptions both about the fact that he is white, therefore must be “rich” and that he is retarded or stupid so is an easy target…

Rinnah’s mother echoed the impact and stress of limited interaction skills saying that, “Where she falls apart is recess or lunch.” These social challenges during lunch time often led to other concerns about nutrition and wellbeing as several of the parents described their children as “forgetting to eat”; “not ever hungry”; being “too distracted” to eat; choosing activities like the computer, television and drawing over sleep; and not staying hydrated which led to complications with headaches, medications, bowel health and overall wellbeing. Struggle was not limited to personal interaction, but occurred in virtual interactions as well. The following example with Karl illustrates how concerns of personal safety result in establishing particular rules for interaction.

Karl like many young men his age had investigated particular Internet sites that related to relationships, dating, sexual orientation and socializing. Following one particular episode involving a transgender website, a rule was put into place that restricted particular websites from his cache. During one of his art lessons, Karl recited the “rules” for Internet to his private art instructor, Ms. D:

Karl: You can’t go on My Space. You can’t go on Facebook. Don’t look up porn.

Ms. D: And don’t give anybody your phone number or personal stuff.

Karl: Nope, and do not type in your birth date.
The particular websites Karl refers to above are social networking sites. Karl’s parents held specific concerns about the predatory nature of some individuals on these sites that may attempt to use Karl’s interaction skills to gain access to personal information that could allow them to take advantage of Karl, either emotionally or otherwise. While these concerns are relevant for all minors who may be frequenting sites such as these there are additional concerns for Karl’s parents as they perceived him to struggle with interaction and the goals of interaction.

Additionally Karl had bid on some (very expensive) artwork on an art auction website, but when the business office contacted Karl’s mother for payment, the auction house was disappointed to find out he had made unsubstantiated bids. While the rules established by Karl’s parents for usage of the Internet would be appropriate for any young person accessing the web, they are of particular significance for many of the participants in this study because they may be less aware of the harmful or predatory intentions of others and may not understand the ramifications of revealing personal information during virtual interactions in particular. However the virtual world was not the only environment of concern for parents with regards to personal safety, the actual world also held cause for concern with regards to interaction skills. While interaction skills and peer relationships in more fleeting interactions had significant impact upon the well being of these artists, more enduring relationships were also a struggle.

Enduring relationships included relationships with family, teachers, and other helping adults. In these relationships stakeholders encountered the same interaction challenges in skills as described in fleeting relationships but in more extensive and intensive intervals. These led to shifts in roles for family members and interruption
offamily dynamics that for some increased levels of stress for both stakeholders and participants.

**Struggle in assumption of roles.** The sibling relationships for the participants in this study were described in what would be considered typical ways including competitive, driving each other crazy, fighting, adoring, collaborative and caring. Each of the participants in the study had siblings whom did not share the autism label. Often the sibling, even when younger, would assume a care-giving role for their sibling with the label of autism. This is a somewhat unexpected shift in the expected care-giving role of the elder sibling typically providing care or supervision of the younger child.

In Rinnah’s case, her younger sister is conscious of when Rinnah might be reaching her breaking point and monitors her eating patterns, reminding Rinnah to eat and drink while at home. The same is true for Christian and Daniel and their siblings while at home. Neko’s older brother checks in with her during the school day in the hall and lunchroom while Devan’s younger sister walks with him hand in hand to and from the bus each morning, leading him to his classroom before going back upstairs to her own. Other examples of the closeness of siblings is seen with Amy and her younger brother, whom are very close, watching their favorite show together on Saturday nights and planning to collaborate on upcoming book projects. Amy described her future plans to publish books where she would do the “drawings and [my brother] will be by editor”. Rinnah and her younger sister both share a passion for arts and crafts and often spend hours together in the basement in their “craft room” creating and responding to art together. Karl is very connected to and admires his older sister, looking forward to her visits. He was also deeply affected when she moved out to pursue an acting career in
New York City, withdrawing from his family and limiting his drawing time, both interpreted as depression by his family. As is also typical for siblings, rivalry and combativeness can be a mode of interaction for relationships. In Brandon’s case his mother describes his older sister’s view of Brandon in this way, “Yeah, they want to kill each other. More so [his sister] because, you know, [Brandon]’s not normal and she wants to make him normal. That's kind of hard.” Here Brandon’s mother describes the challenge for Brandon’s sibling to negotiate the meaning of Brandon’s dis/ability and how it fits into her own narrative. These challenges for families can result in conflict among family members around the individual with autism.

**Struggle and conflict.** Rinnah’s mom describes the ways that Rinnah’s label of Asperger’s Syndrome Disorder played out in her relationship with her husband describing the time of Rinnah’s identification as particularly difficult.

He [Rinnah’s father] doesn’t want to see it, he doesn’t want to deal with it. After I got the evaluation from the clinic in Rochester, [identifying her with Asperger’s] he called the other [doctor] back who had said Rinnah had ADHD and anxiety to reiterate that it was *only* that. He is very much in denial. It was much more acceptable to have the ADHD label then the spectrum.

Other mother’s described similar times of stress and strain related to raising a child who is identified with autism. For Brandon’s mother, the additional challenge of being a single mom is described here:

This hasn’t been easy for me you know, it is just *me*, I mean I can’t work! What if the school calls me and I have to pick Brandon up because he has bitten
someone? I have to be here [home] to get him off the bus, make sure he comes inside…

What each of these stories illustrates is that there are both similarities and complexities to raising a teen with autism as compared to raising those without autism. Working within the social model of dis/ability does not mean that these complexities that come with autism do not exist, or are not lived. These diversities do become a part of the lives of the person with autism and those around them. Teens with and without autism must learn to negotiate within the family and outside of families with peers.

**Conflict with peer relationships.** It was common in this study to see peers physically avoid the participants in this study. In one observation, Christian (who has the label of PDD-NOS) was one of the first to arrive to his community art class. He sat at the table nearest to the door. As others filed into the room they all sat at the other table. Not until all of the seats were taken at the back table did anyone come and sit at his table, and even then, they sat the furthest from him. In another classroom, most of the students were seated around the table in the art room. Fagan, a boy identified with Autism was seated on the opposite side of the table from two of his peers. There was one empty chair next to him. When Isaiah, one of the “cool” 6th grade boys arrives to class late, he moves the chair away from Fagan and squeezes in on the other side of the table, to avoid being close to Fagan. For Jamal, a seventh grade boy identified with autism his table in art is always comprised of him and his paraprofessional, even though there are two other seats available at the table. These practices illustrate the physical and social isolation of people with dis/abilities (Malmgren & Causton-Theoharis, 2006). Christian’s public school art teacher, Ms. E, recognizing Christian’s isolation in her classroom attempted to
reconfigure the groupings with assigned seating. Her hope was by assigning Christian and his paraprofessional to sit with other typical students at another table she could encourage peer interaction. Instead, Christian’s paraprofessional requested that she sit at a table alone with the two students she supported as it was “easier” for her “that way.” This frustrated Ms. E as she felt that both students would benefit from lessened scrutiny and proximity of the paraprofessional. However, she did not feel able to question the decision of the paraprofessional as the paraprofessional was “older” than she and had “a job to do”. This example represents the unwritten rules of inclusion kids with dis/abilities don’t really belong at the table with the other kids. Their physical presence is abiding the rule set by legislative mandate but nothing more.

The request by the paraprofessional to maintain the isolation of her students based upon the convenience of her “work” in the account above may also be based in part upon an assumption that the students with autism are either unaware of or do not mind the physical isolation. This assumption works off of the DSM-IV-TR that describes people with autism as “lacking social skills”; “lacking communication skills” and an awareness of the world around them. However, these perceptions of the teens are challenged by observations from this study such as this:

*Karl and Ms D are looking at images of the designer collections introduced during the recent annual Fashion Week event in NYC. Ms. D encourages Karl to look and comment as she scrolls through the images.*

Ms. D: [Looking at an image of Bill Blass Designs on the Internet] How about this one?

Karl: That one is very good.
Ms. D: [reading from the Internet] Bill Blass 2008

Karl: I think Bill Blass got picked on in High School [for being interested in women’s fashion].

Karl’s statement demonstrates both a clear preference for a design aesthetic but also an awareness for the, sometimes, cruel reality of high school (Parker-Pope, 2008). Perhaps Karl is reflecting the ways that he understands the rules of adolescence, in particular to gender roles and the way boys who might be interested in fashion would be treated in high-school. When interpreted this way, Karl’s presumption about Bill Blass’ experience in high school as a young man interested in fashion demonstrates an understanding of how outward markers of difference from the cultural norm can lead to bullying, harassment and even death in schools (Cavendish & Salamone, 2001; Debbaudt, 2003).

Karl also may be sensitive to how identity is often constructed in relationship to a larger group identity. In adolescence, group identity is dependent upon peer acceptance. The rules of normalcy and friendship can be difficult for teens without a dis/ability label like autism and can be further complicated for those with this dis/ability label due to cognitive, social and neurological difference. The rules of relationships become important when the goal of an interpersonal relationship is belonging—a sense of acceptance that connects you to another person. These things, belonging and acceptance were important considerations for the participants and stakeholders in this study and were considered a point of struggle. For John, concerns about peer acceptance were brought about during a visit to what would become his high school. John’s mother describes the experience in this way,
...So they store it [stacks of snack foods] in the [special education] classroom because the special education teacher runs the after school snack bar, and for a kid like my son who knows he has a Diet Coke addiction and he loves Doritos [this is hard because] he knows that he's had this nirvana of not wanting to eat snack food anymore. One of the things he realized, too, is that the fat kids get teased. He's already… I was worried about anorexia. He’s anticipating that he didn't want to be eating junk. He didn't want to be one of the kids that were ‘the fat weird kid’ because those were the two boys that were the most annoying to him. He didn't want anything to do with them.

These experiences echo common experiences for teenagers about peer acceptance and bullying, both with and without dis/abilities (LaGreca & Lopez, 1998). However, this kind of experience can have additional significance for teens with dis/abilities like autism. It is true that appearance and outward identity markers play a prominent role in acceptance (or rejection) by peers. John’s mother describes the ways that kids can be excluded based upon appearance or “weird” behaviors, both of which can be perceived as a part of being a teenager with autism. In a recent NY times article (Harmon, 2004), one 10th grade boy talked about the relationship between his dis/ability and his status with peers, “People don't suffer from Asperger's,” Justin said. “They suffer because they're depressed from being left out and beat up all the time.” These kinds of experiences for teens with and without dis/abilities are at the very least harmful and at their worst life ending. The appearance, attitudes, preferences and interests of the teens in this study at times had a significant impact upon the relationships that they had with peers. Weiss and Harris (2001) describe the difficulties in understanding social stimuli, in initiating and
responding to social bids, and in appreciating the affect that is intrinsic to social interactions for some people with autism. The aspects of interpersonal relationships including skills, activities, rules, goals and conflict are all impacted by the multiple and varietal aspects of autism. However it is important to consider the perceptions of struggle for people with the label of autism as opportunities to consider struggles not as lacking, but rather needs for accommodation and acceptance of diversity. In early research by Rutter (1970) “lack of friendships were the result of a lack of social skill, not social interest.” There is an important distinction between a “lack” of social skills and a struggle due to diversity in levels or means of interaction. A lack of skills frames communication challenge in the absence of skills to communicate. Struggle due to diversity in levels or means of interaction assumes the skill to communicate is present, but the means with which to express the communication may require accommodations or modifications. For the adolescents in this study, struggle in conflict with peers could result in struggle with participation in art activities.

**Struggle in activities.** It is not uncommon for interpersonal relationships to center and develop around an activity such as art. Most of the participants in this study had people outside of their family who provided support for them, in particular with regards to his or her art making. These people included art educators, classroom professionals (i.e. paraprofessionals, teaching assistants and aids) and other paid and non-paid adults. In-school experiences often found the art educators and other classroom personnel assisting the participants in bringing their ideas into aesthetic fruition. They would offer suggestions, assist with the acquisition and manipulation of materials or provide guidance for artistic production by modeling or providing direct instruction. Some of the most
successful support stemmed from those relationships that had significant time to build. This was most clearly seen with Karl and Ms. D., Karl’s private art instructor. Karl and Ms. D have known each other for almost 10 years, here Ms. D described their working relationship in this way:

Karl and I know each other so well! There are just certain things we can talk about. Although there are still somethings, right Karl, that even Mom doesn’t want to explore? There are some topics we don’t like to talk about.

Those helping adults that knew their student well were better able to anticipate how and where they would be of the most support. They could consider which materials and projects might be of the most interest for the artist’s and at times consider ways that they might entice them to try new materials, processes or content. Several teachers exhibited this when they chose curriculum and materials that matched the current interest of students and/or expanded their repertoire. Strong or well-developed interpersonal relationships between the participants and the helping adults were made possible by sustained contact and interaction with the artists and a willingness by the stakeholders to rely on more than verbal communication skills, looking past perceived struggle with communication.

**Struggle with communication.** Stakeholders in this study often relied upon alternatives to verbal communication including body language, behaviors and even artwork as clues to what might be going on for the participants. As was the case for many of the parents in this study, Rinnah’s mother recognized that Rinnah had always “struggled with the social piece”, even prior to her being identified as having Asperger’s syndrome. She described it this way, “It is very difficult to maneuver 6th grade when you
don’t have the spectrum thing, even harder with it.” She went on to describe a particular event at the lunch table in which the girls at the table were telling Rinnah that she had anorexia.

“She was devastated, and didn’t know how to deal with it, she knew she couldn’t tantrum, but she walked up to the counselor and she was fixated on it. She was just walking around her office and wouldn’t go back to the lunch room.”

Rinnah’s struggle to articulate her ideas in order to challenge the opinions of her peers clearly impacts her ability to interact in the less structured situations like the lunchroom and recess. It was not uncommon for the participants in this study to withdraw during less structured times at school, choosing not to speak to others, instead listening or doing another activity completely, like reading or drawing in a sketchbook.

For some participants, like Brandon, his communication was often not related to any conversation or actions going on around him, instead it was more of a running commentary of things he was drawing or thinking about. He often chose to talk about Sesame Street characters, and other cartoon or animation series. During one of the observations of Brandon in his high school art class he began questioning me about his drawing of “Oscar the Grouch” on his folder. He asked me “how do you think he is feeling?” Brandon then went on to answer his own question saying Oscar was “angry and grouchy”. At the age of 16 this line of conversation marginalized him from his peers and made him the source of ridicule both to his face and behind his back. His art teacher also commented that it made her uncomfortable when he was singing Barney songs in the [high school] classroom.
In Karl’s case, another high school student, he often would spontaneously announce a song title, a movie title or some other burning idea he might have on his mind. They may or may not be anything that his peers would be familiar with, as they were often Broadway shows. He is a popular culture enthusiast of all genres and has an amazing amount of information about fashion, theater, movies and television stored that he can recite at any given moment. The following passage is an example of one of his conversations during his private art lesson with his instructor Ms. D:

Ms. D: Do you want to tell me what you are doing? What is your drawing?
Karl: House critters. It’s some 800 number I made up for their company.
Ms. D: Dare I ask what they are selling?
Karl: The company gives you company for free!
Ms. D: (scolding) Ok, remember we have to be appropriate!

For Karl and Brandon, their communication patterns were generally reflective of their own thoughts and ideas. Their speech was often related to what they were drawing, and seemed to be pre-determined both in content and composition. Because their conversations were often not responsive or interactive this often had a negative impact upon the relationships they held with those around them. Patterns in communication created barriers and visible points of difference between them. Often their lines of conversation were interpreted as an inability to communicate in meaningful ways, causing folks around them to ignore them or not engage with them presenting barriers to developing relationships.
Perception Two: Autism as a construct.

There were essentially two ways of framing autism in this study: the medical model and the social model. These two frames led to ways of considering autism as a negative (disability) or as a dis/ability (neutral and/or positive). While all of the stakeholders in this study were knowledgeable about the aspects of autism as described in popular and medical discourse, some operated out of the social model while others remained in the medical model. The information available through the medical and popular discourses on autism provided families with accessible and concrete information about autism.

Christian’s mother relied upon the medical “experts” to guide her as her son developed and negotiated school. She accessed special education services to support Christian at school and understood her medical providers’ advice to be the “best thing” to do for him. Neko’s mother also relied heavily upon the medical discourse of autism to understand her daughter, both currently and with regards to life down the road. She often looked to the characteristics of autism to explain particular interests and behaviors. In one conversation we had in her home about Neko’s interest in drawing particular subject matters like the platypus and the video game character Sonic, she quickly attributed that to the “perseverations of autism”. She further extended this analysis to Neko’s cousin who has been identified with Asperger’s Syndrome. She immediately went to their shared dis/ability label as an explanation for their narrow drawing interests. We rarely had conversations about Neko that weren’t somehow brought back to the label of autism. I understood this pattern as giving her a certain sense of security knowing that she could attribute particular things to autism, it provided her with a concrete, and in her mind
unchanging way of making sense of something like autism that might be difficult to understand.

Rinnah’s mother also described herself as “channeling my obsessive compulsive disorder into researching for Rinnah.” She is quick to use the language of medical discourse when talking about Rinnah, words like “perseverate” and “tantrums”, often focusing upon the “deficits in eye contact”, and other negative visible behaviors associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder. For Rinnah’s mother she uses the medical discourse both as a way of understanding “why” her daughter is the way she is but perhaps as a release from bad parenting. She described a “sense of relief” when they “got the correct diagnosis.” The “diagnosis” provided a lens to view her daughter through that didn’t involve examining her own “parenting abilities” or the “family dynamics and relationships” The diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome Disorder for Rinnah also provided the impetus for her husband to consider marriage therapy. “We had been working with a family therapist, but this [Asperger’s] was outside of therapy.” So while the diagnosis that Rinnah received admittedly “puts such a pressure on the family” it provided an avenue for seeking help to work on other areas of the family relationship. Rinnah’s mother goes on to say,

We don’t have a lot of family [locally], or support network. My husband doesn’t want anyone to know about it, so it is hard. We had a rude awakening, over the weekend. [This new expert] is gathering all this information to help [Rinnah] and he called us to say he wasn’t sure he could help with ‘couples like this’. That was frightening, we were lucky to get into him, and he said ‘with the nature of the marriage’, he wasn’t sure he could help our daughter. Now he [Rinnah’s father]
says he will go to couples counseling, I have asked him to go for years. I had put
the onus on him, he never set up the meeting. I have found therapy to be very
beneficial for me in the past. My husband hasn’t but he now, as of last night, is
willing to set up an appointment. That is very positive but it has been a long road.

