

Copyright

by

Karen Waldrop Dickerson

2010

The Dissertation Committee for Karen Waldrop Dickerson
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Re-imagining Identity: The Arts and The Child
with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Committee:

Diane Schallert, Supervisor

Stuart Reifel, Supervisor

Jo Worthy

Christopher Brown

Alba Ortiz

Re-Imagining Identity: The Arts and the Child with
Autism Spectrum Disorder

By

Karen Waldrop Dickerson, B.A.; M.S.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2010

“Just take a look through my eyes

There's a better place

somewhere out there.

Just take a look through my eyes

Everything changes

You'll be amazed what you'll find

If you look through my eyes”

“And love dares you,

to care for the people on the edge of the light.

And love dares you,

To change our way of caring about ourselves.”

Acknowledgements

To my darling son, Logan: You are the inspiration for everything in my life. You push me to reach further and dream bigger. Parenting you is the greatest privilege I will ever know. You are so precious to me.

To my family: Mom, Susan, Thomas, Tommy, Janet, and Larry: Words cannot express how much your support has meant to me in this endeavor. I could not have achieved this goal without your unending love and support. I thank you for everything you have done.

To Diane Schallert: This work, that means so much to me, would not have been possible without your guidance and expertise. You have a gift for mentoring your students. I am so proud that you were my chair and my mentor. Thank you for helping me to produce the best dissertation of my ability.

To Stuart Reifel, Alba Ortiz, Chris Brown, and Jo Worthy: I so appreciate all of your hard work and input in the writing of this dissertation. I am forever grateful.

To my friends: Who can get by without “a little help” from their friends? Jennifer, you have always believed in me and always make me laugh. Jenny, you are a wonderful friend, and an incredible writer—your advice and counsel saw me

through. Loretta, thank you so much for formatting my work and being my “Austin Hub.” Michele, you challenged me to stay focused and Tracy, you called constantly to check in on me during the dark days of non-stop writing. I love you all.

To Carl: You are the dream of my future. I love you. Thanks for standing by your crazy girl!

To Scott: This is for you, my darling. Everyday I wanted to give up, I felt your presence pushing me to go forward. Thank you for the years and for our son. I miss you everyday.

Re-imagining Identity: The Arts and the Child with
Autism Spectrum Disorder

Publication No. _____

Karen Waldrop Dickerson, PhD

The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

Supervisors:

Diane Schallert and Stuart Reifel.

In the current literature, little is written about issues of identity in relation to persons with autism. Identity can be defined within a social context, in which individuals are seen as having multiple, changing identities that are expressed in specific, though fluid, social relationships. This dissertation explored the individual arts experiences of four children with autism spectrum disorder in relation to their social identity formation. The dissertation explored three research questions:

(a) What are the contextual conditions that aid and make arts experiences salient for the child with ASD? (b) What are the outcomes of arts experiences for children with ASD? and (c) How do these experiences impact the lived experience of children with ASD?

Data were collected over four months, beginning in March of 2009 and continued through June, in a private school for children with learning differences in southeastern, Texas. Data included interviews with students, parents and teachers and classroom observations. Qualitative research methodology, specifically, grounded theory was used to analyze the data. Findings were that arts experiences for children with autism spectrum disorder engendered an identity transformation for the participants. The central phenomenon of the study was termed: *Re-imagining of the identity of the child with autism spectrum disorder*. Through shared discourse of the classroom teachers, arts teachers, and parents, the children participants became identified as “art kids” and “drama kids” within the school community. Re-imagining consisted of re-envisioning the child’s future, re-defining the child by his or her talents versus his or her deficits, and re-interpreting the child’s actions and behaviors.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	4
Questions that Guided the Study	6
Overviews of the Next Chapters	8
Chapter Two: Literature Review:	9
Arts Curriculum and Aesthetic Experience Research	9
Arts and Children with Special Needs Research	13
Autism Spectrum Disorder Research.....	15
Arts and ASD Research.....	18
Identity Research.....	20
Disability Studies Research	23
Chapter Three: Method.....	28
Rationale and Approach	28
Table 1A.....	31
The Methodological Approach	33
Research Questions	36
Research Site	37
Participants	39
Procedure	55
Data Sources: Collection, Documentation, Observations	57
Data Analysis.....	61
Chapter Four: Results	69
Themes.....	69
Features of Arts Experiences	70
Arts Allow Children to be seen in a Different Light	72
Arts Provide and Alternative Means of Communication.....	76
Arts Allow Interaction with Mainstream Society	80
Arts Challenge ASD Symptoms.....	85
Arts are Enjoyable and Fun	92
Arts Allow Children to Have Agency	95
Outcomes of Children’s Art Experiences.....	97
Child as Risk-Taker	98
Children as Successful.....	101
Child as Social Being.....	108
Child as Revealing Inner Life.....	119
Artist’s Identity.....	124
Conclusion	132

Chapter Five: Theoretical Model	134
Section One: Interpretation of the Model	137
Section Two: Case Studies.....	147
Re-imagining Sasha.....	147
Re-imagining Fred.....	153
Chapter Six: Conclusions	159
Limitations of the Study.....	169
Implications of the Study.....	171
Recommendations for Further Research	177
Appendices	
Appendix A: Teacher Consent Forms	179
Appendix B: Parent Consent Forms.....	181
Appendix C: Assent Form	182
Appendix D: Teacher Interview Form.....	185
Appendix E: Parent Interview Form.....	187
Appendix F: Sasha’s Art “Line Leader”	189
Appendix G: Sasha’s Art “Grandpa’s Card”.....	190
Appendix H Sasha’s Art “Bad Doggie!”	191
References	192
Vita	203

Chapter 1

Introduction

Scholars (Langer, 1967; Beardseely, 1984; Greene, 1995) have long spoken to the impact of the arts in the lives of all human beings, stating that people value aesthetic experiences because of their ability to take us out of our everyday, ordinary routines and for a moment to connect with the beauty that is often hidden in day-to-day routines. In this study, I examined the complex experiences of children with autism spectrum disorder while engaged in the arts. Autism spectrum disorder is a broad term, not yet recognized by The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) that is used to describe children whose behaviors and abilities contain autistic-like features (American Psychological Association, 1994). Autism spectrum disorder is a diagnosis that includes the subcategories of disorders that share many clinical features and interventions including: Autistic Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder not otherwise specified (PDD, NOS), and Asperger Disorder. There is currently much confusion and overlap between definitions of children with autistic-like tendencies. Persons with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have impairments in social, communicative, and behavior development that typically are present before age three, and that often are accompanied by abnormalities in cognitive functioning, learning, attention, and sensory processing (Yeargin-Allsop et al., 2003).

For the purposes of this study, the term autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, was used to encompass all of the school *diagnoses* that all of the children who participated in the study had. Although I felt it was very important to look at children as individuals and richly describe their varying abilities and preferences, for the purposes of clarity, the term *ASD* is used throughout this dissertation. Recent reports have confirmed that the prevalence of these disorders is dramatically on the rise. The most recent studies using the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR) and International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) criteria have identified ASD rates ranging from 2.0 to 12.0 per 1,000 children (1,4,17–23), with “best-estimate” rates of 1 in 150 children according to the Centers for Disease Control (2007a). This represents a tenfold increase from studies done in the 1980’s. This increase is a clear indication of the need for studies that examine what is needed for intervention and what is meaningful to enhance the lives of children with these challenges.

My own experience with children with ASD came when I took a position as a classroom teacher (from 1993-1998) for a group of ten children at the Acorn School (a pseudonym), a private school for children with language and learning disabilities. As I became intimately connected with the children in my classroom, I watched them struggle to express basic wants and needs and to make social connections with peers. My students also struggled to organize their bodies when unpacking their backpacks in the morning, or sequence the steps needed

to wash their hands. In many cases, the children struggled so much with everyday tasks that many simply withdrew into their own interests and did not want to participate in classroom activities. However, I saw a difference in my students when they stepped into the art or drama class. I recall one child, who seemed so disheartened by his school experiences at the tender age of four that he often refused even to attempt a new task, but who was enthusiastically waving his arms to the music in a freestyle, "Flight of the bumblebee dance," during a drama class. Another student, who could often get focused on twirling his shoes laces for an hour, was jumping up and down at the drama teacher's feet yelling, "Me too, Me too!" Something magical seemed to happen for these children when putting on a costume or holding a paint brush that caused them to come alive and enjoy school in ways that I had never observed before. It is from this experience that I came to conceptualize the present study.

This dissertation explored the experiences of four children attending a special needs school who participated in an integrated arts program. The school's philosophy was that the arts provided a unique and important avenue for children to express their ideas and knowledge. The idea of the study was to observe children who were judged as having unique talents or an affinity for dramatic or visual art experiences, and talk with their arts teachers, classroom teachers, and parents about their impressions of the role that participating in the arts had in the children's lives. As a participant observer, I came to know each child and observed them engaging with the arts, and with the input of these

teachers and parents, qualitatively analyzed the impact of arts experiences for these children. I utilized a *grounded theory* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) approach to conduct the study, in which I entered into the research site with only general research questions, analyzed the data with codes, categories, and themes, and finally outlined a theoretical framework that explained the phenomenon I witnessed. I conceptualized these understandings through the lens of identity formation, which allowed me to focus on examining the social reconstruction of the child's identity in the context of his or her arts experiences. Because children labeled with ASD generally have limitations in their verbal communication, I carefully triangulated the conclusions drawn from the data with member checking activities, in order to ensure the best representation of each individual story from the participants' point of view.

Statement of the Problem

Previous research conducted in the area of arts experiences and children with autism is focused on using art in a variety of ways. Some examples include the use of art therapy to improve communication, academic, or social skills (De La Cruz, dissertation, 1995; Epp, 2008), arts as reinforcement or motivation for educational objectives (Kairuki & Honeycutt, 1998; Standley, 1996), and guidelines for teachers to implement and modify an arts curriculum for children with special needs (Mason & Steedly, 2006; Furniss, 2007). Other literature has proposed broader-reaching hypotheses, such as viewing art as connected to the

development of creativity, sense of self-hood, and ordering of the world for the child with ASD (Osborne, 2003). An article by Okerman, Welch, and Zimmerman (2002) came closest to the purpose of my study, as they looked at the impact music had on children with multiple disabilities, citing improvements in social skills, organization, understanding cause and effect, and emotional and language development.

ASD and Identity

In the current literature, little is written about issues of identity in relation to persons with autism. Because of the general deficits in interpersonal skills within this population, understanding who one is in the world is of little consequence to persons with ASD (McAdams, 1997). Identity is described by Erickson (1970) as an individual's comprehension of himself or herself as a discrete, separate entity. Identity is also defined within a social context, in which individuals have multiple, changing identities that are expressed in specific, though fluid, social relationships (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1999). Some scholars are beginning to investigate the connection between autism and identity. Bagatell (2003) reported on a year-long study about a young man with Aspergers Disorder that portrayed how he navigated between two social worlds, alternatively ascribed to the "Aspie" world and the world of his normally- functioning peers. Still other studies have explored professional and parental discourses surrounding children with disabilities and how these discourses affect the children's identity formation

(Priestly, 1999; Thomas, 1998). These studies have explored children's understanding of their own disabilities, how they impacted their lives, and their place in the greater world. Children were shown to have varying degrees of understanding of their disabilities, often dictated by messages from parents and professionals. The children reported being impacted to varying degrees by their disability, in terms of their access to society and in their interpersonal lives (Connors & Stalker, 2006). Finally, studies like that of Kelly (2005) have proposed that when parents and professionals resisted "pathologizing" discourses when talking to and about children, children's self-efficacy and self-esteem were boosted. Additionally, Avdi's (2005) work revealed how *reframing* professionals' terminology toward positive aspects of a child with disabilities effectively increased parents' mental health and outlook about the child's future.

The Study

Expanding on the themes outlined above, my study examined the individual experiences of children with ASD and the arts from a multiple perspectives, in order to understand fully the intensity or quality of the benefits the arts can have for children with special needs. I began my investigation with following questions:

- What is special about the experiences of children with ASD in the arts?
- How can the experiences of children with ASD in the arts be characterized or thematically categorized?

- How do these experiences impact the lived experience of children with ASD?

As is common with qualitative research, the ongoing process of data immersion informed my understanding so that my research questions needed to change to align more closely with my findings concerning identity construction. The final questions this dissertation addressed were the following:

- What are the contextual conditions that aid and make the arts experiences salient for the child with ASD?
- What are the outcomes of arts experiences for children with ASD?
- How do arts experiences impact the lived experience of children with ASD?

In order to address these questions, I conducted numerous observations of the children both in their regular classrooms and while participating in the art and drama classrooms. I conducted in-depth interviews with the classroom teachers, the arts teachers, and the mothers of the children, during which I explored the salient features of arts experiences for the children, as well what the participants reported were the direct benefits for children of participation in the arts.

Overview of the Next Chapters

The next chapter, Chapter 2, includes a review of literatures that are relevant to my study. Chapter 3 details the procedures used to complete the study, including data sources and analytical strategies used to describe how arts experiences impacted the participants in the study. In Chapters 4 and 5, I present the results of the study, in terms of thematic understanding and experiences, as well a model for understanding the experiences of these children. In Chapter 6, I summarize the results, point to limitations concerning my research, and offer suggestions for future research and practice related to arts experiences, identity, and children with autism spectrum disorder.

Chapter 2

Review of Relevant Research

Five categories of literature created a framework for this study about the ways in which participation in the arts impacted children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The first category was research about the general benefits of aesthetic experiences and arts curriculum for all children. The second area included what has been written about the relationship between the arts and children with special needs and/or autism. I then review a third area, the recent research on autism spectrum disorder. Fourth, I examine the literature on identity in social contexts and describe how it is related to children with autism. Lastly, I review the work of childhood disability theorists and issues surrounding the personal experiences of disability, especially from children's perspective.

Arts Curriculum and Aesthetic Experience

The benefits of aesthetic experiences for all of human kind have been widely described through the years. Beardsley (1984) wrote extensively about his theory of aesthetics, saying that these unique experiences include five criteria: object directness, detached affect, felt freedom, active discovery, and wholeness. Scholars have viewed the arts as existing on a different plane than our daily lived experiences in their ability to teach us to appreciate beauty and increase our creative ability, and even to better society by promoting Accessibility

and equality. Langer (1967) described the artist as an expert at communicating inner experiences that can be shared by most people. In his *Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky (1971) claimed that art reflects the development of society and touches upon people's social lives. Likewise, the existentialist philosopher, Maxine Greene (1995), wrote poetically of the ability of the arts to free our thinking by releasing the imagination as no other experience can. She asserted that the arts allow us to think outside the box where endpoints are limitless and outcomes are undetermined. Greene (1995) described "wideawakeness" as a state of existing, wherein one is fully and uniquely alive—a state of being that is wholly separate from the mundane experience of our everyday lives. For Greene, being "wideawake" is also the place where one can step outside of oneself and learn about others' lived experiences or connect with the beauty of a painting or a sidewalk one might walk down daily, but never fully notice. Greene (2001) described the arts' ability to release us from "confinement to the world of skill, training, or measurable competence" (p.77). She spoke of the arts' ability to "release capacities, energies and ways of being in the world that are ordinarily suppressed" (p. 77). Greene believed in encouraging resistance to schools that focus only on standards and benchmarks, and whose goals are more about turning out student's who "are molded in the service of technology and the market" (p.379). In a speech given to the Bronx School of the Arts, Greene (2007) spoke to the centrality of imagination in the resistance to standardization in schools:

I think I want mostly to argue for a centrality of imagination because of its power to enable persons to reach towards alternative, to reach beyond; and I want to argue for the arts because of the ways in which they open windows in an experience, provide moments of freedom and presence, enable us to break with terrible moments of apathy and numbness. (p.2)

Similarly, Jackson (1999) claimed, “The arts offer alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world around us” (p.56). Drawing on Dewey, Jackson also described the impact of aesthetic response, suggesting that it allows us to perceive, be moved and make sense of something that, in real life, we might not understand in the same way. Dewey (1958) described the act of having *an experience* as an intensified engagement of the self with the world. A key element to an aesthetic experience is described as, “The suddenness, the surprise, the eventfulness of an aesthetic experience has the power to transfer the mundane and the ordinary into the extraordinary” (Wang, 2005, p 99). Finally, Bundy (2003) wrote, “The ultimate possibility of an aesthetic response is that it offers people new ways of seeing and understanding the world in which they operate” (p. 172). In speaking to the ways that classrooms should promote aesthetic experiences, Wang (2005) stated:

The unique power of aesthetic experiences in bringing the vitality of life into the curriculum should be released. The classroom needs to be arranged in such a way that transformative and transcendent qualities of the aesthetic can be incorporated to embrace the unexpected, and daily experience can be crafted into something extraordinary. (p.92)