Rinnah’s mother has found another positive aspect to the research she has done on
Rinnah’s behalf. She uses the research that she does about girls with autism as a platform
on both a personal and political level. The research she had conducted about the
particular ways that girl’s with Asperger’s Syndrome Disorder present (compared to
boys) empowered her to continue to advocate for an accurate identification of Rinnah as
someone on “the spectrum.” She also testified in front of state legislation to advocate for
more research on girls with Asperger Syndrome in order to further the supports and
knowledge base for supporting these kids, in particular through adolescence. She believes
that sharing her journey can help others to “not have to struggle as hard as I did”.
Rinnah’s mother regularly sought out “experts” in autism, adolescence and girls as
sources for therapy, diagnosis and information about how best to support her daughter.
The challenge for some of these stakeholders was not to only consider their children in
terms of their autism, but rather consider how dis/ability can be contextualized by the
environment and other factors as is considered in the social model of dis/ability.

The examples above illustrate how some stakeholders in this study framed their
thinking about autism using the medical model. They understood and made sense of their
child using the information about the condition of autism. It provided explanation,
expectation and description. In contrast, other stakeholders chose to consider the label of
autism more completely within the social model of dis/ability. In this paradigm, aspects
of autism are considered within context and importantly autism is no longer the most defining aspect of the child labeled with autism.

In contrast to the medical model that Rinnah, Neko and Christian’s mother’s used to frame autism in their child, some stakeholders framed autism more in the social model and considered how autism is informed by the various environments they encountered in their lives. The language used by these stakeholders was generally more positive in nature than the stakeholders discussed above. For example, Fagan’s mother described him as having “focused interests” rather than obsessions. Amy’s mother referred to her “love” and “interest” in anime to describe her tendency to work with one single style of work.

Often a tension existed between the information generated by the medical model and popular media, and the ways that these stakeholders who held more firmly to the social model of dis/ability considered their artist. This was seen in the description below from Ms. D, a private art instructor for Karl, John and David, as she discussed how the myths and misconceptions of people with autism can color the way these artists were viewed by others, calling into question their competency and ability. In this example Ms. D describes the former art teacher from her school saying, “She still didn’t think they [students with disabilities] had any place in her classroom and using her materials.” She also describes the reaction of people when they found out that she teaches art to students with autism, “You know, one thing that people say to me when they hear that I work with autistic kids, is like, ‘oh, they’re autistic, they must be gifted, they must be a savant in art, are they a savant?’” Each of these descriptions demonstrates the common misconceptions about autism that consider all people with autism to be operating at the same level and as
possessing particular gifts like those portrayed in popular media like *Rain Man* (B. Levinson, 1988). However this research also revealed competing perceptions about people with autism, including perceptions about their communicative and artistic abilities and competency.

**Perception Three: People with autism are competent.**

Stakeholders in this study were on both sides of this statement. For those stakeholders who held this perception to be true, they understand the aspects of autism that inform behavior, communication and cognition to only be a layer of the more holistic picture of these artists, with competency as the foundation for the collage.

For others who located themselves as not considering people with autism as competent, they often relied upon external markers of dis/ability to inform their perceptions. External markers such as verbal communication, social skills and body movements often constructed their perceptions of ability. When the artists with autism did not exhibit any one of these things in “normal” ways some stakeholders assume that it is due to a deficit in cognitive ability. Brandon’s teacher saw his common recitations of Sesame Street as evidence that he did not “belong in [her] high school art classroom”. Brynn’s non-verbal status also planted seeds of doubt in Ms. H’s mind about her “ability” to participate in the day’s lesson, questioning whether she “wants to do” the lesson and is unable to confirm it with Brynn’s actions in the absence of her words. Therefore competence was often constructed within the social environment, through those external markers. In this study, the same assumptions were made with regards to artistic ability based upon external behaviors. Perceptions like these can inform the practices of stakeholders in the lives of these artists as illustrated in the way John’s mom spoke about
his elementary art teacher. This example shows how John’s mother held a belief in John’s ability that was not shared by his art teacher.

But I know there’s such a thing as a late bloomer, and so when John, all through elementary school, not only did he not want to hold a crayon, or a piece of chalk, or a paintbrush, or a marker in his hand, but the art teacher where he went to school discouraged having any contact with him.

Instead, John’s mother believed that John could change the way he thought and responded to things in his life, and she held out hope that there was an artist inside of him just waiting for the opportunity to become visible. The moment came when John was in the fourth grade and created a cubist style self-portrait in shades of blues (see Figure 22).
Figure 22: Portrait in Acrylic by John, Grade 4
This piece, John’s mother said, “absolutely blew me away!” It confirmed for her a belief that John’s just needed a chance to let the “artist within” him out, and to be presented with ideas more than once, not simply counted out if he didn’t respond to something the first time it was presented. When John created this self-portrait, she viewed this piece of art as evidence of his competence as an artist (and person).

Amy’s mother had a similar example with Amy’s work serving as evidence of her competence. Amy’s mother struggled with her knowledge that some of Amy’s behaviors caused people to see her as “less than” her peers and the impact it subsequently had upon people’s perceptions of Amy as a competent artist. However when outsiders, like myself, responded positively to Amy’s work, she graciously accepted the compliments saying, “It’s always nice to hear from someone else! I don’t know any thing about art but I think they are beautiful!” (See Figure 23).
Her understanding of Amy’s ability in art and “competence” as a daughter, sister, and student are validated through these external exchanges about Amy’s artwork. What many of the parents in this study sought for their children is to have someone else view
their child as a competent human being; capable artist and someone who would hold high expectations for them as such.

**Competency and expectations.** Expectations for people with autism can be grounded in perceptions of competence, autism and/or art; and are often created in a collage of the three. Ms. T, a private school art instructor talks about the ways that autism interfaces with expectations, those set by the artist themselves and those she holds for them.

Sometimes they set too high of expectations for themselves. I have to remind them that it may not be necessary, tell them that what they have done is good enough. I only teach functional art but I have often thought that the expressive qualities of painting and drawing would be interesting.

Ms. T generally believes that the students in her class with autism are competent, in that their acceptance into the school as “a college preparatory curriculum” implies that “they have to be able to do that to be here.” In her mind, they must have demonstrated competency somewhere along the line to even earn a spot in her classroom. Ms. T’s understanding of the competency of the students placed in her school implied that she viewed them as individuals capable of learning and growing as the prepared for college. This view of individuals with autism as emerging was at times tempered by understandings of individuals with autism as more stagnant.

At times stakeholders in this study were observed to hold expectations for individuals with autism that were grounded in a belief that they, as individuals, were static and unchanging. For example, the public school paraprofessional who supported Jamal often stated aloud how he anticipated Jamal would respond to a particular material
or project, and these predictions were almost always negative. You could see how him saying things like, “He hates clay” or “He won’t sit still for that” in front of the student might discourage the student’s participation or openness to new experiences and they might indeed fulfill the prophecy made about them. It seemed that the attitudes of the adults that worked with these artists could easily be influenced by the culture in which they worked. When individuals felt overworked, overextended or to be working beyond their capacity when working with students with autism, they were less likely to make repeated efforts to introduce new or engaging opportunities for students. Ms. H spoke about how she identified with a teacher in the film Including Samuel (Habib, 2009), who described her feelings of incompetency working with students with disabilities. Ms. H described herself as “not knowing what she was doing” and asking whether she was expected to have “one lesson or 100” when teaching in an inclusive classroom. During the time of this study, Ms. H became more confident in her knowledge of and work with students with dis/abilities. With increased knowledge and confidence she was able to set and hold higher expectations for her students because she was better equipped to support them in their work.

If experience is indeed a factor in holding high expectations then it is no surprise that Ms. D held her artists with autism to high standards, often “pushing them” to work with new materials, new content or new environments to encourage “growth” in their artwork and as artists. During an observation of John, he had been working almost solely from pictures of women in magazines. Today Ms. D asked him to choose another type of image to work from explaining to me “Well, today we are working on a drawing of the statue of liberty. You know I am trying to get him out of his comfort zone a little and
work on something other than the models from the magazines.” It seemed that the parents in this study who enrolled their children in the variety of extracurricular art education programs sought programs that would support the high expectations they held for their own artist. This was illustrated with Amy’s dad when he described to me that he wanted her to learn “the basics” [elements] of art, a “traditional canon” for artists as the basis for her training as he had received. Parents understood that an art instructor who kept expectations high was doing so from a belief in them as competent and able artists. These stakeholders pushed back against others who did not see these adolescent artists as competent simply because they did not possess typical verbal communication, they saw these artists as people who could communicate in and through art.

**Perception Four: People with autism can communicate.**

**Expanding concepts of communication.** Typical (verbal) communication was a challenge for each of the participants in this study, some to a greater extent than others. Many of the participants had limited, echolalia or non-expressive verbal communication, but used their artwork as a form of communication. It was when their artwork was considered a valid and regular form of communication, lending even more credibility to their competency as artists, that stakeholders were able to consider these artists differently, as something more than “autistic”. For Ms. H, her work with Brynn was challenged by Brynn’s non-verbal status. She often reflected on the effectiveness of her communication exchanges with Brynn,

Brynn’s paraprofessional explains to me that she [Brynn] understands everything we explain to her. So I talk to her that way. [But] when she doesn’t respond by continuing the project I don’t know whether she is done, she’s stuck or what…” I
don’t like it when I project my ideas through my questions. With Brynn it is hard, because I talk to her all the time, but I don’t get a response.

This lack of verbal response from Brynn often made Ms. H feel obligated to make decisions for her. Once, when the class was working on Zulu inspired bowls Brynn, after creating the basic structure of her bowl, proceeded to smash it. Ms. H reflected after the class whether she should have taken the project away from Brynn before she had a chance to smash it.

If that is what a person wants to get out of it…But I think she [Brynn] would really like to have it [the clay bowl], when everyone else’s comes out of the kiln and hers doesn’t. I think then, she will really want to have it.

Possibly what Ms. H should consider is whether Brynn’s behavior is an attempt to communicate or simply her becoming engrossed in the process of working with clay. If Ms. H remains stuck in the realm of relying only upon verbal communication, then she may never “hear” Brynn. Instead she will need to find a way to communicate with her. Throughout the rest of her day, Brynn is supported by a paraprofessional and uses a facilitated communication technology device. However when Brynn comes to Art, her paraprofessional likes to “back off” allowing Brynn to experience art and the art teacher without her. While this increases Brynn’s direct interaction with Mrs. H, it seems to be interfering with their ability to communicate with each other. Interestingly, Brynn’s peers do not see Brynn’s lack of verbal communication as a barrier to her participation and interaction with them.

During this same clay class, Brynn and her peers move to another table to do some drawing after completing their clay project. The girls regularly include Brynn in
their conversations while drawing and do not feel it necessary to finish her sentences or guess at what she wants, they simply ask her and allow her to respond. Whether it is a nod of her head, a beaming smile or other gesture, they seem to have no difficulty seeing Brynn as a competent communicator as seen in this exchange:

Brynn and one of her friends leave the main table and go to another table to color. Ms. H brings over paper and oil pastels and sets them down on the table. Friend 2 is concerned because Brynn caught her foot when she was trying to sit down.

Friend 2: [to Brynn] Are you ok Brynn? Ooh, [Looking at her drawing] that is a nice star.

The two girls clap their hands at the same time, excitedly. Friend 2 begins to draw. Brynn is smiling at Friend 2. Friend 4 joins them. Compliments Friend 2 on her drawing.

Friend 1: Brynn, can I use this paper?

Brynn nods yes. Brynn gets up and goes into the hall. There is some vocalization by her.

Ms. H: Brynn are you all done?

Ms. H brings Brynn back in and asks her to sit back down at the table with the girls.

Friend 3: Brynn, can you spell your name? Brynn adds her name to the picture (See figure 24).
Figure 24. Collaborative Drawing with Brynn and Two Friends.

Figure 24. This is a photograph of the drawing created by Brynn and her two friends in the exchange. I have blurred portions of the image to protect confidentiality.

This exchange is an example of how communication can be altered to make it more accessible to a person with autism. The girls at this table asked questions that Brynn was able to answer without her Facilitated Communication Technology device. They responded to her socially and communicatively in very typical ways, as they would with anyone else. There is a working assumption by Brynn’s peers that she is “just like them” and “is just quiet”. They do not view her as someone who can’t communicate [verbally] just someone who communicates alternatively. Ms. T provides another example of alternative communication practices in the following description of her strategies with students with autism during an interview:
Ms. T: Communication is really the key. You have to figure out what works. I have one student [with autism], she had a really hard time talking with me in class. She would get really upset and act out. But what I found is that email worked really well. I was able to have really good conversations with her about her [art]work, her behaviors in class, a lot of [other] things [as well] but many of the other teachers weren’t willing to do it.

The example of Ms. T shows how flexibility and creative thinking by teachers along with experience and a general willingness to find what will work for individual students. When communication is made accessible through the style of questions presented, the inclusion of writing or drawing or electronic communication, it can open up opportunity for youth with autism as they are seen as competent. Perhaps one reason that Ms. T was so willing to do the work of making her classroom accessible is because she believes art is important.

**Perception Five: Art is important.**

**Art is important for my child because art is important to me.** Many of the stakeholders in this study placed a value on art because it was part of their own identity or experience. For these stakeholders, art was considered an integral part of the life of their child/student because they themselves took pleasure from making art and/or art making was their vocation. Interestingly, those parents who valued art were more willing to view certain behaviors or characteristics of their child as aspects of their artistic nature over the nature of their autism. This perception may be due, at least in part, to parental attribution theory.

Within achievement contexts, Weiner (1986) hypothesized that parents attribute their child's performance as mostly due to two factors internal to the child (ability and
effort) versus two external factors (luck and task). Often people like to attribute certain talents, personality traits, aspects of physical appearance and even quirks to someone in the child’s genetic code. For example, a parent in this study attributed her son’s artistic ability to the fact that “there's art in our family on both sides.” When we consider this theory as it relates to parents of children with autism it raises important questions about the internal (or etiological) understanding of autism and external factors (i.e. environmental, task and support). These differences in parental perceptions of attribution are seen in this conversation with John’s mother as she considers whether behaviors are attributed to his autism or artism:

He is really hard on himself when it comes to his artwork. Everything has to be just so, the right pencil, the right picture, the right line. He gets really frustrated when something doesn’t match his idea exactly. He may only want to do one thing, and if it doesn’t work just right he’s done, he just shuts down. I can remember feeling that way when I did my own art[work], I just figured it was because I was an artist and a control freak. Or is it?

John’s mother recognized many of the behaviors that have been attributed to his autism are behaviors she exhibits when creating art. She goes on to consider how the great masters may have exhibited many of the behaviors that are pathologized in today’s society in this passage:

We have no clue and some of the best artists in the world might have had autistic tendencies. It's not hard to know now, but just from how they drew. I look at what Brueghel’s work was…I mean incredible with his realism and yet Bosch with his bizarre [images]. What was floating through his head?
John’s mother also described how he would line up the dining room chairs at various angles and then walk around them, peering through the openings within and among the chairs. She assumed that he was interested in the shadows and lines that were created by arranging the objects within the room. This contrasts sharply to how Christian’s mother had responded to a similar behavior exhibited by Christian. When Christian crouched down and tilted his head to the side to view objects differently she was told by Christian’s doctor to “stop this [atypical] behavior,” which she did. The difference between these two parent’s perspectives on art mirrored their perspectives on the unexpected behaviors of their child. It also demonstrates how those parents who valued art and regularly considered how art intersected with their daily lives were more willing to consider particular behaviors of their child, not in the terms of the child’s dis/ability but as a perspective of their potential artistic identity. John’s mother clearly understood art to be an important part of the history and make up of her family describing there to be “art on both sides of the family”, while Christian’s mother saw Christian’s artistic talent as an anomaly in their family describing him as “the only one who has any art ability in the family”.

Stakeholders who more closely aligned with the medical model in their perceptions of autism and consequently did not hold an identity as an artist, were more quick to attribute artistic ability to the same stoke of “luck” that brought autism into their lives. This was seen in expressions like Neko’s mother who often remarked “I don’t know where [she] get’s that from” or Christian’s mother who stated his talent “certainly doesn’t come from me!” and Brandon’s mother who claims, “I’m no artist!”
Yet these stakeholders still held the belief that art was important in the life of their child and sought ways to support their participation.

For other participants, like Jamal, Devan and Jevan their families were not positioned (economically or socially) to advocate or support their participation in art in or outside of school. However there were stakeholders who took on that role, at least within the school. Mr. F, Ms. M and Ms. A in particular, strongly advocated for the inclusion of these students in the art classroom, and attempted to establish systems of support that would maximize their participation such as appropriate structure, breaks in instructional time, extended time for projects and additional instructional support. Ms. M was successful in her collaboration with other professionals in the building, making a point to meet with the other professionals who worked with her students, regularly communicating through the student’s notebook with family members and staff. Mr. F took on personal responsibility to work one on one with any student who required additional support. This was because he often felt like the paraprofessionals “didn’t know how to do this stuff” or “were unprepared to support in art”. In his mind, this [art] was important and there wasn’t anyone in his class who would not participate, and if he was the only person who could support them, then he would. Ms. D shared Mr. F’s perceptions about the ability of the classroom paraprofessionals to effectively support students in art claiming that in her experience the paraprofessional was often “intimidated” by art and “end up doing the project for the [kid]. The commitment of people like Mr. F, Ms. M and Ms. D to provide opportunities in art illustrates the perception that art is important for all.
**Conclusion**

One commonality among these stakeholders in this study was the perception about the importance of art in the lives of these artists. The perceptions of the stakeholders about autism were varied, but each played a critical role in the kinds of support provided to encourage growth as artists. It is the perceptions of competency of people with the label of autism and the valuing of art making that informs the practices that can either impede or increase access and opportunities for adolescent artists with the label of autism. Further exploration of the concept of access in this study is explored in the final data chapter.
Chapter 6 Access to Aspects of Art Education

Guiding Question, Access to Aspects of Art Education:

4.) “What role do these perceptions and practices (about autism and art) have on access to art education for these adolescents?”