Given the general agreement that there is something “special” about arts experiences, it would make sense that children of all abilities would benefit widely

from experiences with visual, musical, and dramatic arts, both within the school setting and beyond. Experts agree that the arts help to develop a child's creativity (Roster, Pariser & Grueber, 2002; Saracho, 2002), self-expression, and identity (Hawkins, 2002). Eliot Eisner's (1997) theory of the curriculum spoke about the arts curriculum as a "mind altering device" (p. 9). Eisner (1997) gave the example, "if all you have is a hammer, everything else is a nail" (p. 350) as a metaphor for illustrating how freedom in experience and representation allows the mind to develop in ways that a standard curriculum, which privileges reading and writing, cannot. He espoused the idea that the arts shape the minds that children come to own. Eisner went on to say that we cannot just open the doors to children in schools; we have a responsibility to provide the best education for every individual once they get there. In *The Kind of Schools We Need*, Eisner (2002) asserted that this was an issue of educational equality in which schools must provide a wide variety of tools of representation that best fit the aptitudes of the students whom they serve. Howard Gardner (1983) also wrote about the use of variety of forms of expression for children's minds in his work on Multiple Intelligences. Roper and Davis (2000) explained Gardner's theory:

He sees education as needing to draw on and develop the intelligences that are distinctive to the human species, and in particular needing to play a key role in the maximization of the child's potential across these intelligences. (p. 221)

I have used the preceding theories in conceptualizing the impact of the arts in the lives of children with ASD. Although the literature reviewed did not specifically address arts experiences for children with special needs, the idea

that an arts curriculum can serve as an alternative representation for children with differences aligned well with my research goals. Greene (1995) proposed that the arts allow for a place where “ordinary limits are overcome, landscapes may be altered, windows may be opened to what might be, or what ought to be” (p. 65). The current study attempted to discover these places for children with autism spectrum disorder.

The Arts and Children with Special Needs

The claims of the benefits of art, music, and drama education in helping students to improve communication, language, and social skills are numerous and well documented. Gair (1980) stated “Art education can assist children with disabilities to acquire behavioral, academic and aesthetic skills” (p.8). The literature that deals with the relationship between the arts and special needs children can generally be divided into three categories: a) art as a tool to help certain academic skills, b) art as a therapeutic tool to increase behavioral or social skills, and c) art as a means of understanding human experiences. Because the literature written about children with special needs often incorporates many different disorders, I will note when I am referencing studies about individuals with ASD specifically. Although ASD is a relatively new label, I believe it is important for my study to provide a general overview of the literature on the arts and its relationship to children with special needs.

Many studies claim a link between the arts and achievement in academics (Dupont, 1993; Goodman, 1990 unpublished dissertation; Moore & Caldwell, 1993, Standley, 2008, Argabright, 2005; Johnson & Memott, 2006). However, Eisner (1999) questioned the validity of these claims, claiming the studies had no clear evidence of causality between the arts and improvements in academic skills, were not published in peer-reviewed journals, and were limited to very specific populations. Some researchers like Everett, Steffert, and Smythe (1999) and Wolff and Lundberg (2002) looked at increased art skills in children with disabilities. Their studies claimed that dyslexic students had enhanced creative abilities, making the argument that children with disabilities are actually better at certain arts-based skills than “normal” children. Wolf and Lundberg (2002) found that the prevalence of dyslexia was indeed higher in art students than in the general population.

Epp (2008) cited a study by Julian (2004) who claimed that “Art therapy as a component to social skills training, may increase the willingness of children to participate because art is an activity that they find acceptable” (p.29). Art and music therapy are often utilized to help children with a wide range of goals, including increasing social skills and improving behavior. Trevarthen (2002) reported that music could be utilized to foster communication and social interaction; and to enhance students’ growing awareness of personal identity. Other uses of art to meet goals are outlined by Germain (2008):

Potentially, through art, these students can be given a way to communicate to others, have confidence in their own ideas, understand

emotions, finish projects, improve their fine-motor skills, problem solve, appreciate the beauty around them, and grow in ways that will empower them throughout their life. (p. 55)

Finally, experts in the field advocate for the accessibility of the arts in schools based on their value in teaching society about the human experience of the sensory world (Gee, 2007; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006). Gee stated:

We in the arts link emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth with an individual's capacity to contribute to society by way of acting as a responsible, industrious, and empathetic person both privately and in the public realm. Valuing the arts on their own merits, that is, for the sensorial, intellectual, and emotional nourishment derived from deep engagement with an art form, is the most fundamental and genuine way we think about the effects of art, music, dance, or theater on the individual, ourselves first and foremost. (p.4)

Current Research on Autism Spectrum Disorder

I will now examine what is known about autism spectrum disorder in order to characterize the symptoms and current body of knowledge regarding ASD, before detailing the use of the arts with this disorder. The use of the label Autism Spectrum Disorder, or ASD, is a relatively new phenomenon. It is a term used to describe children who fall along the autism continuum, with symptoms ranging in severity from mild to profound. The word *spectrum* is used because the condition will affect the individuals in very different ways. Assessing children for symptoms of ASD is complex as there are no definitive biological tests (CDC, 2007). A working definition of children and adolescents with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is as follows: the individual demonstrates significant limitations in the development of verbal language and conventional forms of non-verbal

communication such as eye contact, gesture, and body language, with a correspondingly limited development of communicative skills (Robertson et.al., 1999; Sigman & Kasari, 1995).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a group of five closely-related neurobiological disorders, including Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Rett's Disorder. ASD is among the most disabling and mystifying of all childhood developmental disorders because individuals with it have an atypical pattern of development that affects multiple areas of functioning (Hilt & Metz, 2008; World Health Organization, 2006). ASD is characterized by "interference with communication and social interactions and circular patterns of interest, activities, and behavior" (Epp, 2008, p.27). Although all children with diagnoses under the ASD umbrella demonstrate the same core deficits, Fisher (2005) stated that the symptoms can be manifested in a wide variety of ways, ranging from those with many characteristics of the disorder to those with fewer characteristics who remain largely functional. Plimley (2007) outlined that ASD exists in all races and cultures, and is a lifelong condition. She went on to state that the impairments in ASD can manifest themselves in different ways over time, and that as the child with ASD matures, former problems might recede, as new and different problems replace old behaviors.

Families with children on the spectrum face many challenges. Ghanizadeh et al. (2009) cited marital stress, lowered income, and a reduced quality of life as

some of these challenges. The researchers explained, “Most of the families have to live and care for their children on their own forever” (p.478). In an article by Sperry et al, (1999) exploring the needs of parents with young children with ASD, parents identified parental advocacy, adequate training of professionals working with their children, and interventions in social skills as pressing needs in caring for their children.

In February 2007, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) released data gathered from the largest survey of prevalence from multiple U.S. cities to date estimating that an average of 6.6 to 6.7 children out of 1,000 had some form of ASD. These numbers indicate an enormous increase in numbers of children with the disorder, because for decades the prevalence had been estimated to be 4 to 5 per 10,000 children. Today, comprehensive interventions appear to hold the most promise for individuals with ASD. Successful treatments often include parent counseling, behavior modification, special and general education in a highly structured environment, sensory integration training, music therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, social skills training, and psychopharmacotherapy (use of psycho-tropic medications) (Tsai, 2000). However, many curricula included within therapy programs have not been tested or examined to determine which is the most effective for children with ASD, and the evaluation of such programs is needed for evidence-based practice (Epp, 2008).

Art as a Tool to Help Children with ASD

Research that examines the arts and ASD is relatively new and varied in content matter and focus of research. Osborne (2003) focused on aspects of the arts that specifically benefit children with ASD in a broader sense of lived experience and individual growth. Prig, Hermlin, and Hemley (1995) investigated the relationship between so-called graphically gifted “savant” skills in certain autistic children with proficiency in representing complex graphic patterns. Similarly, Furniss (2008) did a study on designing art classes as designated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA for children with Asperberg’s syndrome (a high-functioning form of autism), including ideas for scaffolding and modifications, that promoted the children’s creative talents and abilities in the visual arts.

In looking at specific art forms, Shore (2002) conducted a case study of a child in which he investigated a child with autism success in playing a musical instrument. Shore made the argument that playing an instrument can serve as a means for engaging in social interaction at school and in the community. Shore spent several sessions with two students in which he introduced instruments and simple songs, using each child’s parent as a partner in the sessions. Responses in students were varied including: very basic mirroring motions to encourage turn-taking and reciprocity with the instruments in one child, to getting verbal communication through song from another, to learning to play notes on a recorder given a kinesthetic approach. Shore (2002) concluded, “Music provides

an alternative means of communication for those who are nonverbal, can help to organize verbal communication, improve self-esteem, and is an activity he or she can potentially excel in” (p.106).

An additional body of research dealing with the arts and ASD is in the area of music and art therapy. For example, Bunt (1994) wrote that “music therapy is the use of organized sounds and music within an evolving relationship between client and therapist to support and encourage physical, mental, social and emotional well-being” (p.8). Specifically, studies about music therapy and autism have reflected the philosophy that music therapy supports attention and motivation, and improves communication and social interaction skills in this population (Wigram & Gold, 2006). In their did a systematic review of all current research on music and autism, concluded that the contribution of music therapy for autistic spectrum disorder intervention is most notable in the effect of encouraging interpersonal communication, reciprocity, and the development of relationships, primarily because improvisational music provides variable levels of structure, which is very effective in work against rigidity, meets the child “where they are” in expressive production, and “provides a vehicle for reciprocal interaction, communication and play” (Kim, Wigram, & Gold, 2008, p.536).