In the previous chapter I outlined the alternating perceptions that stakeholders in this study held around autism and art. This chapter will address the role that these perceptions and practices have upon access to art education for these adolescents. Access in this study consisted of entry to art education settings, presentation and understanding of the art curriculum, and interaction with the people in art education settings as they participate in art-making as a socio-cultural practice.

Perception One: “People with autism struggle.”

The perceptions of the struggles that people with autism faced were organized around transition, relationships, and communication. These three realms could either limit or support access to art education. The following examples will examine the particular ways that the perceptions of struggle outlined in chapter five inform access to art education for these artists.

Struggle with transition and decision-making. Transitions have been described by some people with autism as difficult or challenging (Grandin, 2006; Rubin, 2004). Stakeholders, including parents and teachers, also identified two types of transition as a source of struggle for participants, these included daily transitions and life transitions. Stakeholders perceived daily transitions to classrooms, activities, materials and processes as a struggle for adolescents with autism. When stakeholders perceived (or anticipated)
struggles with these daily transitions, they often made decisions (in practice) that impacted the access that artist’s with autism had to classrooms.

**Daily transition struggle and teacher practices.** The physical presence of these artists in the general art education classroom is a fundamental aspect of their participation in and access to the art curriculum. However there were mediations of physical inclusion that happened regularly around these artists based upon their struggles with aspects of autism. Ms. T described a technique she used to assist her students as they transitioned from the hectic “passing time” when students moved from one class to another through the hallways and into the art classroom.

Another thing is transitions…That’s why when they come in my room I do a lot of breathing and meditation. They just all need to slow down. I mean that’s where the [autistic] kids can really struggle, every thing happens so fast. I just really have to get them [all kids] to slow down. Bring their energy level down, get them to be patient with the materials. That benefits all kids.

Sadly, without transitional planning like that described above it was common to see stakeholders make decisions to limit student’s access to the art room by using attendance to the art room as a punishment (or reward) for behaviors during transition time. Other stakeholders would enact the practice of arriving late and/or leaving early from class in order to avoid difficult transitions. By arriving early to class (which subsequently would require leaving another class early) stakeholders could avoid congested hallway time or allow students an extended time to transition from one classroom to another. In one more extreme case, a student was removed from class because he did not transition successfully into the art room activity. The following is an excerpt from an observation.
Today Devan arrives to art class carrying 3 Clifford Books and 2 National Geographic’s, no dynavox. The Paraprofessional, Ms. A arrives after Devan. Devan is seated at a table with three peers; his paraprofessional is at the end of the table. Mr. F is about to begin the introduction to the lesson. Devan is doing tickle motions with his hands in the air toward Ms. A. Shortly after class begins Devan begins to pound his fist on table. Ms. A is chatting with another Girl that is seated across from them.

Devan signs “Stop” then “don’t” Ms. A signs, “Stop”. The other female student and Ms. A talk about the masks that Mr. F is showing. Devan pushes books around on the table. The girls seated across from Devan shakes her head “no” at Devan as he pushes the books. Devan continues to pound his fist on the table. Devan then bangs his head on the table and pounds his elbow on table. Devan has blown his nose with a tissue so Ms A asks him to go to the sink and wash his hands. Devan goes to the sink and washes his hands. He takes the door of the cabinet next to the sink and slams it hard.

Student 1: (to Devan) Ok son!

Ms. A: (to C) Let’s go!! Come on!

Devan lays down on the floor in front of the sink.

Ms. A: (sternly) Get up off the floor or I’m going to go get [a male Teaching Assistant]. Get up, (more sternly) Get up!

Devan slams the door 2 more times from his position on the floor. Devan continues to lay on the floor ignoring Ms. A and his classmates repeated attempts go encourage him to get up. Ms. A leaves the classroom and returns
with the Male TA. When the male TA arrives Mr. F pulls the table and chairs away from the spot of floor where Devan continues to lay.

Male TA (To Devan): (Sternly, but not loud) Let’s Go. (Points his finger toward the door)

*The room becomes completely silent for the first time as the male TA leads Devan out of the room at 9:52 am, 13 minutes after he arrived.*

*At the end of the class when I spoke to Mr. F about Devan’s behavior he implied that this was a regular occurrence, although he was “getting better”.*

The example above demonstrates that struggles with daily transition (perceived and real) can result in a lack of regular presence and participation in the classroom and is not conducive to a student accessing the art curriculum. We won’t know if Devan’s late arrival due to the perception that he would transition better without the congestion of the scheduled change of classes left Devan feeling out of place when he arrived. The lesson was well under way when he took his seat perhaps if he had arrived on time to class he might have used the same few minutes his classmates did in order to settle in before the start of the lesson.

Observations of David and Karl revealed similar trends. David and his paraprofessional often arrived late to class because they waited to access the bathroom or hallway after the peak passing times as a way to avoid struggles with those more chaotic times. Additionally David and his paraprofessional often requested early dismissal from the art teacher in order to again avoid the high traffic passing times in the hallways. While this simple request aided David in avoiding difficult transitions, it often caused him to miss the introduction or conclusion of the art lesson. Karl was also observed
leaving his art class early in order to prepare for a test in the following class. These strategies can provide useful accommodations for the students, but at what cost to their learning in art? The act of leaving art class early in order to attend to courses in other content areas also sends a message to the student that art is somehow less important. The importance of art in the lives of these students can also be threatened in larger life transitions such as the decision that lead to the inclusion of students with autism in advanced art classes and post secondary art education opportunities.

**Struggle with academic (life) transitions.** Perceptions of struggle with transition seemed to reveal itself in the larger life patterns of transitions for the artists in this study. As students advanced through semesters and grade levels they sometimes encountered barriers to access. Some stakeholders in this study saw the inclusion of artists with autism as a response to legislative mandates and not necessarily an earned progression through a curriculum as is typically the case for non-disabled students.

Amy, a student in a suburban middle school, was presented with an experience that illustrates perceived struggle with transitioning with escalating curriculum. For Amy, a student in a suburban middle school, her lack of human support and advocacy within the classroom had a detrimental impact upon her continued development as an artist by limiting her access to art classes based upon perceptions of struggle with learning and performance in the art curriculum. When I first met Amy and her Mother, Mrs. P, Amy had just completed a very successful year of middle school art. The introductory art courses at this school, were the testing ground for those students that would take the advanced art course in the 8th grade as preparation for high school art classes. Amy’s experience in the middle school classes had been very positive and the encouragement
and support by her teacher had been a source of pride and joy for both of Amy’s mother and her father, who is a professional artist.

Amy, a suburban public school student was transitioning into the 8th grade. As the time for class assignments drew near, Amy was not allowed to enroll in the advanced art class that would be taught by another art educator. Amy’s parents were devastated. When Mrs. P contacted the school to inquire why the advanced art class had not been added to Amy’s schedule, a phone conference with the teacher was scheduled. What was explained to Mrs. P by the art teacher was that while “Amy’s talent in art was adequate for her transition into the advanced class, her communication skills and other behaviors were not at the level that they needed to be for her participation at this level.” There was no discussion about what kinds of supports could have best supported Amy’s participation in the art class, or exactly how Amy’s speech patterns and movement patterns would have negatively impacted her participation in the art class. Amy’s parents, though they expressed their hurt, disappointment, and anger about the situation were unable to change the minds of the stakeholder (art teacher) and decision makers (administration). When it became clear that they would not change the decision that had been made for Amy’s continuation in the art curriculum of the school, they instead sought art education experiences for Amy outside of school that would allow her to continue her artistic development and creative growth.

Mr. and Mrs. P hired a private art instructor for Amy that came to their home and worked with Amy for one hour each week on things that Mr. P and the instructor agreed would provide Amy with a “good foundation” for her art, foundational skills that she would need when she “got to art school”. The decision to disallow Amy’s transition to
the advanced art class continued to be a source of sorrow for Mrs. P long after the decision was made. She described this experience further here:

[this was my first taste of] the change in the ways that Amy would be included as she gets older, it worries me about what their agenda is as she gets older. When she was younger, I never questioned that they [the school] believed she was capable, that she had goals to reach, that she was working toward something. Now, I feel like they are trying to tell me to be “realistic” about her future! I think I am being realistic about her future. She has talent as an artist!

During this conversation I whole-heartedly agreed with Mr. and Mrs. P’s assessment of Amy’s ability in art. Amy’s mother responded with, “It’s always nice to hear from someone else! I don’t know anything about art but I think [her artwork is] beautiful!” This experience helped Mrs. P understand how important advocacy for her daughter will be as she continues to navigate her secondary education. She came to an unpleasant realization that Amy’s art teacher did not view her as someone who was capable of participating in the advanced art curriculum. She would need help to re-imagine Amy as someone who could be an artist and not only someone with the label of autism. Unfortunately I was unable to obtain permission from the district in order to interview this teacher in order to gain a better understanding of the basis for this decision. For me this conversation reinforced what I know to be true about advocacy and self advocacy- that it is essential in order to ensure access and opportunity. If someone is not able to advocate for his or herself, then it is important that they have others in their life that can advocate on their behalf. As Amy gets older, my hope is that she will be
able to advocate for herself, in the mean time, I expect that her parents will find ways that they can best advocate for Amy’s opportunities in art to be maximized.

Ms. D also is someone who understands the importance of advocacy and sees herself as an advocate for students like the ones in this study. She recognizes that there may be some specific needs of students with autism and subsequently that “there are a lot of issues with access to programs” because of the perception of the struggles encountered by students with autism. While she is cognizant of the challenges that full participation may present for students with autism, she sees her job as a way “to provide access”. In the following she describes the work being done on Karl’s behalf:

So right now they [his parents] are working with his school to see what kinds of programs they can get him into that are going to allow him to do more art. How flexible can a district be? We’re really pushing them [the district] to see if they will allow him to take a couple classes at the University and have that count for him. I don’t know if they are going to do it though, they’re afraid. If they do this for him, they are setting a precedent. The bottom line is support equals money. The state is falling behind in support.

For stakeholders who viewed inclusion of students with autism as impeded by perceived struggles (cognitive, communicative, interpersonal relationships and otherwise) it often resulted in a feeling of “additional responsibilities” imposed upon them in their job in order to address the students’ struggle(s). This “add-on” philosophy was reflected in feelings of inadequacy as it pertained to the competency of the art teacher to handle students with autism’s perceived struggle(s). One teacher described the negative attitudes
of some teachers about inclusion in this way and how they may impede the student’s access to the classroom,

But you can’t force people to include someone. You have to start with people who are receptive. If you force people you can end up with bad attitudes or worse yet, someone who is unprepared. Support, preparation and willingness, you need all that.

What this teacher describes is the willingness of teachers to seek and provide the support necessary and plan the classroom elements that will ensure full inclusion for all students who come into the art room. Full inclusion means that all students, regardless of handicapping condition or severity, will be in a regular classroom/program full time (Gallager, 2001). At times it is difficult for me to separate the perceived struggles of people with autism that stakeholders held because of the multiple aspects of what happens in classrooms often collage together to make the educational experience happen. However it was clear that privileging spoken (and verbal) communication weighed heavily on the minds of stakeholders and presented unique challenges and opportunities for their teaching. The struggle in communication led stakeholders to anticipate struggle with relationships and interaction with the teacher.

**Struggle with relationships means struggle in interaction with the teacher.** In chapter five stakeholders in this study described unwillingness by teachers to interact with their student with autism, as was the case for John in his public school art class. This lack of interaction was devastating to John’s mom, and she believed it was rooted in a foundational misperception about the competency of John as a person with the label of autism. A similar case was seen with the interaction between Brandon, a 16 year old,
white, urban high school freshman and his art teacher Mrs. B. In an email correspondence Mrs. N (Brandon’s Special Education Teacher) describes the challenge to interaction in this way:

Let me be honest, Brandon's art teacher (Mrs. B) does not seem nearly as excited as I am [about his being in art]. I do not know if you are at all familiar with the general ed[ucation] resistance that us special education teachers get from time to time. She is a very nice person but very hesitant when it comes to Brandon and even talking to me! That is why I am so excited about Brandon’s participation in this study as I want her to be able to recognize his abilities a bit more. She is constantly questioning theparaprofessional with him to see if she is drawing for him. We have to constantly reassure her that it is all Brandon. And she asks her [the paraprofessional] right in front of Brandon even!

An important aspect of Mrs. N’s description is her reference to the “us” and “them” relationship between special education and general education teachers. This long-standing tension as described by Mrs. N is also counter-productive to inclusion of students. Inclusion requires collaboration and cooperation among all of the stakeholders. It requires a shared belief in the ability, belonging and participation of all students. For Mrs. B, Brandon’s art teacher, her beliefs in Brandon’s ability as a student with autism, directly affected his opportunities for participation in the art class, specifically through her interactions with him and the support (or lack thereof) she provides.

**Struggle with relationships and access to people.** Access to art educators had the potential to enhance or reduce participation for the artists in this study in both school and community settings. Access to art educators was informed by the perceptions of art
educators about autism, inclusive art education practices such as verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as planning and preparation for participation. The perceptions that teachers held about the ability of people with autism, their participation in art education, and their belonging in the community of artists had tremendous impact upon the experiences of these artists. Stakeholders who were most successful in fully including artists with autism often had stronger relationships with their student that allowed them to more fully understand the needs and abilities of the student. The policies and practices that are in place to include students with autism in the art classroom include both high and low technology supports that enable these artists to participate in artistic practice to their fullest potential. Importantly, each of these elements had the ability to support or provide barriers to the access to the art educator. In David’s public school classroom, the paraprofessional acted as a liaison between Daniel and his art teacher, Ms. I. The following is from one of my observations of David and his male paraprofessional:

*Ms. I walks over to the table where David and Mr. C are working. David is seated at the table, but Mr. C stands next to him, often walking away from him and talking with other students, but never losing sight of what David is doing. He allows a great deal of independence on David’s part. Another student asks Mr. C for help. Mr. C walks around to each table to check in with all kids. This is one of the best examples of universal support I have seen!*

Mr. C (to David): Are we done?

David: Yes.

Mr. C: We have to clean the stuff up. I’ll cover this, you carry that.
Mr. C and David carry the items to the sink to wash out their brushes and paint containers. The other two boys at David’s table are sharing supplies. It is time to add strings to the sides of the mask. Mr. C threads one side for David.

Mr. C: (to David) You do the other.

David threads the yarn through.

Mr. C: Can you tie that in a knot for me?

David tries unsuccessfully to tie a not in the yarn.

Mr. C: It’s tough to maneuver, isn’t it? (Holds the strings for him) Tie it together.

Mr. C watches David do as much as he can. David pulls the fishing line back through to tie the knot.

Ms. I (to David) Awesome!

David puts his head down on the table (shyly) Mr. C asks David to tell Ms. I that he is done. David doesn’t respond.

Mr. I: David, are you done?

David: Yes.

David answers descriptive questions asked of him by Mr. C and Ms. I listens to the questions and his responses.

In this example Mr. C is acting as a facilitator for David’s artwork and a liaison for David to communicate with the teacher about his project. The prompts that he provides allow David to structure a conversation with the art teacher about his project. In this case, Ms. I, the art teacher, handles Mr. C almost as an interpreter. She looks and responds directly to David, even through Mr. C is providing some of the conversational elements. This is a useful strategy in that David would not have been likely to communicate to Ms.
I without Mr. C asking the guiding questions. Unfortunately, all paraprofessionals were not as successful in bridging the relationship between the art educator and the student, and at times the paraprofessional could increase the distance between the two, acting as a barrier.

**Barriers to access to art educators.** In Brandon’s case, the presence of the paraprofessional seemed to distance him from the art teacher Mrs. B. In my observations of Ms. B, she had very little direct interaction with Brandon. During my five hours of classroom observation of Brandon, the only direct interaction that Mrs. B had with Brandon was the one time Brandon invited her, with prompting from his paraprofessional, to view one of his drawings wearing a pair of 3-D glasses he carried in his backpack. Mrs. B would respond directly with the paraprofessional, Mrs. L, whenever she approached her with a question about the project. Then Mrs. L would return to Brandon and relay Mrs. B’s comments or instructions. The one direct interaction that I saw between Brandon and his art teacher in all of my observation is described below:

*Brian’s roof slab on the clay house he has built is sagging; it is not dry enough to work with.*

Researcher: Maybe you should ask the teacher.

Brandon: Mrs. B, I need to put something in my house.

Mrs. B: What?

Brandon: I need to put something in my house.

*Mrs. B comes over to see.*

Mrs. B: I think you should wait until later to try to do this. I would leave it a little longer in the newspaper.
Brandon doesn’t respond to Mrs. B, instead he goes over and begins talking to another student then comes back over to continue working on his project at the table designated for clay work. While Brandon is at the clay table Ms B goes over to the table across the room where his folder and backpack are stored and is looking at Brandon’s drawing that is on the table. She studies all of the details and lettering he has done, but only when he is not at the desk.

Brandon is well on task for the completion of his project and spends a great deal of his time conversing with Mrs. L during class. It is possible that Mrs. B’s avoidance of Brandon is because she believes Mrs. L’s presence relieves her of the necessity of guiding Brandon as he works. It is also possible that she is not comfortable interacting with him because of his dis/ability label. Brandon willingly seeks her input when prompted by Mrs. L as he does his peers, yet the perception of struggle with ability to interact appropriately can carry over to peer interaction as well. In particular the art room is often a place where peer interaction plays a more prominent role in class time, in particular during independent work. This unstructured interaction time with peers could present another source of struggle for students with the label of autism.

Practices of exclusion from peers. The isolation from Mrs. B that was described above by the presence of Brandon’s paraprofessional Mrs. L is just one aspect of the isolation that can be experienced by students with a dis/ability label like autism. Often stakeholders regularly employed a practice in the classroom that resulted in the loss of opportunity to interact with peers. This was accomplished through both structure and a lack of structure, meaning some stakeholders assigned seats that separated students with dis/abilities from their non-disabled peers, while others allowed students to chose their
own seats which led to isolation of students with dis/abilities through peers electing not to sit with them. Each of these isolating practices limited the opportunities for peer interaction and can actually compound the perceived struggle of interaction becoming a causality dilemma.

Much of social skill development is the practice of interaction skills. When students are either withheld from inclusive environments with pull out models of special education or their interaction with non-disabled peers is interrupted by the presence of supports (human or otherwise), it seems probable that peer interaction would be a struggle. This struggle is evidenced in the research (Pivic, McComes, Laflamme, 2002; Baurminger & Kasari, 2000; White, Keonig & Scahill, 2000; Ochs, Kremer-Sadlik, Solmon & Sirota, 2001) and was demonstrated in the current study. John’s mother described his frustration with the resource room approach the school took with John,

… his isolation from the regular, typical kids, made it such that by the end of the eighth grade, he’d had it. He decided he’s not going to the high school. He did not want to be in resource room anymore, and he certain wasn’t going to talk to anybody.

She goes on to describe John’s attitude toward people with dis/abilities and his reluctance to identify himself as a person with a dis/ability:

…You know that's the hard part of starting a kid with an inclusion background. It's because… he has this knowledge that he wants to be more. You know, that he has that awareness in himself… [and perhaps] that level of awareness is heightened [more in him] than some kids with this disability. He's really a
disability snob (Laughter). He doesn't want to be with kids that have disabilities.

He wants to be with the typical kids.

Fagan’s mother described his participation in a group that was aimed to build social skills for kids with autism around an art context. Unfortunately, Fagan’s mother described the experience as “unsuccessful” in both venues: socialization and art making. While the program recognized that youth with autism may encounter challenges in the arena of peer interaction and attempted to provide the participants with strategies to support these difficulties, they missed the natural opportunities that might occur among teens by simply creating art together in an inclusive environment. Fagan’s parents saw the art classroom as a place that provided a setting unique from other classrooms, one that might allow for inclusion rather than isolation.

Art classroom practices that provide opportunities to connect. Rinnah’s mom, like Fagan’s, also desired opportunities where their child might have successful peer encounters. She told me that she considered “art classes” as one possible context for “kids like Rinnah”. Rinnah’s mother actively sought environments that would counter act the isolating experiences that schools and special education supports had resulted in for Rinnah in classes other than art.

Amy and Rinnah both described to their parents the kinds of positive peer interactions they encountered when participating in an art class at school. The act of creating art in view of peers and displaying art publiclyserved to facilitate peer interactions. While Rinnah’s description of peer response to art work was perceived as “jealousy”, Amy’s mother recognized Amy’s art as “opening many avenues for Amy, especially socially.” People regularly admired Amy’s work and would use the work as an
entry point for interaction with her. The same was seen with Brandon and one of his peers in art class.

*Brian is standing at the clay table, next to a typical peer, working on his clay house.*

Student 1: I wish I could do that kind of art!

Brandon: Maybe I can do the Walt Disney castle.

Student 1: Brandon, I think you are going to be an artist.

Ms. L (Brandon’s Paraprofessional): He is already an artist.

Student 1: (Emphatically) No, I’m saying mean a BIG Artist! Like Michelangelo!

Brandon: And Bob Ross?

Student 1: Brandon, you'll have to send me a ticket when you are famous, send me a piece of artwork!

Ms. L: You should get his autograph now!

Student 1: Yea!

This exchange demonstrates how the artwork of these artists has potential to lead to peer interaction, when not interrupted by helping adults, and how the artwork produced in an inclusive environment of an art classroom can help to transform the way that their peers view these adolescent artists. But often peer interaction can remain rather surface when it is curbed by perceptions about challenges with communication. I have considered what might have happened if Brandon’s paraprofessional had not intervened in this conversation, would Brandon’s peer have pursued his conversation with Brandon? Would he have told Brandon about his admiration for his work in the same words? Unfortunately we won’t know in this case.
Struggle with communication and practices that access or occlude “voice”. In chapter five it was shown that some stakeholders believed that students with autism struggle with communication. These perceptions were often based upon a privileging of traditional literacy skills of written or spoken word as a primary means of communication in the classroom. When students with autism do not respond in these same modalities, it was assumed that they were incapable of communication. If communication is the primary way of accessing curriculum, then stakeholders must present students with autism entry points other than those using traditional (verbal) communication methods.

For Ms. H, a private school art teacher, inclusion is a given in her classroom. However her experiences with people with autism are limited as are her strategies for teaching them. What Ms. H struggles with is how to negotiate what she “knows” of students and what she is now experiencing. She frequently expresses her frustration with Brynn’s inability to express herself verbally, often lamenting, “I just wish I knew [what she was thinking]”. For Ms. H, the privileging of spoken communication as the primary way to express one’s needs is fundamental in her mind. It is only when Ms. H is able to consider other ways that Brynn communicates that she will better understand her needs. When communication is extended beyond traditional literacy modes artists become contributors to and consumers of the art curriculum. In one observation of Christian in his community based art class where they were making sculptures inspired by Hawaiian gods, the necessity of offering alternatives was made clear.

Christian: So, I’m all done here.

Art Teacher: Looks good. The next step is?

Christian: Name it.
Art Teacher: Yes, I want you to write a description of your god, tell the story about it and what all the pieces represent. Why you chose them, what they mean. You know, write a story about it.

Christian: I’m not much into stories.

Art Teacher: (frustrated) Ok, but I need you to write the description of it and what it means.

Christian: I’m not really that into writing.

Researcher: What if you tell me the story, and I write it down?

Christian: Well, all right!

Christian goes on to recite a detailed description of his God of Love and the symbolism of each part.

“The horns are because he is fierce. The blue and black feathers are because he is strong. The blue eyes are burning with love. The white teeth are pure like love. The red tongue is red for love. He is the Dragon god of Love.”

Christian’s description would have been missed if the offer of a scribe hadn’t been made. Christian’s inability to tell the teacher what about her request was difficult prevented her from cuing into a necessary and very simple support. I question whether this lack of support ideas like scribing may dampen the joy some students have when they come to art, and have the opportunities to work outside of the mostly textual literacy’s in school (and out of school). After the researcher finished scribing Christian’s story of the “Dragon god of Love” he’s ready to go.
This example from Christian’s community based art education class demonstrates how a simple accommodation for written expression unlocked rich and descriptive language that might otherwise be missed. Communicating with the vocabulary of the art room is one way that students can more fully engage with the art curriculum. In another observation of Christian the students were gathered around some reproductions for an activity called “gallery talk”. In this exercise the teacher leads a verbal discussion of reproductions that center on some predesigned questions. The following is an excerpt from my field notes:

Students are seated on the floor in front of the instructional exhibit while the teacher asks a set of prescribed questions. The pace is very fast, Christian does not contribute anything to the discussion but attentive in his body posture, looking at the teacher and directing his gaze toward the reproductions when asked. The fast pace just does not allow him time to formulate and communicate a response. I believe it would be helpful if the art teacher allowed each student a time to talk about a picture in an organized way, perhaps going around the room would allow sufficient time for Christian and others to formulate a response. Or the art teacher could announce the questions to the group at the beginning of class in order to give them time to formulate a response (either on paper or otherwise) before beginning the gallery talk.

In another observation of Devan, where he was able to stay for the entire class, his interaction with the art curriculum was limited and the natural social aspect of creating art in a room full of peers was non-existent due to struggles with communication. The
following are my notes from the exchange including the pertinent background about

Devan and his recently acquired communication technology:

*Today I am observing Devan, a middle school student with the label of Autism.*

*Devan has a paraprofessional (Ms. A) assigned to him for the full day. The first time I observed Devan Ms. A had explained to me that Devan had recently received a DynaVox[^4] for his use. (Devan has attended this school since Kindergarten and is now in 7th grade). He has traditionally been non-verbal at school, but last Friday when the rest of his class was on a field trip, Devan stayed behind with his teachers. During that time he vocalized over 40 words. This was surprising to the staff, and they sought to verify his use of language by quizzing him with a second book of pictures. What is additionally significant about Devan’s verbal expression at school is it is in stark contrast to Devan’s use of verbal language at home. Devan was part of a recent documentary where he was shown talking a great deal with his younger sister and responding verbally to his mother while at home. During my first observation of Devan he had his Dynavox with him. Ms. A used it primarily to help him communicate his emotions, toilet needs and for him to share responses to yes or no questions. At the end of my first observation of Devan I asked him if he would like it if we loaded some art vocabulary on his Dynavox. Devan repeatedly pushed the sad key on his Dynavox. When the paraprofessional asked him why he would be sad, he just

[^4]: Dynavox is a brand name for an Assistive Augmentative Communication Device designed for people with speech and communication challenges. This device allows the user to access pictorial representations of language and will speak for the user when prompted by the use. They are easily customizable and can be updated by school personnel, families and the user themselves by computer.
continued to push the sad key. It was the end of class, and it seemed Devan did not have any interest in adding art terms to his Dynavox so Ms. A and I let it go.

Later that day, when I was signing out in the office I overheard a woman describing to the secretary Devan’s “breakthrough” with verbal language. She was holding a piece of paper that lists all the words he vocalized on the day he got the Dynavox and she was going to put into Devan’s file. This woman was absolutely amazed at his vocalization and goes on to describe how she “thought it was a fluke” so she “tested” him with another book, and he ‘named all those correctly too!’ Devan had been transformed in her eyes. I couldn’t help but approach her, I explained who I was and then asked if there was any way that we might be able to program some art vocabulary into his Dynavox. She looked puzzled at my request of “art vocabulary” and asked for clarification.

Researcher: (To Teaching Assistant) Even the names of colors and things would be helpful.

Teaching Assistant: (rebuking) But he knows all his colors!

Researcher: But, he could ask for things at his table, or let the teacher know what he needs.

Teaching Assistant: He can sign all his colors to Ms. A.

OC: I realized that I wasn’t making it clear that by having art related words in his Dynavox that it would enable Devan to communicate with his peers at the table who may not be as fluent in sign as Ms. A. For the teaching assistant, the Dynavox and (indeed) Ms. A were all Devan needed to maintain his isolated existence in the “inclusive” classroom. At the end of the day, when I returned to
the school this same woman was telling the principal excitedly that Devan had ordered his own lunch in the lunchroom today, voicing his food choices to the staff. The principal responded by acknowledging this “accomplishment”. But I think disappointed the Teaching Assistant with her curt and limited response.

This example of Devan illustrates that there are many additional supports for communication that could be employed around the art curriculum that would provide an entry point for peer interaction. The ability for Devan to interact directly with his peers by asking for materials or discussing the project might lead to additional interaction that could help forge more meaningful relationships. The key is finding a communication system that enables a student’s “voice” to be heard.

Earlier Ms. T talked about the success she has had utilizing electronic communication as a vehicle for student voice, here she explains why she thinks it works so well:

Ms. T: … [my student with autism] could read the emails without the emotional response. We could have these respectful, sometimes blunt, conversations, but always with a loving voice [using email]. You must always be respectful and calm…It’s not useful to force communication. I’d say three quarters of the kids [with autism] enjoy virtual relationships. That’s why email is such a good tool.

These examples illustrate how successful inclusion practices reaches beyond simply placing kids with disabilities in classes. It is a process that is at once complex and simple. It is complex in that requires thoughtful planning for access, opportunity, participation and interaction. It is simple in that it is what should happen for all the members of our learning communities. One thing that may attribute to the difficulty of
successful inclusion is the inability of some teachers to move beyond their deeply held beliefs that are rooted in the all-encompassing power of autism. Next I will respond to the second perception that was described in chapter five.

**Perception Two: Autism is a construct that informs practice.**

The description of this perception from chapter five is an attempt by Kunc (1994) to illustrate the sociological term “spread” specifically as it relates to disability. The disability spread is a theoretical view of disability in which the impairment spreads over the entire existence of the person. Figure 25 is a diagram that represents Kunc’s (1994) theory:

![Figure 25](image)

Norm Kunc’s Diagram of Dis/ability Spread (1994)

There were some stakeholders in this study who were so fixed in their understanding of autism as a construct and its impact upon the person who carries that label that they were unable to consider any aspect of that person without using the lens of autism. Therefore practices by stakeholders were also informed by this lens of autism as something that was the person, it was a world they lived in (a place) and it was some entity with which they must do battle (a thing). In Chapter 5 perceptions about the competency of people with autism held by stakeholders were often rooted in the
communication challenges experienced by some of the artists in this study. The artists were viewed as people who struggled with communication, relationships and competency. These questions of competency at times led to questioning of authenticity and authorship of artwork as was the case for Brandon. Sadly, the practice of questioning authorship and authenticity is not new to individuals with autism (D. P. Biklen & Cardinal, 1997).

There has been much controversy and continued debate about those individuals with autism who utilize facilitated communication strategies for communication. Some people cannot accept that the words typed by these people are in fact his or her words. Instead, they believe that it is the facilitator who is directing the communication in spite of the fact that these assertions have been disproved again and again in multiple controlled studies. While the support of Brandon’s artwork by his paraprofessional differs from the techniques of facilitated communication (FC) there are commonalities between them. First, each is a literacy practice, a mode of storytelling, one by typing words and another through painting images. Secondly, stakeholders in each context root both questions of authorship and authenticity in perceptions of inability. Mrs. B questioned the authenticity of Brandon’s artwork in the same way that critiques of facilitated communication techniques question the authenticity of the words typed by FC users. These perceptions of inability can change the ways that artists with autism participate in art education and artistic practice because of the practices of stakeholders.

In another example, Neko’s mother also questioned her abilities on occasion, questioning whether Neko had “traced” images or drawn them herself. When her mother questioned her in this way Neko did not appear to be upset, just responded with “I drew
them”. These questions do however call into question her belief in the art ability of her
daughter. Yet the artwork produced by Neko, Brandon and others in this study does offer
opportunities for acknowledgement of ability that could lead to increased opportunities in
art education. Opportunities for acknowledgement, both within families and outside of
families were often a source of pride for both families and the artists as was seen when
Brandon’s mother showed me this newspaper clipping during our interview (See Figure
26). These experiences were important for both artists and families because more often
than not, autism eclipsed any other aspect of self, including their art making.

Figure 26. Newspaper Clipping Announcing Brandon’s Art Award.

Other examples of the ways that autism could eclipse aspects of art making were
seen when art education experiences became subservient to other content area learning or
learning outcomes. Ms. D, the private art instructor, describes how she is willing to
reinforce other areas of learning within her art curriculum, at times elevating those
outcomes over the art production.
I try to have the kids practice their talking here, you know the parents really like that, I have them go down stairs and talk to them about what they did in the art class or I have them practice verbalizing things during their time with me. I also try to get them to work outside of their comfort zone, you know kids like Karl they are formulaic drawers, I want to make them try those things, they don’t have to make something that is “good”, but it forces them to try something new. It’s not art therapy. But I do think that art can help you work things out. It helps you work on things too. The kids that I work with chose to be here. They want to do art.

Here Ms. D describes the way that she perceives autism as something that is always present, in the art curriculum that she works with students in and in the art itself. It is representative of the power that autism seems to have for many of the stakeholders in this study. However, Ms. D also recognizes that the artwork created by her artists with autism also can transform the ways that others view them, allowing folks who may question the artistic ability, communicative ability, or competency of these artists to be seen as competent people.

**Perception Three: People with autism are competent.**

In stark contrast to the art teacher’s perceptions of Brandon’s ability in art are Mrs. N’s descriptions of Brandon’s art illustrated in her initial email contact with me regarding this study. Below I have included her descriptions of Brandon and his artwork:

I currently have a student in my class who is a fantastic artist. His attention to the most miniscule details in his art is absolutely fascinating. The way that he portrays perspective in his drawings is quite extraordinary as well. His name is [Brandon]. Art is his absolute passion. You will not be surprised to hear that being
a student with autism one of his favorite things to draw is trains. He is very knowledgeable about trains and will draw in great detail including each intricate part. He also enjoys drawing animals as well and these drawings are amazing as well. He is currently enrolled in a Studio in Art class here at the High School. If given the go ahead we would love to get the paperwork going for permission to have you come to observe and include him in your research.

In this description, the special education teacher described in detail Brandon’s ability in art, yet clearly references its connection to autism in her comment, “you won’t be surprised to hear…that his favorite thing to draw is trains”. It is apparent that the special education teacher’s commitment to people with disabilities having access to the same opportunities offered to individuals without disabilities in her push to get Brandon into the high school studio art class. Her wish is that Brandon’s talent in art would allow the art teacher to eclipse Brandon’s identity as “autistic” with his ability in art and potential for an identity as artist. She sees Brandon’s competency through his art, and therefore believes that he should have increased access to and opportunities in the high school art class.

People with autism are competent and deserve access to materials. Previously it was described how Brandon, Amy, Devan, and others were denied access to the art classroom because of misconceptions about people with autism. However, at times, access to the art room is granted, but access is conditional at best. Ms. D described the ways that some teachers might limit the materials that students with autism would use, for fear that they might “ruin,” “break” or otherwise misuse materials, offering “old broken crayons” rather than more age-appropriate art materials. The artists themselves
also limited their use of materials, preferring sharp tipped drawing instruments over those materials like paint or pastels that were less exact and had a propensity for smearing, blending or otherwise softening. John’s mother describes his preference for felt markers in this way, “It's a tactile thing that he didn't like painting. He didn't like holding crayons. He never used crayons. He never -- the only thing he ever did was a felt marker”. These self-imposed limitations may be related to characteristics of the artist, autism or aesthetic. But without the input of the artists how are we to know? Most of the artists in this study willingly utilized the materials offered within their art education classes without question, materials that were offered to everyone in their class but would evoke their personal preference for materials when doing their own artwork outside of class, like most kids.