According to Cooper and Widdows (2004), art therapy is particularly appropriate for children on the autism spectrum because they are often visual, concrete thinkers. Julian (2004) stated that engaging in art forces children to be less literal and concrete in expression, and offers them alternatives as a non-

threatening way to deal with rejection. Epp (2008) specifically looked at art therapy and the improvement of social skills in children with ASD. A group of 66 children were engaged in a group therapy setting using various art therapy methods targeting the specific social skills of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and control. Based on pre and post-test measures, results showed a statistically significant improvement in three of the four areas, with an overall decrease in internalization. Epp (2008) admitted in her discussion that there was no statistical evidence that art therapy was the key in the improvement of skills. However, she did hypothesize that use of the art therapy techniques were particularly helpful in that they “reach children who function more easily in a visual/kinesthetic orientation than in the social/intuitive environment” (p.36).

Current research on Identity

Identity is an oft-used term for which there is no clear agreement about its meaning (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Elliot, 2001). Erickson (1970) used the term to describe an individual's comprehension of him or herself as a discrete, separate entity. In the current literature, little is written about autism and identity. Bagatell (2007) stated, “While there has been some attention given to the issue of identity and disability, there has been little attention paid to the process of identity construction for individuals with autism, in large part because of the assumption that social worlds hold little importance” (p.413). Reflective of this viewpoint is the traditional, deficit-driven literature that has described persons

with autism as lacking sense of self (McAdams, 1997), and therefore not as able to consider how they are viewed by the “other” person, and how they view their own places in society at large. Bagatell (2007) did a case study about a young man with autism in which she examined how he negotiated between the social words of “normals” versus persons with autism. Her findings indicated that the man felt the tensions between these two worlds deeply, often expressing feelings of depression regarding his inability to fit completely into one or another space.

Identity is also defined in terms of a social nature in which individuals have multiple, changing identities that are expressed in specific, though fluid, social relationships (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1999). As defined by Urietta (2007), “Identity is also very much about how people come to understand themselves, how they come to ‘figure’ who they are, through the ‘worlds’ that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds” (p. 107). Social identity is described by Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) as groups to which people belong that provide their members with a definition of who they are and how they should behave. In Dyson’s (1995) work on writing children, she quoted Thorne as saying, “we define selves through relationships with others” (p. 104). Dyson related this idea about to examining the dynamic social networks and social contexts in which children and their literacy develop.

The current literature asserts that people represent themselves through the voices or the worlds of others, in the discourses both of specific individuals and communities (Holquist, 1981; Holland et al., 1998). This is certainly true in

classrooms, where children's identities are constantly shifting in changing social networks. Wortham (2004) wrote that children enter classrooms with sociohistorical identities that include ethnicity and gender, are developed over time, and may include school labels such as Speech Impairment, Attention Deficit Disorder, or Gifted and Talented. In his study of social identification in classrooms, William, an African-American male, became positioned as an *unpromising boy* within the classroom context, and his actions were consistently interpreted through a deficit lens which included negative stereotypes about gender, race and scholastic achievement. Wortham's study demonstrated that social categories produced and installed locally in the classroom functioned to naturalize students' identities and sheds light on the importance of the discourse and interactions among individuals within the classroom context over time.

Worthy et al. (2010) described the phenomenon of "re-storying" as a process of "interrupting and revising negative reputations for students who entered the classroom with official and unofficial labels" (n.p.). Worthy et al. used research based on the work of Noddings (1984), Alder (2002), Alder and Moulton (1998), and Goldstein (1999, 2001), as well as studies of effective and exemplary teachers (Allington, Johnston, & Day, 2002; Haberman, 1995; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000; Williams, 2003) to describe the caring moral stance and subsequent pedagogical practice of Mae, an exemplary second grade teacher. The researchers illustrated the impact of these practices on student identities saying, "Mae's expectations for participation, behavior, and academic progress,

as well as her support, were unwavering. Mae not only refused to let negativity taint her perceptions of her students, she purposefully disrupted their previous negative stories and supported them in building positive identities and new stories for themselves” (n.p).

McCarthy (2001) studied identity construction in elementary students’ reading and writing by attempting to understand how student’s success, or lack thereof, and interest in literacy practices shaped the ways in which they and others perceived them. The study focused on the intersection of the students’ identities as readers, in conjunction with their subidentities (Mishler, 1999) which included race, gender, and class. The study found that there was wide variation in how students’ reading identities were agreed upon and constituted between parents, teachers, and the children themselves. Some children stated that their abilities and interest in reading were very important to who they were, and other students rated issues of ethnicity, gender, and class as more important, or just as important in their identity construction.

Current Research from the Field of Disability Studies

As a final area of study that guided this dissertation, I turn now to the general foundational field of disability studies. Disability studies examine the social construction of disability as a value-laden, culturally, and historically influenced discourse, much like the constructs of race, sexuality, or gender. Scholars are now challenging the long-held view of Western societies that has

used a medical model to describe disability as being lodged within the person. In the medical view, the person is disabled by a specific mental and physical condition, as in the case of the medical label of Autism Spectrum Disorder (Kuppers, 2000). Disabled activists propose a social model of disability that contests discourses that view disabilities as deviant, and that seek to tear down barriers and allow people access to participate in society on equal terms (Linton, 1998). Labels and definitions tend to describe the limitations of children, not their abilities. The idea of oppression is a key component of this field which spoke to my study's broader aspirations and concerns that children with ASD have access to art experiences both within and outside the public school system. Abberley (1987) pointed out that in order to label disabled persons as oppressed, one must consider the differences between their lives and other sections of society, comparing how they are inferior to others because they are disabled people and how society benefits from this situation. In another related study, Dowling and Dolan (2001) discovered that families with disabled children often identified "missed experiences," such as outings, trips to the park, and other opportunities for recreational activities because of public intolerance. I agree with Kuppers (2000) as she warned us that, "The process that will lead to a barrier-free society for people with differences and impairments is long, and has to be fought on many fronts. One of those fronts is in the arts and in art education" (p. 122).

A new, seemingly under-researched area under disability studies is the branch of the "sociology of childhood" that "challenges traditional views of

children, and recognizes their role as skillful social actors with their own perspectives and experiences of the social world” (Connors & Stalker, 2007, p. 20). Within this branch are scholars who have investigated the real experience of impairment in the lives of disabled children. Research conducted in this realm indicated that the kind of discourse that professionals and parents used with children with autism and other disabilities had a powerful impact on how these children understood their own disabilities and identities.

Connors and Stalker (2006) studied 26 disabled children and showed they experienced disability in four ways: in terms of impairment, difference, other people’s behavior towards them, and material barriers. The study suggested that the children may have lacked a positive language with which to discuss differences in which they experienced disability, in order to give the most accurate picture. In examining professional discourses about children with disabilities, Kelly (2005) found that professionals who gave parents positive messages about their children helped the parents to reframe their own views of parenting a child with impairments. Thomas’ (1998) study revealed that parental interpretation of the meaning of impairment was crucial to the development of their child’s identity. Parents who sought to challenge negative assumptions about impairment and barriers to Accessibility encouraged more positive self-perceptions for their children than those who emphasized their child’s limitations. Results showed that learning disabled children do develop an understanding of impairment and disability in the context of their own lives and are able to

articulate their own experiences and perceptions, despite the absence of discussion with their parents or professionals.

Echoing these findings, Avdi (2005) reported on a study of family therapy with parents of autistic children. The researcher used discourse analysis to look at how problems and identities in therapy are “talked into being” (p.507) during therapeutic sessions. Similarly, Thomas (1999) has argued that the personal impact of impairment and disability on disabled individuals self-identity and self-esteem is as important as addressing disabling barriers in society, and one area on which to focus are the experiences of children. Priestly (1999) confirmed this assertion, stating that children’s stories of the disability experience portray themselves as capable social players who can act and who resist dominant discourses and create their discursive places.