In opposition to the teachers described by Ms. D many of the art educators in this study provided full access to materials, with a presumption of ability, and remained ready and willing to modify materials if necessary. This was seen in the case of Ms. H, the art teacher for Brynn. One of Brynn’s behaviors related to her autism was to put art materials into her mouth, sometimes in fair quantities and swallowing them. When selecting materials, Ms. H was careful to provide only non-toxic materials to Brynn, and these were the same materials that were provided to all of the students in Brynn’s class. On the day that the class was creating their Zulu pots, Ms. H provided Brynn with the required clay. Brynn thoroughly enjoyed the experience with the clay, rolling several coils, smashing and cutting the clay with the provided tools. At the point when Brynn began to eat the clay, Ms. H simply removed the clay from Brynn’s workspace and asked her if she was hungry. When Brynn responded “yes” with a nod of her head, Ms. H retrieved
Brynn’s lunch box from her paraprofessional and allowed Brynn to have a small snack before returning to her clay work.

The following class Brynn was presented with the glazes to complete her Zulu Bowl. Brynn, along with her peers, applied glaze to her piece in bold, thick layers as instructed. When she had finished glazing her piece and began to explore the glaze with her mouth Ms. H asked her to stop, explaining that it “might not be good for her”. Brynn continued to put the glaze-loaded brush into her mouth twice more. After her third request, Ms. H removed the glaze and brush from Brynn’s workspace. This approach was an example of how all materials can be presented to artists, with the proper precautions and supervision. Ms. H had an idea that these materials might end up in Brynn’s mouth, yet it did not stop her from presenting the materials to Brynn, it only dictated the way that she monitored her use of them. For Brynn, the materials presented were used, as intended and materials or the opportunity to use them did not compromise her artistic endeavors.

Participation was not only informed by access to materials, it was also impacted by access to the art educator. Here Ms. T describes how she chooses materials based upon her successful use of that material in the past.

What I’ve found is that a lot of them like focused tool use, metalworking, especially making link chains. It’s like the twisting and working is really good. It seems to fit their thinking. It just goes to show you how advanced they really are!

The examples of practices from Ms. H and Ms. T and others demonstrate how the commitment of stakeholders to access and opportunities in art for artists with autism are essential. I just don’t know how I would do it! Before I worked here, this never would have mattered to me. Then I saw, Including Samuel, and there
was a teacher in there who said she cried so many times this year because she just
didn’t know what to do. I knew what she felt like, you know, after working here.
There are some kids that, you know, there are some kids that I just don’t know
what I’m doing.

Ms. T echoes these sentiments when describing her perception about the negative
attitudes of some teachers to include kids with disabilities in general classrooms:

Ms. T: A lot of teachers need to shift out of the annoyance they feel about making
accommodations for the kids with special needs and realize that these are changes
that benefit all kids.

Researcher: Why do you think they are annoyed?”

Ms. T: They are scared. They think that they don’t know how best to work with
[those] kids.

In addition to a working knowledge of how to best support students in art is one
of the first and most basic premises for creating inclusive contexts within art education
settings, or any setting for that matter is the presumption of competence (Biklen, 2006).
A belief in both the ability of the student in art and in the importance of art itself are the
cornerstones for successful inclusion in art education, one that goes beyond inclusion as
physical placement. The importance of art could, at times, be grounded in art as a form of
expression and communication, resulting in a perception of people with autism as
communicative in and through art.

**Perception Four: People with autism can communicate.**

**Communication and beyond.** It was revealed in chapter four’s discussion of the
role of art in the lives of these artists that art at times functions as a form of
communication and literacy. It was also revealed that each of these students described
their participation in art making activities as being primarily for “pleasure”. Therefore, access to art making is first and foremost sought out as a source of pleasure. When the artmaking functions as a source of communication and as a way of exploring and ideas, it becomes yet another reason that access to art making is critical. When the artwork of these adolescents was considered in this way, it led to other considerations about the importance of art and artmaking.

Perception Five: Art is Important

In addition to art functioning as a way to communicate, a source of pleasure and evidence of competency, for some artmaking for art’s sake. The parents viewed these art education experiences as a source of development for the artistic growth, an opportunity for socialization and also recognized it as a source of pleasure for their child. I was curious about why some parents were willing to enroll their child in private art instruction like that offered by Ms. D. What was their motivation? During one of our interviews, Ms. D had this to offer:

   Researcher: Is it usually the kid that initiates taking private lessons?

   Ms. D: I don’t know. I think a lot of times it’s the parents. They may notice some ability in art and are looking for programs, areas for their kid to be successful. They are looking for validation that their kid has talent. They come to me and ask me if their kid has “potential” or “ability”. I think if the kid has the desire to explore art at whatever level that is good enough for me! What is potential and ability anyway?

   Ms. D’s observation about how some parents might seek contexts where their child could be successful is important. It could be an explanation for how and why they support
a child’s interest in art, and could easily be understood to be a support to their artistic growth and development through increased opportunity.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the ways that the perceptions that stakeholders held about autism and art have effected access to art education and art making experiences for these adolescent artists. Some of the stakeholders in this study viewed these artists through a lens of deficit rather than diversity, providing limited or no access to materials or opportunities for art making. However, when stakeholders viewed these artists through a model that presumed competence they were provided greater access to materials and opportunity for art making. In this study it was shown through the work and experiences of these artists that they were competent, communicative and capable of many things: capable of relationships, capable of dreams and capable of becoming artists. While not all stakeholders provided full access to materials, curriculum or even classrooms it is my hope that this work will help to highlight the amazing artists in this study. The most powerful representation of art in the lives of these artists was in their act of creating, which of course requires access to materials and opportunity for art making. Some of the most beautiful, poignant and powerful moments in this research happened when I was simply in their presence as they created. It is these moments that I have hoped to capture in the short film that accompanies this work. These images and times were to me, indescribable in the text of these pages and sum up visually what I have attempted to do in these data chapters. The final chapter will discuss the findings and implications for the field.
Chapter 7: Conclusion and Implications

In this chapter I will review the findings of this study and present the implications for the fields of inclusive art education and art teacher preparation. Suggestions for future research in the areas of inclusive art education, art teacher preparation and the support of adolescents with autism in art-making are proposed.

Summary of Study

Throughout this study a combined qualitative methodology of arts-informed research and critical descriptive ethnography was used to explore the experiences of 13 adolescent artists with autism as they participated in a variety of art education settings. This combined methodology was crucial because it enabled me to combine my own identity as a visual artist and qualitative researcher. The use of collage was the primary vehicle for this arts-informed research, as it seemed the obvious choice in which to honor the visual and verbal texts. The spirit of collage also enabled me to represent the pieces of literature that informed this research as simultaneously autonomous and connected.

The Story I Told

This research sought to tell the story of the ways that these 13 artists accessed and engaged in art making, both through their approach to art making and in the content of their work. Also, I looked to describe the ways that the stakeholders, or those around them, view these artists and the work they produce. The data that were collected in my efforts revealed three central themes: engagement in and role of art; perceptions and understanding of autism, and access to aspects of art education. The first theme of engagement and role of art was concerned with how the adolescents with autism engaged in the process of art making and the roles that art played in his or her life. The theme of
perceptions and understandings of autism centered around the perceptions that stakeholders held about the characteristics of autism and how they would impact the life of someone who carried that dis/ability label as they participated in art education and art making. The final theme of access to aspects of art education referred to the way that the perceptions about autism of stakeholders impacted practice that informed access for the participants to the curriculum, materials and people that make up art education experiences.

**How I Narrated the Story**

I sought to have the artists be central to this study. This meant that their “voice” was represented alongside those of the stakeholders. In this research, I call upon the recently challenged notions of voice in qualitative research (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008) that calls to question what counts as voice, and therefore data. In this study “voice” is extended beyond spoken work and includes description of actions, behaviors and the visual artwork of these artists. Through participant observation, interviews, analysis of artwork, and description of artistic process the experiences of these artists was developed. Each of the artists who participated in this study is a unique individual who shares the developmental status of adolescence and the dis/ability label of autism. Most importantly the narration came through the art making of the participants; their words; and the words of the stakeholders. The stories were presented through each of the three data chapters that addressed the three primary codes: art, autism, and access.

In this study, autism was at times narrated through the medical model lens that focuses upon the perceived deficits that these adolescents have. When the medical model was utilized, these artists were viewed as inadequate, incompetent or unaware. These stories of autism clearly constructed (or blocked) access points for the artists to art
education settings and subsequently the world around them. Yet another story of autism emerged that viewed these adolescent as artists first, rather than simply “autistic” teens who made art. The artwork they created told of interests, longing, love, loss and friendship. These stories helped to answer the study’s research questions.

**Responding to the Guiding Research Questions**

**Guiding Research Question One**: How do adolescents with the label of autism engage in artistic production?”

Figure 27: Visual Representations of the Ways that Participants Engage in Artistic Production

*Figure 27. This is a diagram I created to help me represent the themes identified in the data. The four blue inner circles are the contexts that the participants work within. The information in the outer squares is the result from working in those contexts.*

Engagement in artistic production requires opportunity, access to materials and artistic drive. In art making, drive is the thing that moves an artist to create, the power
behind the brush (or pencil, or camera, etc), the picture in our mind. In this study the artists were observed engaged in artistic production in multiple settings. The informal settings were generally more flexible than the formal settings (in schools) and encouraged exploration of materials, artistic skill development, and socialization. In their private time the participants engaged in personal art pedagogy. This included down time at school and/or time at home where many of these students engaged in artistic practice as a way of releasing artistic drive and exploring interests. Each of these settings provided the initial requirement of physical access to classrooms and/or materials. In these settings each artist took his or her point of inspiration from a variety of sources, including the teacher’s direction, peers and their own interests in various popular culture items or objects like trains, trucks or anime. For some artists, much of their time was spent engaged in artistic production, producing volumes of sketches or dozens of models of tape decks, and occasionally this was used as a way to motivate students to comply. For example when David and his paraprofessional were working to finish an art project, and David was somewhat unmotivated, David’s paraprofessional, Mr. C, offered David time to draw in his sketchbook as a reward for finishing the project. David responded by working efficiently to complete his project and leave himself time to draw before moving on to the next class. Ms. D, in her private art lessons often alternates preferred modes of art making with new materials or processes as a way to encourage her artists to stretch themselves out of their artistic comfort zone. The willingness of these artists to spend extended periods of time engaged in art making is one clue to the role that art plays in their life. One of the things that I considered was how could the personally directed artwork created
by these artists to be considered in a positive light? The questions below represent the ways that I considered how to bring this to light.

New questions:

- How do art teachers define engagement in art education for students with autism?
- What tools do art teachers need to support multiple means of engagement for students in art?
- How can art teachers capitalize on this out of class time interest in artistic production? How might it inform the in school art curriculum?

**Guiding Research Question Two:** What role does art-making play in their lives?

Figure 28: Diagram of Themes About the Role of Art in the Lives of Participants

*Figure 28.* This was a graphic representation that I created about the themes that emerged from Guiding Question Two. The arrows all point back to the art making, which was for me central to this study. There are also arrows indicating the interplay of these three roles among each other, informing and supporting each.

Art making played multiple roles in the lives of these artists serving as a mode of artistic development through art education, and a mode of communication, and as an identity as an artist. The role of art-making was unique for each individual, and yet was
not exclusive. There was a common experience of art making as a source of pleasure, and therefore as something they would do within and outside of art education settings choosing to engage in art making on their own fruition.

**Artistic Development Through Art Education**

Historically art education has sought to develop intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, cultural and emotional domains (NAEA, Position Statement, 2009). This position from the National Art Education Association represents the many aspects that go into the creation of artwork. In particular, a balanced approach to art education will address each of these areas while developing technical skills as an artist. The artists in this study regularly engaged in several aspects represented in the NAEA position statement, exploring new materials, further refining skills with familiar materials and representing content with aesthetic intent. Each of the settings that were represented in this study addressed areas of artistic development but each uniquely privileged different aspects. For example, in the private lessons that John, Karl and David took with Ms. D, the focus was very much tailored to the individual goals and needs of the artist. For John who preferred to draw images of women, couples, and worked almost exclusively in two-dimensional format Ms. D convinced him to try his hand at an assemblage using scraps of wood. Much to John’s surprise, and to the delight of Ms. D and I, John created an interesting sculpture (see Figure 29). This project was planned by Ms. D in order to push John out of his comfort zone of two-dimensional art. What John ended up creating, and quickly I might add was a sculpture that had two distinct areas of focus. One area (on the right) resembles a structure with symmetrical supporting columns flanking a platform and covered with what could be likened to a roof. This portion of the sculpture seems to harken a solid, if not traditional structure. In contrast the construct on the left is
asymmetrical, with steps leading to an element that contains a sphere on a pedestal, almost creating a more human-like semblance over the architectural vibe of the other part of the sculpture. This part of the piece is offset slightly to the left side creating a sense of being off balance. One could read this sculpture as two very different aspects of John himself. One where he feels very confident and stable, the other that appears top heavy, slightly off center and a bit more futuristic in its feel. I wonder if this relates to the description by his mother of how John does not seem himself as someone who is disabled, rather he considers himself not disabled and capable of being with other “normal” people rather than with other people with dis/abilities like autism.
In the formal art education settings of the art classrooms in school, learning goals were often centered upon those established for the class as a whole (i.e. Art History, Aesthetics or Materials). In community art settings, artistic development was centered upon pleasure and enjoyment of process, along with socialization. In the personal
pedagogical practice of these artists, development for the artists’ was rooted in both pleasure and refinement of preferred materials or content. One commonality among all sites was how often the viewers (art public) read the content of artwork created as communication.

**Art as Communication**

Throughout history, visual art has been used as a means of communication. From the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt to the Caves at Lascaux, France drawings created were used to tell the stories of these lives (Jansen, 1991). These drawings offered insight into the cultural, emotional and spiritual lives of those people much in the ways that the drawings created by the artists in this study communicated through their drawings. Of course, communication through art, as with any form of communication requires three things: a sender, a receiver and a message. In this study the senders were the artists with autism, the receivers the stakeholders (art public) and the messages varied. Some stakeholders sought meaning in the reading of messages looking for insight into the emotional, cultural and artistic lives of these students. When permitted to, within the artwork these artists often communicated their struggles, their desires, joys and questions of adolescence. The difference was, for some of these artists their artwork was their most literal form of communication. For these artists their artwork became their main path to communicate with others and a form of literacy.

**Art as Literacy**

When visual art is seen as something greater than the collection of symbols created with artistic mediums it has the ability to become evidence of something more than aesthetic wonder; it becomes a demonstration of literacy. In the recent development of multi-modal literacies (Jewitt & Kress, 2003) and their importance in the classroom
artistic practice can take a prominent role. However, it is here within this discussion of art as a form of literacy that it is important to clarify the distinction between art as a representation of literacy and the concept of visual literacy. Visual literacy (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Kiefer, 1995; Pantelo, 2005; Saava & Trimis, 2005; Walsh, 2003) is demanding attention through our everyday communication (Restak, 2003) and intellectual awareness for participation in today’s visual society. Consider, then the ways that visual literacy combines with aesthetic appreciation, analysis and production within art education. Here, the inclusion of artistic production as a development of visual literacy (Opat, 2008) is where the critical distinction comes. The production of art, as a source of visual language, is how and when art becomes evidence of literacy, in particular for people with a dis/ability label.

In this research I challenge the current cultural practice that situates art as simply a support for the more traditional textual literacy. This narrow understanding of art considers art as one of three things: (a) Art is merely representation of the print based text (b) Art as simultaneous story telling of printed text and/or (c) Visual images serving to substitute for printed text for the illiterate. I wish to consider artistic production as the text, read in its original language—interpretable stories from the artist. Within this expanded definition of both text and literacy I take to heart Blandy’s (1989) caution against the use of artistic practice as simply a way to teach other “prescriptive” skills, but leaving open the purpose of artistic practice to be, as it is for “typical” peers, a freedom to create. If, as put forth by socio-cultural literacy theorists (Gee, 1990) that literacy is built through a complex process and not a set of sub-skills, then artistic practice should be
treated in the same way. It is not (and should not be) a pre-requisite for art making to be non-disabled, to demonstrate traditional (verbal and written) communication skills or specific behavior expectations such as to sustain eye contact. Therefore it is essential that the participants in this study are not defined by their dis/ability label alone but are considered artists first.

**Artists First**

This study contains the stories of artists (first) with autism (second). This claim is made by me not to prescribe yet another identity upon them (i.e. Autistic or Disabled), but rather to offer an alternative frame for seeing these individuals as competent and capable artists as well as a person with the label of autism. Adolescence is a time when identity is beginning to form, as these individuals were not in a place where their identity formation would be complete, it would be developmentally premature to expect that they viewed themselves as artists, although some did. However, based upon my observations of behaviors, activities and interaction I feel confident in this description. This distinction is an important one as it frames this study in the social model of dis/ability and person first language of dis/ability. These artists created art in concert with their autism; some of the participants in this study might argue that they made art better because of autism if asked. When they are making art, they are no longer the girls or boy with autism, but the person who creates, draws, dreams and does. Through this study I became interested in the way that the identity of an artist and the identification of a dis/ability could be considered together. The new questions below are how I might further explore this concept.

**New Questions:**

- What models do students with autism have in art and art education?
• What opportunities exist for artists with autism beyond K-12 art education?
• How can artists with autism continue to develop artistically within and beyond K-12 art education?

Guiding Research Question Three: What perceptions do the stakeholders (teachers, other professionals and family members) have about autism and art?

The perceptions of the stakeholders, in this case teachers, other professionals and family members, about autism and art informed the ways that they considered the adolescents as people and artists. In this study, these perceptions were considered within two frameworks, the medical model and social model of dis/ability. Stakeholders who saw these artists as disabled, were rooted within the medical model and viewed these artists and their work through a deficit lens. In this way of thinking, art by these artists was not something that was created intentionally but only as a means to some other end, or as a consequence of autism.

Artists as Disabled

Stakeholders like Mrs. B and Amy’s public school art teacher viewed these artists as disabled, considered them limited by the aspects of the autism that made them atypical in communication, interaction and/or behavior. These artists were consequently limited to those settings where they were isolated from typical peers in self-contained classes; isolated within inclusive environments by the proximity of paraprofessionals, or lacking supports (low or high tech) to facilitate their full participation and inclusion in art making opportunities. In this framework, people with autism were considered incapable of the thought processes required for the creation of visual texts intended to communicate with
the viewer (art making). Often they were considered to “have nothing to say” literally and/or figuratively. Through this lens these artists remained in isolation due to their location in resource rooms, self-contained or special education classrooms. Often they were limited in the materials they were provided to work and were often relegated the “old broken crayons” while the rest of the class engaged in new (or at the least well cared for), age-appropriate materials. Stakeholders who held these beliefs that were consistent with the medical model of disability considered people with autism to be (a) obsessive, inflexible and paralyzed by routine and repetitive behaviors; (b) cognitively delayed and/or mentally retarded (c) incapable of autonomous or independent living or life; and (d) unable to engage with those around them. Each of these perceptions was based upon an overall consideration of people with autism as incompetent. On the other end of this spectrum were stakeholders who viewed these artists as competent human beings, albeit through alternative means of expression. Using the social model of dis/ability lens artists like those participating in this study and their work were viewed as dis/abled, rooted within the model of human diversity and viewed through a lens of artism. Art for these artists was a context of possibility, a place of transformation.

Artists as Dis/abled

Stakeholder’s who viewed these artists as dis/abled saw them as “people with the label of autism”, not as solely “autistic”. This distinction meant that they did not deny the presence of characteristics of autism including behaviors, cognitive or neurological differences, challenges in communication and/or engagement with the world around them, but none of these things were viewed as insurmountable, only requiring creativity to work around. These stakeholders believed these artists to be capable of participating to the fullest extent possible in art making, seeking out ways to support belonging and
inclusion as artists in the classroom and community around them. These stakeholders would offer these artists not “old broken crayons” but rather a box with unbroken crayons in a wide array of colors, empowering them to make choices in their creativity. This box of crayons would represent a belief system whose foundation was built upon ideas of competency. These ideals were the driving force behind teachers like Ms. D; Ms. H; Ms. K; Ms. M and others. They all held a belief that the artists in this study were not representative of the “mindblind autistics” represented in the medical model descriptions of people with autism, but rather people who were competent and possessing theory of mind.

**Competency and Mindedness**

In his book *Idiots: Stories about mindedness and mental retardation* Linneman (2001) describes how along with the diagnosis of autism it is “inevitable that the focus of the childrens interpretive communities will converge on the mental retardation question”. The construction of an answer to this question will inform the interpretation of the mindedness of the child. Linneman goes on to describe the relationship in this way, “…If the child has autism but no mental retardation, it is likely that his or her interpretive community will consider “mind” as present but hidden. If mental retardation is detected, then “mind” will become contested territory.” The arguments on either side fall around what evidence is expected, validated and observed. When evidence of mindedness or competency is considered in ways that are broadened, then interpretation can be expanded. Art making provided one such avenue for attributing mindedness to these artists.

Art making and artistic production offered ways for these artists to be seen by stakeholders and others as capable, artistic and participatory, knowingly or otherwise. Art
making offered opportunity for their strengths to be visible, revered, valued, envied and “good”. One example was shown with Brandon who was being congratulated by his peer for his artistic ability and the peer expressed envy of his drawing skills. Rinnah also described feeling like a success in the art room with her teacher where she got “A’s” rather than being known as the “bad grades kid” as she was in her general classroom. Scholars like Howard Gardner (1983) have diligently developed the concepts of intelligence being expressed through multiple avenues including visual, spatial and intrapersonal ways, all of which are encompassed in artistic production and practice. These stakeholders held perceptions that support Gardner’s theory, considering their artistic identities over their autistic tendencies.

Ideas of competency are intrinsically linked to communication; competency and communication are then connected to citizenship and status in society. For people with autism art making offers a way to communicate their ideas, thoughts and interests. This sentiment was described repeatedly by many of the families and some teachers in this study (i.e. John, Brandon and Amy). Making art affords them the means with which to connect to the world around them and produce a means for economic and emotional support in the wider community. However this requires full access to materials and opportunities in the visual arts.

**Access and Opportunity in Visual Art**

The challenge for these artists with autism was not that they did not demonstrate typical literacy skills, express themselves in expected patterns of communication or that they did not interact with others in a way that most neurotypicals would consider appropriate or even desirable, but that they were not viewed as able, competent or expressive. When considered disabled, (medical model) they were often seen as only
performing an expected manifestation of savant-ism, obsession or sensory stimulation (albeit with artistic materials as the vehicle of performance). Stakeholders who viewed these artists through the medical model lens might evoke an “artistic readiness model”. This readiness model draws upon a readiness model that has been proposed in literacy content area (Mirenda, 2003). In the literacy readiness model, an inability to master a set of sub-skills denies access to further literacy instruction. The experiences that work within the literacy readiness model are similar to the experiences that artists with autism have when they are limited in both their access to materials and opportunities for art making and art education as they were in this study. This was similar to the experiences of the artists in this study who were continually required to meet sub-skill sets before being offered full access to art materials, curriculum and even the classroom. Baumgart, Brown, Pumpian, Nisbet, Ford, Sweet, Messina & Schroeder (1982) have suggested that the traditional “bottom-up” model of access to curriculum for students with dis/abilities is invalid and ineffective. It is beautifully described in this passage:

The “Not Ready For” Hypothesis

For years professionals have told parents, “Yes Mrs. Johnson, your child will be completing school in a year or so and we agree with you in theory that she should be taught to perform chronological age appropriate and functional skills in natural environments. However, the result of our multidisciplinary evaluation clearly indicates that your child IS NOT READY socially, emotionally, intellectually, physically, economically, cognitively, politically, religiously, ethically, linguistically and conceptually to learn to perform the skills you are requesting. However, when she progresses through the successive, vertical, linear,
developmentally sound, ontogenetically determined, yet possibly invalid, sequences that we have arranged, maybe then she will be ready to learn to perform chronological age appropriate functional skills in natural environments.”

Instead, Kluth and Chandler-Olcott (2008) suggest an “Act as If” approach to curriculum development for students with dis/abilities. In this approach to curriculum development, students with dis/abilities are presented with curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, interesting and engaging. When curriculum is presented in this way, students are more apt to participate in and benefit from the instruction. This approach reiterates the concept of Universal Design for Learning (D. Rose & Meyer, 2002) that demands a curriculum that is not watered down, but provides multiple and flexible means for engagement with materials and supports to achieve the desired learning outcome. Stakeholders in this study operated in this “act as if” paradigm regularly and consistently when they provided the artists in this study with new, engaging and developmentally appropriate materials. In anthropology this might be described as taking an emic perspective (Goode, 2006). An emic approach in teaching in opposition to the epic approach allows teachers to approach students in a more natural way with regards to communication and interaction, rather than attempting to consider (or classify) the student in a “scientific” way (Garcia, 1992). Approaching students with a sense of their human-ness rather than their deficit evokes the social model of dis/ability over the medical model that situates students in terms of deficits. These materials assumed the necessary sub-skills were in place or would only come with exposure to and practice with art materials. Rather than waiting for these artists with autism to develop (verbal or written) communication skills that would be more typical or expected, these stakeholders
sought new ways for these artists to communicate, often through their art. Ultimately this approach required a paradigm that honored both the artistic identity and potential for such identity in these artists, along with the unique attributes that make up the people that they are. This approach represents a collage of these two things: Art and Autism that may at times privilege one over the other rendering one (or the other) opaque or transparent. The visual below captures the essential difference between these paradigms. These perceptions become important to this work as they help to shape the practices that the stakeholders enact with these adolescent artists with autism (See Figure 30).
Figure 30. Representation of the Two Prevailing Views that Inform the Practice of Stakeholders.

Paradigm One: Focus on Deficit = Disabled
- "Is Not Ready" and views students as:
  - Autistic
  - Incompetent
  - In Special Education Classrooms
  - In capable of handling Materials, Curriculum, Self
  - Can not Communicate

Paradigm Two: Focus on Diversity= Dis/abled
- "Acts as If" and views student as:
  - Artistic
  - Competent
  - In General Education Classroom
  - Capable of Learning with Materials and Curriculum
  - Communicative
  - Having Potential

Figure 30. This was a diagram I made that represents the two prevailing ways that stakeholders viewed these artists. These mirror the medical model of disability on the left, and the social model of disability on the right. Under each are the identities and perceptions that were subsequently assigned to the participants when viewed through this lens.

An underlying aspect of the opportunities in and access to art making provided by the stakeholders in this study were an overall value of art making and artists. For stakeholders that were teachers of art in this study, there was a valuing of art that was inherent in their practice as teachers and artists. This valuing of art may or may not have extended to all aspects of art, meaning not all who valued art placed the same value onto every aspect of art. An example might be a privileging of more “traditional, narrative art” over “contemporary conceptual art”. Another example might be a privileging of art produced by people who do not hold a dis/ability label over those who do. Again, the perceptions of autism may collide with perceptions of art, each informing the other. For some stakeholders there is no difference between the value of art produced by people
with autism as it relates to artistic intent, drive or production and that produced by artists without the label of autism. For other stakeholders, elitist ideas of art making may collide with perceptions of autism in ways that render it opaque, obscuring art making beneath the outer shell of autism. When I consider the findings from this third research question the following new questions have come to me.

New Questions:

New questions that resulted from this third guiding question are:

- How are the perceptions of stakeholders about students with autism in art education and the world beyond transformed?
- What changes to teacher preparation are required to support these changes? How might these changes inform the practices that are enacted by these stakeholders?

Guiding Research Question Four: “What role do these perceptions and practices have on access to art education for these adolescents?”

Figure 31 is a visual representation of how I saw the perceptions and practices informing access for these adolescents. I have connected the three concepts in an interactive triangle because I think they are not necessarily linear. By this I mean, a stakeholder could value art and therefore provide access without necessarily presuming competence. What the participant creates by having access to those materials could then inform the perception that the stakeholder has about their competence, and thus leading to increased access. On the other hand, access could be granted because of the stakeholder’s perception of the student with autism as a competent, capable artist. I saw these three things as inter-related and informing of one another, but not necessarily ordinal in their relationship.
Access became a central theme in this study, for without access to art education settings, both in and out of schools, artistic practice would not be possible for these participants. Physical access may seem like a forgone conclusion because access to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment is a guaranteed right of I.D.E.A. legislation, most recently reauthorized in 2004. However, the sad reality is many students are pulled from, arrive late, leave early or simply do not attend art classes at school. These practices are often justified by special education teachers, paraprofessionals and other school personnel who work with students with autism as allowing students to leave early in order to “get ready for” their next class; “transition” and “avoid all the confusion [peers] in the hallway”; or to allow students with autism to avoid triggers that may “set them off”, “upset them”; or it was described as a way to “make it easier” for everyone, primarily stakeholders. Each of these rationales sends a clear message about the perceptions of readiness of students with autism for participation in art education. The message is that this [art] class doesn’t really matter for this [my]
student and therefore it doesn’t matter if they are here for the whole class or not. Spoken another way, art class is not important and/or this student does not have anything to bring to this class. However, physical access was not the only access denied to these artists; curriculum access was also limited or blocked based upon these same perceptions about students with autism.

The worry over “troublesome” behaviors that limited physical access to the classroom also included perceptions of the “inability” of people with autism to communicate, or a cognitive deficit in people with autism that would render their participation and learning in art impossible. When teachers and others were unprepared to support or accommodate activities in the art room this changed the ways that these artists accessed the curriculum. One of many examples of this happened with Christian during a community art class. The students had been asked to write a description to accompany a sculpture they had created based upon the Hawaiian deity sculptures. Christian, as did the other students, created a wonderful sculpture, with thoughtful details and intentional aesthetic qualities. However when he was asked to write up his description Christian was faced with his struggle in written communication. As an accommodation, Christian tells his description and I write it down. In his description, Christian goes on to recite a detailed description of his God of Love and what the symbolism of each part is. Christian describes in detail why each part is the color it is and what each feature will do.

The example of Christian illustrates the findings in the literature and in this research that art teachers often feel ill prepared to teach the diverse student body present in today’s art classroom (Guay, 1994; Hillert, 1997; Blandy, 1994; Pfeufer-Guay, 1993). It has also been suggested that opportunities for building confidence when working with
diverse learners increases effectiveness and relieves frustration (Fedorenko, 1996). Therefore what adolescent artists with autism need are art teachers who are knowledgeable in content and curriculum, but also caring art teachers who believe in the “power of the arts” (Rauchenberg, 2000) to transform lives and the ways that those around them think about the abilities artists with disabilities. These participants need teachers who believe in the competency and capabilities for participation in art making by people with autism. Art teachers of students with autism need an understanding of the different challenges some of these students may experience due to autism. In the example of Christian the problem with this teacher was that she was unaware of how certain demands may be difficult for an adolescent with autism to meet. By not providing any accommodation, she was limiting Christian’s participation in the planned art experience. This example led me to consider the following new questions about the practices of art teachers of students with autism and how I might be able to explore this topic further in future research.

New Questions:

- How can art teachers best guarantee and support full access to art teachers themselves, art curriculum, art materials and art classrooms for students with autism?
- How can art teachers help support access to peers for students with autism in art classrooms?
- How can art teachers most effectively and appropriately use the paraprofessional support that often accompanies students with autism to the art classroom?
Limitations and Future Directions

This study, as any study does, had limitations. While each of my decisions in the design of this research was done with intention, there were limitations that stemmed from this research and my decisions. One such limitation was about the limit to the number of participants that I could enroll while still conducting (and completing) this research in a timely fashion. A larger number of participants might have yielded even more stories of art making. During the recruiting and enrollment phase I was conscious that I sought a balanced representation of both gender and ethnicity. On these points I feel I was fairly successful which allowed me to skirt a common limitation of diversity in the sample.

While the intent of my research has always been to represent the importance of art making in the lives of these adolescent artists from their own perspective, the aspects of autism that limit communication played a significant role in the ways that I was able to gather data on the perspectives of these artists. Ultimately, it was the art making that was important to these artists and therefore important to me. There was nothing as moving as seeing them in the moment of art making: drawing, painting, and creating. The pure joy and art that sprang from some of them, like an unending well, was perhaps the most powerful representations of this concept. Unfortunately, at times their dis/ability status proved to limit the opportunities and access they were afforded to art education settings, materials and other people (an artworld) and their artistic practice was interrupted by their dis/ability status.

Along with the communication challenges of the artist participants in this study another limitation was in my access to the participants. I was not granted full access to some (2) of the participants in this study with regards to in school art education settings.
This aspect of access meant that my observations of students were not consistent for all the participants. Two of the students in this study (both attended the same district but not the same school) were only observed in their home during personal art making and collaborative art making with me, the researcher. In turn, there were other participants (4) whom I only saw in school and did not gain access at home. While the variety of settings offered a rich description of the many types of art making opportunities I would have preferred consistent (full) access for all students across all settings.

Additionally, a deeper analysis of the data would have likely revealed an intriguing gendered perspective. Teaching as a profession is largely inhabited by women (S. Biklen, 1995). Particularly at the primary and intermediate grade levels, with art education mirroring this trend. Ironically, white male artists have dominated the world of art and the history of art (Nochlin, 2003). With this in mind, it would be of interest to me to look at this data with a feminist perspective as it relates to the topic of how gender informs teaching, learning, art and dis/ability. I am curious if the perception of the nurturing female teacher (Acker, 1995) plays a role in the ways that student’s with a dis/ability label experience art education. Also, if gender informs the support of artistic development in male and female student’s with a disability label. I would hope to have the opportunity to re-examine this data at the conclusion of this study with this paradigm in mind.

Lastly, the opportunity to continue following these students in a more longitudinal study would allow one to more deeply explore the role that art would play (or not) as they continue mature (develop). It would be interested to see the ways that these two realms of living, as artists and people with autism might continue to change, interrupt and inform
the people around them. I intend to do a follow up study of other adolescent’s who regularly practice art making in the hopes of following them as they transition from secondary education.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings described above have multiple applications within the fields that have informed this study.

**Recommendations for Teachers of Students with Autism**

At the heart of every classroom is a teacher. In the case of a teacher of an inclusive classroom there are certain philosophical underpinnings that are essential in order to create a learning environment where all students are not only welcome but also afforded an equitable educational experience. A commitment to equity requires a priority to be willing and prepared to teach all students who enter the art room. This requires a shift in the perceptions of ability and competence of students with autism to understand them as competent people capable of the maximum participation possible in meaningful art experiences. This may require personal initiative for professional development, research and collaboration with other personnel and professionals in the school community to find ways that will best support individuals with autism who attend art class.

In order to successfully collaborate with other personal, professionals in the school community and families it was demonstrated in this study, and is reflected in the literature that communication is key to collaboration. When teachers communicate clearly and regularly with paraprofessionals who come as supports for students with autism as was seen in David’s case, the expectations and goals are more clear and attainable and artistic production more meaningful for students. When working with
paraprofessionals it is key to engage them in the art curriculum, but do not rely upon them to be the liaison between you and the student. The best resource for how to support a student is often the student themselves. Make yourself available and approachable for communicating with your student and be sure to provide them with a means to communicate their needs, desires and ideas to you. By providing access to you, the art teacher, you will automatically set the stage for increased access and opportunity in the classroom.

Access was shown to be a critical component of this study. Teachers like Ms. D who provided full access and opportunities for students with autism to the physical classroom, materials, curriculum, peers and themselves constructed art education experiences that were enjoyable, meaningful and contributed to artistic growth. Ms. D and others found ways to honor the creativity that is the foundation for art making by incorporating models and strategies of Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction as ways to provide access for students. When Ms. D, Ms. H. and Mrs. I offered choices in materials, content and outcome they demonstrated the principles of Universal Design for Learning as multiple means of representation, engagement and expression as the keys to including all students in art. Your ability to support students appropriately is dependent upon your resources and knowledge of your students. Ms. M exemplified this kind of advocacy when she went to the other school professionals with questions about adaptive materials and teaching strategies that would best support the students in her art classroom. Ms. H and others regularly sought out ways to expand their knowledgebase for high or low-tech supports, adaptive materials, and accessible lesson plans. Others like Ms. D and Ms. I found that providing flexible deadlines,
utilizing additional personnel, or designing less prescriptive lessons also provided greater access and opportunity in art. This required a commitment to learning and developing many easy modifications and adaptations that serve a wide range of diverse learners in the art classroom.