Conclusion

The number of children with ASD is sharply on the increase in the United States. The need for more research on what approaches can help these children express their knowledge and develop their talents and abilities is in great demand. The arts have long been a way in which human beings can step out of the mundane experiences of their everyday lives to connect with the beauty of the world around them and release the imagination (Greene, 1995). For children with special needs, the arts have been used as both an educational (Furniss, 2008; Shore, 2002) and therapeutic tool (Cooper and Widdows, 2004; Epp,

2008), and current research is beginning to investigate the ability of the arts to enhance the quality of life of these children (Osborne, 2003). If as Eisner (1997) has stated that the arts are a “mind altering device” and that freedom in experience and representation allows the mind to develop in ways that a standard curriculum, with its privileging of reading and writing cannot, then why would this not hold true for children with ASD? This dissertation expanded on the current literature on how children with ASD benefit from experiences in the arts. Currently, few qualitative studies attempt to describe richly the lived experiences of children during art experiences. Even less is know about the relationship between children with ASD and issues of identity. Brantlinger (2005) stated clearly that more qualitative research is needed in the field of special education because by its very nature, the goal of qualitative research is to understand the unique experiences of individuals with disabilities, which no checklist or standardized test can accomplish. Maxine Greene (1993) asserted that the arts make social justice more possible. Scholars in the field of Disability Studies echo these concerns by looking at ways in which society has created disability by refusing to remove structural constraints that would enable more people to have access to resources in society (Donahue, 2003).

Chapter Three

Method

This chapter presents the description of the methods and procedures applied in developing and completing this dissertation. I first discuss the rationale for the study, give a brief overview of the pilot study, and state the research questions with which I began. Second, I describe the research site and provide brief participant biographies. Third, I outline the data sources, data collection, documentation, and record keeping procedures. Last, I discuss my sampling methods, data analysis, and protocols used to establish the quality, rigor, and trustworthiness of the study.

Overall Approach and Rationale

This study began as a general investigation into understanding the ways students with autism spectrum disorder experience the arts. To date, there have been several studies looking at what skills and abilities are developed in children with ASD through experiences in the arts. However, a gap still exists in the literature. The current body of research also does not include an exploration of powerful arts experiences for children with ASD as communicated from multiple perspectives including art (visual and drama) teachers, classroom teachers, and parents. Even fewer studies interview the students themselves, shedding light on their own lived experience of interactions with the arts. This may be in part

because young children who carry the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder are often observed to have deficits in oral communication skills. In no way do I want to perpetuate what some scholars have identified as part of the positivist world view, or “medical model” wherein the so-called experts in the field write for and about children with disabilities, further silencing their individual voices and reducing them to lists of symptoms and treatments. It is my theory that the current literature that looks at the lives of children with disabilities often deal with older children and those who are able to use oral language sufficiently to communicate the fullness of their arts experiences themselves. Therefore, the impact of arts experiences for young children with disabilities has largely been ignored by researchers. I hope that by having participants who are intimately connected with the children such as teachers and parents as informants, as well as the children’s own perspectives and artifacts, when possible, my study will help to fill in these gaps and further the conversation in this arena.

The Pilot Study

This dissertation builds upon the ideas and data gathered during a pilot study conducted in 2004, in which I did a condensed case study of a 6-year old Hispanic girl, who carried the diagnosis of Prader-Willi Syndrome. Prader-Willi Syndrome is a genetic disorder involving a myriad of physical, communicative, and cognitive indications that include speech and language impairments, mild to moderate mental deficiencies, obesity, wide set eyes, etc. “Kay”, a pseudonym,

participated in a ballet class through an organization called Kinetic Kids in San Antonio, Texas. A private company, Cosmic Kids (a pseudonym), organized competitive sports, gymnastics and arts programming, including dance, music, and visual arts for these children. I began observing Kay as she participated in the one-hour ballet class once a week for approximately 5 weeks, and in her special education classroom for three, one-hour observation, supplemented with one 30-minute parent interview. I began to conceptualize a framework for my study when I came across an article by Osborne (2003) that examined the potentiality of art (visual) therapy as a possible therapeutic tool with children diagnosed with autism. Osborne argued that because art (and the arts, more generally including drama, music, and dance) and aesthetics are particularly suited to developing abilities and ways of being, including creativity, sense of self, and spirituality, art therapy is a valid common ground for teachers and therapists on which to work with children whose disabilities manifest themselves in these ways.

For the purposes of the pilot study, I entered the field with the following question:

How does participation in a dance class impact the lived experience of a special needs child in terms of creativity/imagination, spirituality/voice, sense-of-self and engagement?

I looked for evidence of the categories of experiences that Osborne described including: creativity/imagination (Matthews, 1999, Lindqvist, 2003),

spirituality/voice (Beesley, 1993; Lealman, 1993; Winston, 2003), sense-of-self (Osborne, 2003; Winicott, 1971), and engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Cowart et al., 2004) as thematic codes during my observations. Because of considerable overlap of classification across these thematic categories, I chose to meld separate categories into one, allowing myself to do so only because Osborne herself acknowledged that truly distinct separation of these terms may not exist in the relevant literature, or in life. A detailed description of each category is summarized in the Table 1A:

Pilot Field Note Categories

<u>Creativity/Imagination</u> (Matthews, 1999, Lindqvist, 2003),	playful quality in participation in music or drama, where children moved, played or did something new with their experience and knowledge, that they had not been taught previously.
<u>Spirituality/Voice</u> (Beesley, 1993; Lealman, 1993; Winston, 2003)	"a sense of wonder, awe and mystery, and to feelings of transcendence, self-knowledge, creativity and the expressing of one's innermost thoughts through the arts and through exercising the imagination" (Beesley 1993, p.417). "heightened awareness and uplift" (Winston (2003, p. 245)
<u>Sense of Self</u> (Osborne, 2003; Winicott, 1971)	-awareness of separateness - sense of agency and impact upon the world
<u>Engagement</u> (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Cowart et al., 2004)	-a connection with peers/teachers, staying with an activity, and being in the moment.

As I observed the ballet class, I took detailed field notes, writing down descriptions of the class content, teacher interactions, and in particular, things that Kay said and did during the class. During my school observation, I went to

Kay's self-contained special education classroom. I observed a cooking activity, a PE class, and a large group lesson where Kay was included in a mainstream Kindergarten classroom. Analysis of the pilot study data led to several insights that I used to shape the development of what became the dissertation. I used qualitative techniques to analyze my data (Erickson, 1986). As I reviewed field notes, I used Osborne's categories as a coding structure, trying to find evidence of each category during the ballet and school observations, as well as in the parent interview. I readily found examples of all of the categories I defined: creativity/imagination, spirituality/voice, sense-of-self, and engagement during observation of the ballet class. However, it was very difficult separating what I saw into distinct categories. Spirituality was the hardest to ascertain, perhaps because of the breadth and depth of this concept across many bodies of literature. The examples of sense of self, as it relates to a sense of confidence, belief in one's ability, and interactions with others were the most frequently coded and apparent. In retrospect, I believe including Osborne's categories in the framing of my research questions may have been too limiting and fenced me in to looking at only these aspects of arts experiences. In addition, trying to write convincingly that these states of being were occurring based on my descriptions alone was daunting, and led me to use multiple perspectives (teachers, parents, students, and the researcher), prolonged engagement, data triangulation, and member checking for accuracy to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness in the current study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Hatch, 2002).

As expected, I found a general lack of Osborne's categories during the school observation, but looking critically at my study, I question the efficacy of this design because of the limited observation time I had and because of the times of the school day that I observed. More frequent, prolonged and reflective observations, as well as interviews with classroom teachers was meant to remedy this situation in the current study. In the pilot study, interview questions were extremely conversational and not well crafted, as for example. "How do you think Kay has benefited from being in the ballet class?" leaving me with little useful data. For the current study I included more standardized, open-ended interview questions (Patton, 1990). A key piece to the dissertation study was to include more children as participants. In this way, I was able to describe the experiences of several children in hope of finding similarities and distinctions between all of the children to understand more fully how the arts are special for certain children with ASD. I used Osborne's categories to help guide initial coding of initial observations and interview transcriptions.

The Methodological Approach

Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that "qualitative methods can be used to obtain intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought process, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods" (p.11). I chose to use an interpretivist/constructivist approach for this study, to understand better the world from the point of view of the

participants themselves. Mertens (1998) asserted that qualitative research rejects the notion that there is a single, objective reality, and that qualitative researchers seek to “understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge” (p. 11). I endeavored to interview arts teachers, classroom teachers, parents and (in two cases) children, to gain these multiple perspectives about arts experiences from those who live it. In order to explore what is exceptional about the arts for children with ASD, I felt it is necessary to situate the actions within the context they occur; therefore I carried out the study in the natural setting in which the phenomena occurred.

The research focus in this dissertation began as a broad expansive question of what is special about the art experiences for children with autism spectrum disorder, and as such, it was concerned with building theory. Glasner and Strauss (1967) used the term *grounded theory* to describe a research methodology in which the theory is developed from the data, in which the researcher takes an inductive approach, moving from the specific to the more general. I attempted to interpret the data in this way, without any preconceived ideas concerning its content or structure. I took a phenomenological approach to the study, one in which the researcher “attempts to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992).