The art teacher and art classroom are one aspect of the experiences of these students in art education. But families and the artists themselves also play a key role in the creation of environments where art making and art education are available and afforded to all.

**Recommendations For Families and Artists**

Many of the families in this study were able to find ways that allowed them to honor the strengths and abilities of their artists. In John’s case his mother made clear connections between what could be characterized by some as autistic tendencies to artistic skills and behaviors. John’s mother also saw these skills, such as attention to detail, as strength in other academic areas, like the science lab. This enabled her to consider John’s strengths in reference to the wonderful aspects of his personhood, not only as part of his dis/ability.

It was important for many of the families in this study to seek out others who honored their child for who they are and not who they are not. Rinnah’s mother described her desire for teachers and classrooms where her daughter could feel capable and competent rather than different or disabled. Ms. D also described the ways that she individualized instruction based upon the strengths of her students, something that was highly sought by parents of students who had an interest in art and a dis/ability label. Ms. D prided herself on her willingness and preparedness to support the artist within. Seeking out these kinds of environments for the adolescents in this study required advocacy on behalf of the
students. Brandon was one example of how a student benefits from the advocacy of stakeholders on their behalf, enabling them to have opportunities and access to art education. These opportunities in art can include many aspects of learning; loving and living that can be made visible through the creation of art. Some of the parents in this study did not identify themselves as artists, as was the case for Brandon and Christian, and for this reason they sought out those who could best support the artistic development of their child. In Amy’s case, even though her father is a practicing artist, he felt Amy would benefit from another source for instruction, enrolling Amy in private art lessons with a local college student. Reaching out to external resources is not only acceptable but can be beneficial for all the parties involved, nowhere is it written that parents must do/be it all! Sometimes the best thing a parent can do is to share their knowledge with professionals that work with their child. Mrs. H was a great example of how parents can be a wonderful resource for teachers by learning and sharing the adaptations and modifications that best support their child and teach them to the art teachers, who then can share it with others. This is not to imply that the road of advocacy is always smooth. In this study Amy’s mother encountered a roadblock to Amy’s inclusion when she was not promoted to the advanced studio class based upon the perceptions of Amy’s troubled communication and behavior. In cases like these it is imperative that parents know the law that ensures a Free and Appropriate Public Education for a child in the Least Restrictive Environment.

**Recommendations For Art Teacher Preparation Programs**

This study supported the findings of the literature that many art teachers do not feel prepared to teach diverse student populations in the art room, and in particular
students with autism who are not verbal. Ms. M and Ms. H both described feelings of inadequacy in their preparation for diverse populations. Art Teacher Preparation programs should strive to provide pre-service art education students with the strategies and philosophical underpinnings of teaching within a fully inclusive classroom. This will prepare candidates to teach the diverse range of learners that they will encounter in the art classrooms of the 21st century. This requires coursework in how to plan and implement curriculum and strategies based upon Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction to reach the widest range of artists in a classroom. In particular, as the incidence of autism continues to rise, art teachers need specific knowledge and supports for artists with autism. Part of these experiences and knowledge building could come by providing pre-service art education students with fieldwork experience in teaching students with dis/abilities. This would increase confidence when teaching students with dis/abilities and assist in the removal of frustrations and biases concerning the abilities of these students. It would also provide practical and hands on experience with the introduction of methods of interdisciplinary teaching and learning through collaboration.

In inclusive teaching collaboration is key to student success. Art Teacher preparation programs should include strategies for collaboration and communication with other school personnel who make up the interdisciplinary teams that support students with dis/abilities like autism. Christian’s art teacher Ms. K described how she felt challenged with directing the paraprofessional who worked in her classroom and felt that they often had conflicting perspectives about her role for supporting the students she was assigned to. Without concrete communication and collaboration strategies to draw upon, Ms. K felt ineffective in her efforts to construct a support system for Christian that
reflected her desire for his inclusion in the art classroom community and artistic
development.

The art classroom community is made of individuals who are part of an endeavor
to create and respond to art. If we are to consider the successful art curriculum as one that
represents the diverse and varied materials and artists that make up the art world, then it
seems clear that dis/ability art and culture should be included in that multicultural art
curriculum art teachers need knowledge of dis/ability art and artists. Art teacher
preparation programs should educate art teachers to believe in the power of the arts to
transform lives. This will provide a model for those artists who may be experiencing
dis/ability in concert with their art experiences.

What art education approach would best support adolescent artists with autism? It
is the same approach that would support all kinds of artists. In this approach all students
would engage in the project to their fullest extent of participation, receiving the necessary
supports, accommodations, and differentiations to accomplish this. This approach to
teaching all learners in the art classroom is not based in the “all or nothing” approach,
meaning that students can either do all of the project or none of the project, but instead
suggests that the principle of partial participation (both in and out of school) applies. In
this principle rather than students being denied an artistic experience based on a real or
perceived lack of ability, they would participate in the art project, along side of peers, in a
way that honors their artistic development and expression. This can be accomplished with
the support of a paraprofessional, through the modification of techniques and materials or
through natural peer supports for students. Most importantly, it begins with an art teacher
who believes in the power of art.
Conclusion

According to the CDC the number of students diagnosed with autism is increasing (CDC, 2005) with some sources citing an increase of more than 500 percent over the past 10 years of students with the incidence of autism receiving services under IDEA 04 (GAO, 2005, p.17). There is debate as to the reason for this marked increase, with considerations of accuracy of reporting; broadening of the ASD and more inclusive diagnostic criteria; and a hypothesis of increased incidence of ASD due to a secular increase also cannot be ruled out (Fombonne, 2003; Honda, Shimizu, Imal, & Nitto, 2005). The increased identification of students as ASD labels, no matter what the reason, coupled with the inclusive education movement implies that there will be more students with the label of autism present in both formal and informal art education settings and therefore a greater understanding of these artists could better support their art-making. Additionally, there have been more artists who have become a part of the greater artworld and therefore could potentially take their place in the canon of art education as art teachers and students explore and respond to art. It is for this reason that more research is needed that can help to illuminate the practices, perceptions and places that best support adolescent artists with autism as they make and respond to art. This future research can give us the perspectives of the artists themselves as they encounter the ever-changing world of inclusive [art] education. More voices coming to the conversation would help to describe the experiences of these artist to better understand and support their art making. Also, art teachers sharing with each other their challenges, celebrations and stories.

It was the aim of this research to describe the experiences of adolescent artists with autism and they participate in art education, making and responding to art. The
research questions that guided this research may prove helpful to the field of inclusive art education. Current educational statistics identify that the number of students with the label of autism who are attending general education classes is increasing (Guay, 2003; Kellman, 2006; Causton-Theoharis & Burdick, 2008; Kraft, 2003) and that the art room is one of the first places where inclusion occurs (Schiller, 1999). The importance of art education settings is important because artistic practice offers both verbal and visual expression for students (Papalardo, 1999). Art has an inherent value as a form of expression or communication while providing opportunities for a wide range of learners (Arnold, 1999) to engage in meaningful artistic practice.

Researcher Reflection

In my role as participant observer, I found that the artists I observed became increasingly comfortable each time I came to observe them. Many students, as I neared the end of my observations requested that I would continue to come. I found it difficult to cut off my ties with them after spending time with them, talking to them about their art and getting to know their families.

My passion for quality art education for all those who seek it is what brought me to this research. My belief in people with dis/abilities as capable of expression, communication and creativity continue to drive me in my ongoing professional practice in art teacher preparation and my personal artistic practice. I imagine I will always feel a pull or tension between my commitment to teaching and my desire to do research that will make a difference. Either way, doing both makes each stronger, so I hope to continue to surround myself with people who believe as I do that art is an essential experience for all students who enter our schools, our communities and our lives.
Appendix A

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (formerly called P.L. 94-142 or the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975) requires public schools to make available to all eligible children with disabilities a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their individual needs. IDEA requires public school systems to develop appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each child. The specific special education and related services outlined in each IEP reflect the individualized needs of each student. IDEA also mandates that particular procedures be followed in the development of the IEP. Each student's IEP must be developed by a team of knowledgeable persons and must be at least reviewed annually. The team includes the child's teacher; the parents, subject to certain limited exceptions; the child, if determined appropriate; an agency representative who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of special education; and other individuals at the parents' or agency's discretion. If parents disagree with the proposed IEP, they can request a due process hearing and a review from the State educational agency if applicable in that state. They also can appeal the State agency's decision to State or Federal court. For more information, contact: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services U.S. Department of Education 400 Maryland Avenue, S.W. Washington, D.C. 20202-7100 [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep) (202) 245-7468 (voice/TTY)

**Rehabilitation Act**

The Rehabilitation Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by Federal agencies, in programs receiving Federal financial assistance, in Federal employment, and in the employment practices of Federal contractors. The standards for determining employment discrimination under the Rehabilitation Act are the same as those used in title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

**Section 501** Section 501 requires affirmative action and nondiscrimination in employment by Federal agencies of the executive branch. To obtain more information or to file a complaint, employees should contact their agency's Equal Employment Opportunity Office.

**Section 503** Section 503 requires affirmative action and prohibits employment discrimination by Federal government contractors and subcontractors with contracts of more than $10,000. For more information on section 503, contact: Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs U.S. Department of Labor 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W. Room C-3325 Washington, D.C. 20210 [www.dol.gov/esa/ofccp](http://www.dol.gov/esa/ofccp) (202) 693-0106 (voice/relay)

**Section 504** Section 504 states that "no qualified individual with a disability in the United States shall be excluded from, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under" any program or activity that either receives Federal financial assistance or is conducted by
any Executive agency or the United States Postal Service.
Each Federal agency has its own set of section 504 regulations that apply to its own programs. Agencies that provide Federal financial assistance also have section 504 regulations covering entities that receive Federal aid. Requirements common to these regulations include reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities; program accessibility; effective communication with people who have hearing or vision disabilities; and accessible new construction and alterations. Each agency is responsible for enforcing its own regulations. Section 504 may also be enforced through private lawsuits. It is not necessary to file a complaint with a Federal agency or to receive a "right-to-sue" letter before going to court.
For information on how to file 504 complaints with the appropriate agency, contact:
U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division 950 Pennsylvania Avenue,
N.W. Disability Rights Section - NYAV Washington, D.C. 20530
www.ada.gov
(800) 514-0301 (voice) (800) 514-0383 (TTY)

Section 508
Section 508 establishes requirements for electronic and information technology developed, maintained, procured, or used by the Federal government. Section 508 requires Federal electronic and information technology to be accessible to people with disabilities, including employees and members of the public.
An accessible information technology system is one that can be operated in a variety of ways and does not rely on a single sense or ability of the user. For example, a system that provides output only in visual format may not be accessible to people with visual impairments and a system that provides output only in audio format may not be accessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Some individuals with disabilities may need accessibility-related software or peripheral devices in order to use systems that comply with Section 508. For more information on section 508, contact:
U.S. General Services Administration Center for IT Accommodation (CITA) 1800 F Street, N.W. Room 1234, MC:MKC Washington, DC 20405-0001 www.gsa.gov/section508
(202) 501-4906 (voice) (202) 501-2010 (TTY)
U.S. Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board 1331 F Street, N.W., Suite 1000 Washington, DC 20004-1111
www.access-board.gov
800-872-2253 (voice) 800-993-2822 (TTY)
From: http://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm#anchor65310
Appendix B

The Medical/Psychiatric Diagnosis of Autism: The DSM-IV Criteria

The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is the main diagnostic reference used by mental health professionals and insurance providers in the United States. The current (fourth) edition, which was published in 1994, is commonly referred to as the "DSM-IV." The diagnosis of autism requires that at least six developmental and behavioral characteristics are apparent, that problems are evident before age three, and that there is no evidence for certain other conditions that are similar.

**Diagnostic Criteria for Autistic Disorder**

A. A total of six (or more) items from (1), (2), and (3), with at least two from (1), and one each from (2) and (3)

1. qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
   - marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
   - failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
   - a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest)
   - lack of social or emotional reciprocity

2. qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by at least one of the following:
   - delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime)
   - in individuals with adequate speech, marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
   - stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language
   - lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level

3. restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests and activities, as manifested by at least two of the following:
   - encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
   - apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
   - stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g., hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
   - persistent preoccupation with parts of objects

B. Delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of the following areas, with onset prior to age 3 years: (1) social interaction, (2) language as used in social communication, or (3) symbolic or imaginative play

C. The disturbance is not better accounted for by Rett's Syndrome or Childhood Disintegrative Disorder.
Appendix C

Letter to Art Educator

Project Title:
Autism and Art Education: Experiences of Adolescent Artists with Autism
Researcher: Corrie Burdick

Dear Art Educator,

My name is Corrie Burdick. I am a doctoral student in art education at Syracuse University. As part of my program requirements for my dissertation I am undertaking a research study to describe the experiences of adolescents with autism in inclusive art classrooms. I am looking for volunteers to be participants in my study. As a participant, I would observe you in the art classroom for a total of 3-5 visits (55 minute sessions). As a participant, you will remain completely anonymous. No identifiable characteristics or descriptions will be included in my study. I will be observing all of the people who support students with autism in the inclusive art classroom in order to describe the experiences of these students. I will try to make my presence natural with minimal disruption. I will be taking hand written notes during my observation. In addition I will be doing some video taping of the artistic production by the student and photographing their artwork. The purpose of taping is to help me clarify the methods and materials used for art making. At the completion of the study the tapes will be erased. There is a possibility I would like to interview you as part of my data collection. During these interviews I will use, with your permission, an audio taping device that will help me to keep accurate notes of our conversations. These interviews will be to help me gain further understandings of the experiences of students with autism in art. Upon completion of transcription of the tapes, the interview tapes will be destroyed. Any unused photographs and or digital data will be destroyed at the conclusion of this research. You will also have the opportunity to review my videotapes and photography so that you are informed of my work.

I hope that you will consider becoming a participant in my study as I hope to contribute to the field of art education and the support of students with disabilities in art. The risks to you by participating in this study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable at being “watched”. These risks will be minimized by you having a clear understanding of my role as a researcher and my ability to establish a rapport with you and support you in ways that will not compromise my role as a researcher. You will also have the opportunity to review my videotapes and photography so that you are informed of my work. If you no longer wish to continue you have the right to withdraw from the study, without any questions or penalty at any time. If you have any further questions about this project or my objectives, please do not hesitate to reach me at the contact information I have included.
Please understand that your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or discontinue your participation at any time. You may do so with no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled and no questions asked. If you have any questions or concerns about this project you can reach my advisor for this project, Julie Causton-Theoharis, at 443-9651 or jcauston@syr.edu. You can also reach the IRB at (315) 443-3013 if you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, or if you have questions, concerns or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the researcher, or if you cannot reach the researcher, or if there are any research related injuries.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter. Please sign, date and return this letter to the address listed below. A copy of the signed consent form will be given to you for your records.

Sincerely,

Corrie Burdick
The Graduate School
207 G Bowne Hall
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13244
cbburdic@syr.edu
315-416-5021

Julie Causton-Theoharis
Teaching & Leadership
150 Huntington Hall
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13244
jcauston@syr.edu
315-443-9651

I _________________________________ wish to become a participant in Corrie Burdick’s study “Autism and Art Education: The Experiences of Adolescent Artists with Autism”.

I grant permission for Corrie Burdick to: (please check all that apply)

______ Videotape art making

______ Photograph artwork
Audio tape interviews with me

Signed _______________________________     Date _________________________

I am over the age of 18. ____Yes _____NO        Date of Birth: ____________

Name of Investigator: _______________________________________

Signed: ____________________________________ Date: ____________
Appendix D

Letter to Family/Parent/Guardian

Project Title:
Autism and Art Education: Experiences of Adolescent Artists with Autism
Researcher: Corrie Burdick

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Corrie Burdick. I am a doctoral student in art education at Syracuse University. As part of my program requirements for my dissertation I am undertaking a research study to describe the experiences of adolescents with autism in inclusive art classrooms. I am looking for volunteers to be participants in my study. As a participant, I would observe your child in the art classroom for a total of 3-5 visits (55 minute sessions). As a participant, your child will remain completely anonymous. No identifiable characteristics or descriptions will be included in my study. I will be observing all of the people who support students with autism in the inclusive art classroom in order to describe the experiences of these students. I will try to make my presence natural with minimal disruption. I will be taking hand written notes during my observation. In addition I will be doing some video taping, with your permission, of the artistic production by your student and photographing their artwork. The purpose of taping is to help me clarify the methods and materials used for art making. At the completion of the study the tapes will be erased. Photographs may be included in my written document to illustrate ideas presented. There is a possibility I would like to interview you and/or your child as part of my data collection. During these interviews I will use, with permission, an audio taping device that will help me to keep accurate notes of our conversations. These interviews will be to help me gain further understandings of the experiences of students with autism in art. Upon completion of transcription of the tapes, the interview tapes will be destroyed. Any unused photographs and or digital data will be destroyed at the conclusion of this research. You will also have the opportunity to review my videotapes and photography so that you are informed of my work.

I hope that you and your child will consider becoming a participant in my study as I hope to contribute to the field of art education and the support of students with disabilities in art. The risks to you and your child by participating in this study are minimal. Your child may feel uncomfortable at being “watched”. You and your child having a clear understanding of my role as a researcher and my ability to establish a rapport with you both and support you both in ways that will not compromise my role as a researcher will minimize these risks. You will also have the opportunity to review my videotapes and photography so that you are informed of my work. If you or your child no longer wish to continue you have the right to withdraw from the study, without any questions or penalty at any time. If you have any further questions about this project or
my objectives, please do not hesitate to reach me at the contact information I have included.

Please understand that your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or discontinue your participation at any time. You may do so with no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled and no questions asked. If you have any questions or concerns about this project you can reach my advisor for this project, Julie Causton-Theoharis, at 443-9651 or jcauston@syr.edu. You can also reach the IRB at (315) 443-3013 if you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, or if you have questions, concerns or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the researcher, or if you cannot reach the researcher, or if there are any research related injuries.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter. Please sign, date and return this letter to the address listed below. A copy of the signed consent form will be given to you for your records.

Sincerely,

Corrie Burdick
The Graduate School
207 G Bowne Hall
Syracuse University
Syracuse NY 13244
cbburdic@syr.edu
315-416-5021

Julie Causton-Theoharis
Teaching & Leadership
150 Huntington Hall
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13244
jcauston@syr.edu
315-443-9651

I _________________________________ wish to become a participant in Corrie Burdick’s study “Autism and Art Education: The Experiences of Adolescent Artists with Autism”.

Signed _______________________________     Date _______________________________
I _________________________________ hereby grant permission for my child
___________________________________ to become a participant in Corrie Burdick’s
study.

I grant permission for Corrie Burdick to: (please check all that apply)

    ____ Videotape my child’s art making

    ____ Photograph my child’s art work

    ____ Audio tape interviews with my child

Signed _____________________________ Date ______________________________

I _________________________________ do NOT wish to become a participant in this
study.

I, _________________________________ do not wish for my child

___________________________________ to be a participant in this study.

Signed ________________________________  Date _________________________

Signature of Investigator: ______________________________________________

Name of Investigator: Corrie Burdick

Date ________________
Appendix E

**Assent for Student Participant**

**Informed Assent Form for**

*Autism and Art Education: The Experiences of Adolescent Artists with Autism*

My name is Corrie Burdick and I am from the School of Education at Syracuse University (SU). I am asking you to participate in this research study because you are interested in art and are a student with the label of autism.

**PURPOSE:** A research study is a way to learn more about people. In this study, I am trying to learn more about the ways that you learn in art class, make art and what your art means to you in your life.

**PARTICIPATION:** If you decide you want to be part of this study, you will be asked to allow me to observe you in art class and observe you making art. All of this should take about 3 weeks. I would also like to videotape you making art and photograph some of your finished pieces.

**RISKS & BENEFITS:** There are some things about this study you should know. You may feel experience some temporary discomfort by being video or audio taped, observed or interviewed. You could feel like your privacy is being invaded or that the attention you are receiving is unwanted.

Not everyone who takes part in this study will benefit. A benefit means that something good happens to you. We think these benefits might be more attention coming to your artwork. People may become interested in you or your artwork as a result of your participation in this study.

**REPORTS:** When I am finished with this study I will write a report about what was learned. This report will not include your name or that you were in the study.

**VOLUNTARY:** Voluntary means that you do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. I have already asked your parents if it is ok for me to ask you to take part in this study. Even though your parents said I could ask you, you still get to decide if you want to be in this research study. You can also talk with your parents, grandparents, and teachers before deciding whether or not to take part. No one will be mad at you or upset if you decide not to do this study. If you decide to stop after we begin, that’s okay too. You can also skip any of the questions you do not want to answer.
QUESTIONS: You can ask questions now or whenever you wish. If you want to, you may call me at 416-5021, or you may call Dr. Causton-Theoharis at 443-9651. If you are not happy about this study and would like to speak to someone other than me, you or your parents may call the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 315-443-3013.

Please sign your name below if you agree to be part of my study. You will get a copy of this form to keep for yourself.

Signature of Participant ____________________________ Date __________________

Name of Participant ______________________________

Signature of Investigator or Designee ________________________ Date _____________
Appendix F

Sample District IRB

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE CONDUCT OF RESEARCH THROUGH THE JD/SU TEACHER CENTER

1. Proposed research projects must hold some potential for contributing to knowledge in the theories of practices of education.

2. Proposed research must evidence quality in conceptualization and methodological design.

3. All research projects are governed by relevant District policies and practices, such as in regard to pupil records, curriculum, parental involvement, and testing.

4. All research projects must be approved in principle by the Teaching Center Coordinator and the District administrative staff before they can be undertaken. All participants must also give their consent.

5. Research projects should be unobtrusive on the essential operations of the school.

6. All research projects are subject to the monitoring of the Teaching Center Coordinator and/or the District's administrators, who may restrict or terminate an effort if that action seems warranted.

Procedures for the review and conduct of research:

1. The researcher will:
   a) Discuss the feasibility of the project with the Teaching Center Coordinator.
   b) Provide evidence of Human Subjects Committee approval.
   c) Submit materials, including the JD/SU Teacher Center Research Request Form to the Teaching Center Coordinator for consideration and approval in principle.

2. The Coordinator will review the proposal and forward it to the District administrative staff with recommendations.

3. The District administrative staff will review the proposal and will act to approve or disapprove the proposal in principle.

4. If the proposal is approved in principle, the researcher will:
   a) Work with the building administrator(s) to set up the study including:
      i. explaining the study to prospective participants,
      ii. obtaining parental permission when necessary, and
iii. reviewing schedules to determine optimum times and dates for conduct of the study.

b) Collect and analyze the data.
c) Submit a written report of the study to the Teaching Center Coordinator, the administrator(s) involved, and the teacher participants.
Title: Autism and Art Education: The Experiences of Adolescent Artists with Autism in Schools

Principal Investigator Corrie Burdick      Phone __416-5021____________

Institutional Affiliation ____Syracuse University________________________________________

Please type responses to the following directives.

1. Attach a one page statement of the thesis of the proposed study.

2. Describe the sample population.

   The population for this study will be male and female adolescents (age 12-18) with the label of autism (or autism-related labels) who attend suburban and urban public school inclusive secondary art class in Upstate New York. All students in the study will have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) including supports in the visual arts. This population will best allow the researcher to address the proposed research questions regarding the experiences of adolescents with autism in inclusive art classrooms. The sample of students with the label of autism will be derived from personal contacts the researcher has developed in previous research using snowball sampling. A letter introducing the study and the right of refusal will be sent from the researcher and the dissertation chair and will include contact information for both to participants and their families. Self-addressed envelopes will be provided to indicate that a participant or their family does not want to be contacted in any way or participate in this research. Seven participants for this study will be recruited from a population identified by this researcher during previous research on paraprofessional support in art education (Causton-Theoharis & Burdick, 2008) as students with the label of autism that identify as “artists” and are participating in inclusive art classrooms and making art.

3. Describe the data-gathering procedures emphasizing the intended involvement of the JD participants.

   The design of this study will utilize qualitative methodology that will include balanced participant observation, ethnography, interviews, document analysis, and photography (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Observations during art class time will include video-taping of art production, balanced participant observation with subsequent interviews, and analysis of art work produced by
participants in this study. Because this study will involve a small number of participants a triangulation of multiple data sources will be employed. These forms of data collection will allow for a full and rich description of the experiences of these artists in an inclusive secondary art classroom. Using a grounded theory approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) themes will be identified and discussed as they pertain to providing access to the art curriculum and support of authentic art production by adolescent artists with autism. Visual images, videotape and supporting audio materials will be included as hyperlinks in an electronic dissertation format (Kim, 2000; Monaghan, 2006). The inclusion of these visual aspects of this research is imperative to the very nature of art and is justified within the body of Arts-Based Research (McNiff, 1998).

In order to answer the questions proposed in this study, 5 case studies will be conducted. Data will be collected through balanced participant observation in inclusive secondary art classes in order to provide rich description of access to art curriculum (including physical space and art materials) and authentic production of artwork by students with the label of autism. Field notes will be taken during field placements, then analyzed and coded for recurring themes. Additionally, videotaping will be done of artistic production and audiotapes will be used to help the researcher record dialogue that may happen around the student’s experience in the art classroom during class. Still photographs that are pertinent to access and artistic production will be used to provide further description of the student’s experience in the art classroom during class. Still photographs that are pertinent to access and artistic production will be used to provide further description of the student’s experience in the art classroom during class. Open ended interviews with participants, when possible, and those people close to them: including art teachers, paraprofessionals, school leaders and family members, will be used, when applicable, to further explore emergent themes and to clarify sub questions. I would interview school leaders only if they are identified in initial data collection as a meaningful influence on the experience of adolescent artists with autism. They would be identified by participants in the study and approached by me as an additional source of data regarding the experiences of adolescent artists with autism in their school. Questions will focus on emergent themes and be related to the research questions concerning access, artistic identity and authentic art production.

4. Describe briefly the methods of data analysis.

Field notes will be taken during field placements, then analyzed and coded for recurring themes. Additionally, videotaping will be done of artistic production and audiotapes will be used to help the researcher record dialogue that may happen around the student’s experience in the art classroom during class. Still photographs that are pertinent to access and artistic production will be used to provide further description of the student’s experience in the art classroom during class. Open ended interviews with participants, when possible, and those people close to them: including art teachers, paraprofessionals, school leaders and family members, will be used, when applicable, to further explore emergent themes and to clarify sub questions. I would interview school leaders only if they are identified in initial data collection as a meaningful influence on the experience of adolescent artists with autism. They would be identified by participants in the study and approached by me as an additional source of data regarding the experiences of adolescent artists with autism in their school. Questions will focus on emergent themes and be related to the research questions concerning access, artistic identity and authentic art production.
5. Describe the timetable of the research project.

Data collection for this project will occur between January and June of 2008. Participants in this study will be observed in art class 3-5 times during the data collection period. Any additional interviews will be done at the convenience of the participants in a place and time that is suitable for them.

6. Describe what the JD District will gain as a result of your research.

This study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of adolescents with autism in inclusive art classrooms. These understandings should seek to provide improved support for students by art educators and other related support personnel within these contexts for authentic art production. These findings that are specific to the students participating in these school districts could lead to further research in additional school districts for replication and implications for art teacher preparation on a broader scale. These contributions of this study include but are not limited to the ways that art educators, paraprofessionals and special educators in the JD District can support students with autism in art. Additionally, this study allows for the opportunity to highlight artwork by students with autism within the JD District for possible further development of skills and talents in support of art making. This study also makes space for students with autism to describe their experiences in this district’s inclusive art classrooms offering insight into their art experiences and lives as artists.
Interview Question Protocol

Sample Interview Questions for Project Title:
Autism and Art Education: Experiences of Adolescent Artists with Autism in Schools
Researcher: Corrie Burdick

Sample Interview Questions for Students:
1. Tell me about this piece of artwork.
2. What is the title of this artwork?
3. Do you enjoy making art?
4. What role does art-making play in your life?
5. Do you like to have help when you make art?
6. What kind of art materials do you most enjoy using?
7. How did you learn how to make art?
8. Do you consider yourself an artist? A good artist?
9. Has your artwork ever been displayed?
10. Do other people tell you that you are a good artist?

Sample Interview Questions for Parents/Families:
11. What role does art-making play in your student’s life?
12. Does your child receive support for their art making?
13. Do others in your family or community recognize your child’s art making ability?
14. What role do you think art plays in the life of your child/student?
15. Do you see your child/student as being “talented” in art?
16. Do you consider your child/student an artist? A good artist?
17. When did you first recognize your child/student’s ability in art?

Sample Interview Questions for School Personnel:
18. What role does art-making play in this student’s life?
19. Does this student receive support for their art making?
20. Do others in your school or community recognize this student’s art making ability?
21. What role do you think art plays in the life of this student?
22. Do you see this student as being “talented” in art?
23. Do you consider this student an artist? A good artist?
24. When did you first recognize this student’s ability in art?
References


Freeman, W. C. (1998). *You're okay right where you are: Expressive movement in education*. The Union Institute, Ohio.


Hillert, M. S. (1997). The problematic nature of art teacher's efforts to adapt instruction for special needs students. Unpublished manuscript.


Pugach, M. C. (2001). The stories we choose to tell: Fulfilling the promise of qualitative research for special education. Exceptional Children, 67(4), 439-453.


Corrie Burdick

Curriculum Vitae

Education

Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York
Ph.D, Teaching and Curriculum, Art Education 2011
C.A.S. Women’s Studies, 2006
C.A.S. Disability Studies, Anticipated 2011
Assistant Director of the Teaching Assistant Program, 2007-2008
Teaching Associate; Future Professoriate Program, 2004
Teaching Assistant in the Department of Art Education 2003-2007

Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York
Master’s of Science in Art Education, 1995
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art Education, 1991

Research Interests

Paraprofessional Support of Art Education.
Universal Design for Learning and Art Education.
Adolescents with Autism In Inclusive Art Classrooms.

Academic Employment

Alfred University

Instructor, Division of Education 2008-Present

Courses Taught:
Human Development: Exceptionality SPED 456
Current Teaching Methods, Adolescent Subjects EDUC 489
Student Teacher Supervision EDUC 463
Methods & Curriculum of Teaching Art EDUC 491
*responsible for design of course
Education Field Work/Practicum EDUC 345
Masters Research EDUC 695
Multimodal Literacies in the Inclusive Classroom SPED 550
Seminar in Professional Development EDUC 460

Syracuse University

Instructor, Department of Art Education 2007-2008

Courses Taught:
Art in the Classroom

Graduate Teaching Associate in Department of Art Education 2003-2007

Teaching Ex Courses:

- Foundations of Art Education EDU 215/617
- Methods and Practices in Teaching Art EDU 301/601
  EDU 302/602
- Special Problems in Art Education EDU 510
  - Museum Integration
  - Multicultural Art
  - Art Centered Art Curriculum
- Cultivating Creativity in the Classroom AED 660
- Meaning in Art AED 667
- Interdisciplinary Art Education AED 612

RESPONSIBILITIES:

- Supervising 9 Saturday Workshops for Young People ages 5-15 and assessing pre-service students teaching progress. This responsibility includes organizing workshop sessions, assisting and providing feedback to students in developing age and material appropriate lesson plans for workshops, supervising the student implementation of lessons and reviewing and providing weekly feedback to student teacher and assistant’s workshop reflections of teaching experiences.
- Organizing and facilitating the “Big Show”, a culminating event of Saturday Workshops student’s work. This show is comprised of over 800 pieces of artwork, hands on activities and photo opportunities for all in attendance.
- Providing Chairwoman with workshop grades with supporting evidence for each student.
- Coordinating and implementing Outreach and Advocacy Events with surrounding Syracuse communities.

Teaching Fellow, Syracuse University

Planning and implementing programming for incoming Teaching Assistant Orientation for approximately 350 incoming graduate students.

PUBLICATIONS

“Reducing Intensity of Paraprofessional Support in the Art Classroom” (In Press, 2010) Art Education


“Curriculum Connections” Education Exchange SP 2006
AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

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<td>Excellence in Mentoring: Women’s Leadership Center</td>
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<td>Harootunian Dissertation Research Award</td>
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<td>Syracuse University</td>
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<td>Who’s Who Among American College Students</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<td>Outstanding Teaching Assistant, Syracuse University</td>
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ACADEMIC COMMITTEES AND SERVICE

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<td>Children, Youth and Learning Initiative, Alfred University</td>
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<td>Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee, SU</td>
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<td>PAGE Summit Member: Imagining America, SU</td>
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<td>Diversity Education Committee, SU</td>
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<td>Facilitator, Connective Corridor Project, Chancellor’s Initiatives and Leadership Committee, Syracuse NY</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<td>Coordinator, “Reading is Fundamental” Ed Smith School</td>
<td>2005-08</td>
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<td>Facilitator, Annual Student Art Education Association at Syracuse University (SAEASU) Portfolio and Job Interviewing Strategies Panel</td>
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COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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<td>• Math Teaching Academy, Syracuse NY</td>
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<td>• Science Teaching Academy, Syracuse NY</td>
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<td>• Literacy Teaching Academy, Syracuse NY</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social Studies Academy, Syracuse NY</td>
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<td>Enable Project, Disability Art Outreach, Syracuse NY</td>
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<td>H. W. Smith Elementary Mural Project, Syracuse NY</td>
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<td>Elmwood Elementary Mural Project, Syracuse NY</td>
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<td>Sedgwick Mural Project, Sedgwick Assisted Living Center, Syracuse NY</td>
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<td>Jowonio Mural Project, Jowonio School, Syracuse, NY</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>Hugh Spalding Children’s Hospital, Holiday Project Volunteer</td>
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<td>“Hands-On-Atlanta” Mural Project for the Association for Retarded Citizens, Marietta, Georgia</td>
<td>1999</td>
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<td>Kenn-Kids Critical Care Center, Mural Project, Kennesaw Georgia</td>
<td>1996</td>
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<td>Scottish Rite Children’s Hospital, Volunteer, Atlanta, Georgia</td>
<td>1995</td>
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<td>Imagination Celebration: Art in the Zoo, Burnett Park Zoo, Syracuse New York</td>
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CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS


“Coming Out from the Margins: Arts Informed Research in Doctoral Study”. National Art Education Association Annual Convention, Seattle, WA April 17-20, 2011

“How to Really Grow a Student Teacher”. Panel Presentation, New York State Art Teacher’s Association, Rochester NY November 17-19, 2010


“Learning Styles and Diversity in the Classroom.” Co-presenter. Syracuse University Conference at Minnowbrook. May 2006

“Beyond Collage.” Co-Presenter, National Art Education Association Conference. Chicago, IL. March 2006


“Professional Portfolio Development”. Presenter. Office of Professional Development, Syracuse University, Syracuse NY. April 2005


“Beyond Jeopardy” Collaborative panel presentation NYSATA Beyond the Image.

ADDITIONAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Art Teacher, Furtah Preparatory School. Marietta, Georgia 2001-2003 K-12
Art Teacher

Art Teacher, Lockhart Academy. Kennesaw, Georgia 1996-2001 9-12
Art Teacher Fine Arts Dept. Head 1998-2001 6-12 Art Teacher
1996-1998 K-12 Art Teacher

Pre-Kindergarten Teacher, Tutor Time Marietta Georgia 1996


*P-12 ART TEACHING CERTIFICATES HELD IN NY, FL, GA.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

New York State Art Teachers Association

National Art Education Association

Society of Disability Studies

Student Art Education Association of Syracuse University