A case study methodology was utilized to understand students’ experiences in the art and drama classrooms. I wrestled mightily with the

knowledge that I was attempting to represent children's experiences through my own and others' interpretations, with a population who often could not express in words, at any rate, the meaning and depth of their experiences. Yin (2003) acknowledged that the case study allows for Accessibility of the context and multiple sources of evidence to develop insights about the subject. Based on my past experiences teaching children with ASD, I feared that they might not be able to express the fullness of the art experience in response to traditional data collection methodology. Therefore, for my study, I felt that the use of others' perspectives to gain insight into the lived experiences of children with ASD was imperative. I believe that for my study, more data from a variety of sources would lend depth and richness to the story I was trying to tell. As will be explained in the data collection and analysis sections, when the children participants were able to give assent, I attempted to interview the children with varying degrees of success. Whenever available, I used children's words as valued data, both from their mouths, and as revealed in my observations of their performances, and artifacts and conversations with teachers and peers. Case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991). Mertens (1998) went on to describe case study characteristics as follows: (a) relying heavily on the interaction between the context and the individual; (b) the nature of the case and context is of particular importance; and (c) the historical background of the individual and the context influences perceived outcomes. Finally, I felt that case study was the

best approach because, “a case study is a method for learning about a complex instance, based on a comprehensive understanding of that instance taken as a whole and in its context” (The U.S General Accounting Office, 1990, p. 14). The use of case studies allowed for an in-depth view of individual interpretations of the children’s experiences, as observed by me in the art, drama, and general classrooms, and then as supported by the teachers’ and parents’ observations and interpretations.

Research Questions

Given the guidelines outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990), the initial research questions were developed to be broad in nature. This was because there were so few articles that examined this particular intersection of art education, autism, and disability theory, in addition to the fact that there were not conceptual variables in place to determine which pertained to this study and which did not. The questions became more focused as the data were analyzed and interpreted. Specifically, the initial central question(s) of this study were:

- What do teachers, parents, and children say are the salient features of arts experiences for children with ASD?
- How can the experiences of children with ASD in the arts be characterized or thematically categorized?
- How do these experiences impact the stories we tell about lived experience of children with ASD?

Site Selection

The research for this study took place at The Acorn School (a pseudonym), a private school in Houston, Texas, in the spring of 2009. The Acorn School was a private, specialized school whose mission was to “educate and empower children with language and learning differences” (mission statement). The Acorn School had been in operation since 1983 and had an annual enrollment of approximately 80 students. The Acorn School enjoyed an exclusive reputation in the city as one of the premier schools for children with learning differences, and was well known in the private school as well as the medical community. The Acorn School received referrals for potential students from numerous prestigious hospitals, clinics, and other private schools that specialized in the diagnosis and treatment of children with a wide range of learning challenges, including Autism Spectrum Disorder. The school provided classes for children aged 18 months through the fifth grade. The Acorn School offered a language-based, developmental curriculum and multi-age grouping. Children attending The Acorn School had identified communication and learning differences, but average to above average learning potential. These differences included problems with speech/language, learning to read, focusing attention, visual motor areas, and social skills. Each student went through an admissions process before enrollment in the school, which included diagnostic testing, parent tours, and a two-day classroom visit before the admissions committee determined if the child was a good candidate for The Acorn School.

The curriculum was based upon an individual teaching plans or “ITP” that contained age appropriate learning goals for each child in the areas of communication, academics, cognition, and gross and fine motor and social skills. Each classroom was limited to ten children, and was led by a certified teacher or master’s level speech-pathologist, as well as a para-educator. The Acorn School was set on sixteen acres of land in a warehouse district of the city. The site for the school was chosen for its wooded appearance, and the current buildings on campus were completed in 2004. The school was designed in sprawling layout, with the main building housing the administrative, development, and support staff. The classrooms were housed in “cottages” and were named as such with each cottage containing four classrooms with a general use area in the center containing a stove and tables. A large library sat behind the administration building, which also contained an open area for performances, a computer library, as well as the art and music classrooms. The state-of-the-art facilities included parent/therapist viewing areas, built-in assisted listening devices, play and picnic areas, gardens, and large, bright classrooms. The creative and visual arts played a large role in the academic program and incorporated the school’s focus on expressive, receptive, and pragmatic language skills, while giving children a creative outlet in which to express themselves. The Acorn School in general served children of upper middle to upper socioeconomic status. Tuition at the school averaged between \$18,425 - \$21,368 per year for preschool students, and \$24,645 year for school-age students. Approximately 24% of the

families at the Acorn school were on scholarship. Ethnic diversity at The Acorn School was characterized by 19% minority students.

Participants

I began my research by observing art and drama classes for children in the lower grade levels. I chose to look at art and drama classes, excluding music, because I thought I might learn about significant differences in these two realms of the arts. Although it is an interesting implication for further study on my topic, it did become an area of focus in my theory development. Specifically, I chose to look at art and dram classes because the two teachers of these subjects were also teaching while I was working at the school in the early 90's, and I knew of their expertise and beliefs in art experiences for children with learning differences. I conducted eight informal observations over a month long period, consisting of three drama classes, three art classes, and two regular classrooms. Because of my past experience noticing differences in the children in my own classroom as they participated in art and drama classes, as well, as the knowledge I gained during my pilot study, my goal was to begin by observing these classes without any particular children in mind when I did so. I did this purposefully, in part to see if what I had observed so many years ago still held true for the current students, and secondly because I thought choosing students strictly by teacher recommendation alone might bias my observation towards certain children over others. I propose that this lends credibility to my study-- that

even in general observations, there were children who seemed to stand out to me as being particularly suited to or performing well in the arts. At that time, I did not ask for identification of the children as those diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, because I knew that the population made up for approximately 50% of the student body. I guessed there would be a high probability that the children I eventually asked to enroll in my study would also carry the diagnosis.

Art and drama classes were similarly structured at The Acorn School in that they usually began with a circle time where the children entered the classroom, sat on the floor together, and had a group discussion/presentation of what the project or skit that would be done that day. In art, the teacher would typically explain the project steps, or do an example with children taking turns or answering questions and introducing materials. During drama class, circle time usually looked like a warm up exercise –dancing to music, the teacher reading a book that the play was based on, picking roles or setting out props. I made general notes about children’s behavior, their engagement, and how they interacted with peers and teachers.

Because I could not watch every child in every class, I simply took notes on anything that stood out to me as interesting or remarkable during the initial observations. I found that certain children began to stand out to be as being particularly engaged during arts classes. In my initial field notes, I used Osborne’s categories of creativity/imagination (Matthews, 1999, Lindqvist, 2003), spirituality/voice (Beesley, 1993; Lealman, 1993; Winston, 2003) sense-of-self

(Osborne, 2003; Winicott, 1971), and engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Cowart et al., 2004) as thematic codes during my observations, as explained in previous section. In drama, this looked like children actively paying attention, interacting with peers about the play at hand, looking engaged, or looking joyful (smiling, laughing). I did note that some children in particular seemed to really stand out to me in drama class by being very invested in character development, knowing the lines following the play, asking for different roles and improvising lines or motions.

In art class, my observations looked different. General notes during these classes noted children actively participating in discussion, being excited by materials, asking for turns, and volunteering information. When the projects began, I made notes about children's prolonged engagement with materials, colors, or simply "staying with" the project for an extended period or time. When composing analytical memos, I began to see a pattern of the same six or so children standing out to me each time I observed their class during art or drama time. Eventually, I had informal conversations with the art and drama teacher separately, describing some of the children I had observed as seeming to me to be standing out as having powerful encounters in the classrooms. In all but one case, the teachers agreed that the children I had observed, who stood out to me, were children they thought of as "art kids" or "drama kids." The full meaning of that term would reveal itself over the time I conducted research with the core participants of my study. However, I did take teacher comments and

recommendations as valuable, because the teachers had extensive opportunity to observe these children and knew of the fullness of their participation in art and drama.

It was at this time that I asked if the teachers knew if the child was on the autism spectrum. One child was eliminated from consideration at this time, because she was not identified as being on the spectrum. When I met with the parents to obtain consent for interviews and further observations, I confirmed the diagnosis with the parents verbally, as it was listed on my consent forms. Once I obtained consent, I confirmed the diagnosis with the teachers, asking them to check the school records to verify. I made a conscious choice not to review the school's permanent records and did not ask permission to review school records in my consent forms. I did this in an effort to resist the influence of medical model terminology and prior descriptions of children's abilities and deficits. I narrowed my participants down to four children, two boys and two girls. The other participants in the study were all adults, the two ICAT teachers (Intra-curricular Teachers) teaching art and music, the classroom teachers, and parents of the four children chosen for case study. I chose the two teachers in question because of my former teaching relationship with each one, their expertise in and long tenure at The Acorn School, and their commitment to the belief that experiences in the arts are beneficial for children with autism spectrum disorder. The regular classroom teachers of these children were asked to participate in the study after the children have been chosen. Pseudonyms, chosen by the research

participants themselves, or their parents are used throughout the dissertation in order protect identities.

The children

Sasha: At the time of my study, Sasha was a five year old girl of Asian decent who has attended The Acorn School for two years, beginning in the fall of 2007. This was her second year in Level II, a pre-kindergarten at The Acorn School. Sasha was a slender child with long black hair who was often described by her teachers as “strikingly attractive”. She was the youngest child in her family, having two older brothers. She is described by her mother, as “a very happy child” who “is shy in the beginning until you get to know her” (interview, 5-13-09). Her mother stated that Sasha loved art and music and playing with her pet dog. Sasha’s mother joked during an interview saying, “If she is quiet, and I’m like ‘Where is she?’ I know where she’s at—she’s drawing!” (interview, 5-13-09). Her classroom teacher, Ashley, described Sasha as “shy and quiet, introverted, willing to please, and a hard-worker” (interview, 5-29-09). In the same interview, Ashley related that Sasha was on-target academically and highly intelligent, and very art and musically driven (5-29-09).

Sasha was reported by Ashley to have “pretty strong receptive language skills, but expressively uses 3-4 word utterances which are increasing” (interview, 5-29-09). Tommie (Sasha’s mother) explained that Sasha was born in California where the family had lived for three years before moving to Texas. As reported

by her mother, and confirmed by the classroom teacher, Sasha was diagnosed with high functioning autism in 2005 by a team of specialists in Houston, Texas. Sasha's relationships with other children were described by her mother as, "getting better now, because of this school, here (The Acorn School) that's really helping and now it's extending to outside of school, too." (interview, 5-13-09). Her classroom teacher agreed, saying "She has a lot of good social skills, but she needs to work on initiating interaction, leading.., she does a lot of following" (interview, 5-29-09).

Will: Will was an eight year old boy with deep brown eyes and wavy brown hair. He was a child of Egyptian descent, tall for his age. Will had attended The Acorn School since 2007. Will was born in Egypt, where he lived until he and his family had come to the United States, when he was two years of age. Will lived with his mother, father, and younger sister. After noticing some difficulties in developing early language skills, Will's family sought professional educational and ability testing, and he was diagnosed with a receptive/expressive language disorder when he was five years of age. Will's teacher stated that he was later diagnosed as "being on the spectrum," after admission to The Acorn School. He was currently in a multi-age level classroom nearest to a first and second grade curriculum. Jasmine, Will's mother described him as "very sweet and sensitive" (interview, 5-16-2009) and as loving video games and the Wii.

Will's classroom teacher, Leigh, described him as "artistic child who likes to draw." She went on to state that Will "has some trouble focusing and a real

hard time with transitions” (interview, May 20, 2009). Although he had made gains in this area, his teacher observed that if Will perceived something as too hard, he became very anxious. Will and his teachers were working towards him being more flexible in the areas of transitions and trying new activities. Leigh also explained that Will had been working with the school wide social skills program in a private, pull-out basis, that “has helped him a lot to be able to identify with his peers and he is actually playing now (interview, May 20, 2009). She went on to say that, “He has had a hard time thinking of ways to enter into conversation with his peers, but he is getting much better with that now. He plays with kids on the playground and is able to carry on a conversation a little better” (interview, May 20, 2009). Will enjoyed computer games very much- especially Batman Lego. His mother reported that from a young age Will began acting out plays from movies he had seen. Jasmine reports that this contained the majority of his verbalizations for a period of time. Academically, Leigh reported that Will liked to learn about science, in particular different types of animals. She also reported him to be very good at math, and as making steady improvement in reading in the current year.

Fred: Fred was and an eight year old boy who had attended The Acorn School for three years. He was a blond-haired, Caucasian boy with a bright, infectious smile. Fred was one of three children, with a twin brother and an older sister. He lived with his mother and father. His mother states that “his talent is definitely music” (interview, 6-12-09). Fred’s mother describes him as “a very

happy child who just loves life” (6-12-09, interview). Fred enjoyed swimming, riding bikes, computers, reading, writing, and drawing. Fred loved to play Guitar Hero and was considered quite the expert by his family and friends. Fred’s mother shared that he developed typically until he was fifteen months old, when he stopped responding to his name, stopped making eye-contact, and lost all of the words he had. He was diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified (PDD,NOS) when he was twenty months old. His mother stated that “he struggles with losing and things not turning out the way he wants them” (interview, 6-12-09). His teacher, Mary called him a “brilliant, brilliant child” who excels at academics and any kind of art. “He just gets it” (interview, 5-21-09). Mary shared that Fred struggled to apply information to new situations. Fred, Mary stated, “prefers to be by himself, and cooperating with the group is something he really has to work on” (interview, 5-21-09). She also said that Fred was working on handling discipline. Fred stated that he is good at art, music, and drama. Fred had a starring role in the school-wide musical this year, and was the only child with a solo part.

Rose: Rose was an engaging seven-year-old girl who was completing her Kindergarten year at The Acorn School during this study. Rose was Caucasian with light brown hair and big, blue inquisitive eyes. Rose has attended The Acorn School for three years. She lived with her mother, father, and younger brother. Rose’s mother, Betsy, described her as loving “fairy tales and play acting” (interview, 6-4-09). Betsy continued saying, “She’s a fun kid who

definitely can talk! She is a chatterbox. I will say this about her personality--she is very rule oriented, I would say her first impressions are lasting. She gets an idea in her head and I find it very hard to get her to change her mind” (interview, 6-4-09). Rose carried the diagnosis of Pervasive Developmental Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. Her mother explained this diagnosis saying,

“That means that she interprets information a little bit differently and she is going to struggle socially in particularly getting cues to understanding what other people mean by things. And she also has some different interests and different ways of relating to people sometimes” (interview, 6-4-09).

Rose loved fairies, dancing and mermaids. Her teacher described Rose as “a very happy child who just has a bounce in her step and is curious about everything” (interview, 6-29-09). According to her teacher, Rose did well in reading and math, with some difficulty in comprehension. Her teacher explained that she loved stories and drama and could become very attached to certain of her peers. Her teacher also described her as being “very caring.” Socially, Rose had difficulty noticing social cues and initiating conversation. Rose participated in Big Street Theater (a pseudonym), a regional theatre company that welcomes children of all abilities. Rose had recently been a performer in a Big Street Theater production of “The Ugly Duckling,” in which she had done very well.

The Teachers

The arts teachers who were chosen for this study had been teachers at The Acorn School for over ten years each. As a former classroom teacher at

The Acorn School, I had a good working relationship with each informant, and had first hand knowledge of their personal commitment to the importance of arts experiences for children with special needs, and their expertise in providing meaningful experiences in the classroom for their students. Both teachers had conducted presentations of their teaching practices and curriculum at various conferences in Texas. Because of my previous relationship with both teachers, I originally called by telephone to ask for a lunch meeting during which I explained the overall research questions and what their participation would entail. Both teachers voiced an enthusiasm for this study, and for its potential to provide further support for the benefits of arts experiences in the lives of children with autism spectrum disorder.

Diana, The Drama Teacher

Diana, the drama teacher, had attended Southwestern University, with an emphasis in theater arts. She had 18 years experience teaching at The Acorn School. Diana told me that she had always felt as if being in theater was her calling, saying, “Honestly in high school it was my lifeline. It was the reason I went to school. I loved it. Did all the competitions and ran tournaments and all that kind of stuff” (interview, April 23, 2009).

Diana’s relationship with The Acorn School was a very personal and intimate one. Diana’s daughter began attending the school in 1989 after being diagnosed with Landau Kleffner Disorder in 1988. Diana shared with me in our initial interview that her daughter, who had been developing perfectly normally

had her first seizure when she was four years old, subsequently began to lose her expressive/receptive language abilities. Diana's daughter attended The Acorn School from 1989 to 1991 and made significant gains during this time. The daughter had recently graduated from a four year university. During this time, Diana was subsequently asked to join the staff at The Acorn School. Diana recalled how this occurred saying,

And the teachers in her classroom found out that I was a theater major, and that I had a background in theatre and asked me if I would help out putting on a play in the classroom. I helped work with the children to put on the play. I think it was Strega Nona, and um, it became clear to me that this could be something that could be very beneficial to children with learning differences. I didn't know very much at all at the time about special education. But, I knew that they needed it tremendously, and that what all children need is a boost of self esteem (interview, April 23, 2009).

At the time of my study, Diana, was conducting drama classes with each classroom at the Acorn School in a group setting, with each class lasting approximately 30 minutes, one time per week. Drama classes were held in a special room next to the library. In addition to her teaching duties, Diana directed a school wide musical, in partnership with the music and art teachers at the Acorn School, at the end of each school year, in which children across all grade levels participated. She shared with me the reason she thinks drama is so important for children on the autism spectrum saying,

Children on the autism spectrum often are so very concrete that they don't know how to pretend. So, it is my belief that pretend play is paramount to children's development. They have to be able to pretend because that involves perspective taking. That means you are thinking outside of who you are. So, I think that that is probably one of the most beneficial, one of the greatest benefits that drama can give the kids on the spectrum"

(interview, April 23, 2009).

Ben, The Art Teacher

Ben has been an art teacher at the Acorn School since 1998. He held a bachelors degree in painting and drawing, with a minor in piano, and a master's degree in child development. Ben also conducted art classes once a week with each classroom, and also worked with each class to make a group art project, which was sold to benefit the school at the annual fundraiser. He also took a leadership role in the annual production of the musical each year by working with the children to create sets and props and by playing the piano for the musical performance itself.

Ben was a very popular teacher at The Acorn School and had an "anything goes" reputation with the teachers and children. He described his philosophy of teaching art to children with learning differences, saying, "But my whole deal is for kids to get to love materials, and to be excited by new combinations-- the fact that you can make something out of anything" (interview, 5-4-09). Ben went on to say that some of his main goals were for the kids to become familiar with a set of core materials, getting excited about color, being confident to take risks, and using these experiences to engineer products. Throughout the course of our interviews, Ben related to me that he did not view teaching children on the spectrum to "do" art as being quintessentially different than teaching any other group of children to "do" art. Ben said this best in one interview saying, "I guess I am not focusing so much on spectrum kids versus

those that are not. I give them all an equal experience....Really, my whole approach is that everyone is going to find some way to feel good about making art. Or feel good about themselves making art. Everybody needs that" (interview, 5-4-09).

Leigh, Will's classroom teacher

Leigh had been a teacher for 28 years. This was her first year teaching at The Acorn School, in a combination first and second grade classroom. Leigh was trained with at an education center in Houston, Texas that taught specialized reading techniques. While working for the association, Leigh taught children before and after school, using that methodology for 20 years. Leigh shared with me that she spent her first two year teaching in Germany, and then was in public school for one year following that. Leigh was originally from Ohio, but had lived in Texas for 20 years.

Ashley, Sasha's classroom teacher

Ashley had received her bachelor of science from The University of Texas and her master's in speech pathology. This was her first year at The Acorn School. She taught a multi-age classroom of three-to five-year olds, focusing on a pre-school curriculum.

Ava, Rose's classroom teacher

Ava had been teaching at The Acorn School for three years. She had a bachelor's degree in special education and a master's degree in early childhood education. After receiving her teaching certificate, Ava spent nine years teaching

special education classes in the public schools. She believed science is her area of specialty. Ava came to visit The Acorn School upon recommendation of a friend and wanted to work there saying, "I came to visit one time, and that was it!" (interview, 6-29-09). She had been recently named Teacher of the Year at the school.

Mary, Fred's classroom teacher

Mary held a bachelor's degree in elementary education with a minor in math. Mary had taught fourth grade in the public schools for a year and a half. She had taught at The Acorn School for nine years. At the time of the study, was teaching a combination second/third grade classroom.

Researcher as Instrument

I believe it is important to stop here and be forthcoming about my stance as researcher and why I chose The Acorn School as my research site. I had worked at The Acorn School beginning in the summer of 1993 until the fall of 1998, first as a lead teacher/speech pathologist and later as Speech Pathology Coordinator and Summer Camp Director. I had remained in contact with the school over the past ten years, visiting the campus, attending staff reunions, and fundraisers. It should be stated plainly and clearly that I have intimate connection with the administrators of the school on a personal as well as professional basis. I believe deeply in the mission of the school and hold that The Acorn School is one of the finest learning institutions for children with

learning differences that exists. I believe it is important to reveal my strong personal partiality towards the school, and realize that my writing may reveal my positive bias.

I understood that ethical concerns may arise about the level of personal passion I have for what I believe is the powerful relationship between children with ASD and the arts, based on my teaching experiences from 1993-1998. The best way to safeguard ethics is to bracket my personal views. Wolcott (1990) stated that being up-front with one's personal lens permits the researcher to explore his/her own biases outright, and gives the reader more information about how the study is envisioned from the beginning. I also feel that because of the relationship and trust that pre-existed my study, the arts teachers and classroom teachers were more candid with me, granting me "insider status" and also felt freer to voice their dissenting opinions when they arose. This, I believe, aided the credibility of my study.

To clarify, I did not know any of the children before entering the site, nor their parents. Because of my past relationship with the school, I was granted easy access to the students and faculty when I approached the administrator about doing my dissertation research there. I was allowed to come to the school to do my observations at any time during the week and was allowed to roam the campus at will, observing any classroom that I so desired. The school community as a whole knew that I was conducting research for my PhD thesis, and, in general, they knew the topic I was interested in.

I acted as both a participant and observer during this study. In this role, my place in the school fluctuated during the course of my time in the field. For the initial observations, I made every effort to enter the classrooms as unobtrusively as possible, sometimes observing from the one-way mirrors in the observation rooms between each classroom. However, after I obtained consent from the children's parents and from the teachers, I began to spend more time interacting with the children and teachers in the classroom. I was fortunate to be granted "insider status" almost from the beginning of my study, most probably because of my former teaching experience there. I sat in circle with classes, helped pass out snack or gather materials, and interacted with the research participants informally as I passed them in the halls or when the classes were out on the playground. The children in the study, as well as those in the participant classrooms, began greeting me by name when they saw me around campus, often asking me, "When are you coming to our class?" I defined my role to the students and teachers saying that I was a former teacher who was now working on her doctorate degree. I often had lunch in the staff room on campus. Interacting with the children in my study during the school day would allow them to feel more comfortable with me, I hoped, and would facilitate their willingness to interactions with me, showing me their art, or talking about their roles in drama. I informally questioned each teacher about their comfort level with my more "present" role in the classroom, with all of the teachers saying that they did not object to me having a more active role. It felt natural for me to assume this role,

and I felt it aided in gaining the research participants' trust and helped me to be more able to get the depth and quality of response I needed during the formal interviews.

Procedure

Field Entry

Because of my ongoing relationship with the faculty, I had been speaking with the school informally about the possibility of me doing my dissertation there throughout the time I had been in graduate school, and the administrators had verbally agreed to allow me to do so on more than one occasion.

Upon IRB approval, I contacted the head of school to obtain the official letter of consent to begin the study, with a proposed starting date of April 2009. Next, I had a meeting with Diana, the drama teacher, and Ben the art teacher during my initial, general observations to obtain formal consent. I explained to these teachers that I would interview them a maximum of three times, and would ask to be allowed to observe in their classroom two to three times a week for a period of a few months. Once I had selected the children I wanted to participate, based on my direct observations (as described in the beginning sections of my participants section, I sent a letter (see appendix II-A) home to the parents of the children in a sealed envelope. The letter gave a brief overview of my study and asked the parents to indicate if they would be interested in talking with me further, and to please give their contact information so that I might reach them to

set up a meeting. Four out of the five parents agreed to meet with me at that time. The mothers of the children agreed to meet me at The Acorn School in the office of the school's Administrative Manager. Parents generally chose to meet me directly after school began in the morning or right before pick-up time in the afternoon. During the face-to-face meeting, I explained my study to the parents, let them know that I would be observing their child approximately five to eight times, in the regular and arts classrooms, and that they themselves would participate in one or two formal interviews with me at a mutually agreed upon time and place. I also answered any questions they had, and obtained formal written consent. During our formal meeting, I also ascertained whether or not I could approach their children to obtain assent. I felt this was appropriate for three of the four children in the study. All three parents gave me permission to obtain assent. The mothers were told that their child would not miss any classroom time to participate in the study, and that the interviews with the children (if feasible) would take place during non-instruction time at the school or at home.

After the parents gave consent, I approached the classroom teachers of the four students, explaining that I would do one or possibly two formal interviews with them and would observe in their classroom once or twice a week for approximately two months. During each formal meeting to obtain consent, I made it clear to the teachers through oral communication and written permission forms that: 1. participation in the study was strictly voluntary; 2. participants may

withdraw at any time; 3. that all data including interviews, discussions, or artifacts would be kept strictly confidential, and 4. that participants would chose pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Data Sources: Collection, Documentation and Record Keeping

Observations

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that observations provide first hand encounters of the phenomenon of interest to the researcher. As previously discussed, I assumed a participant observer role in the art and regular classrooms at The Acorn School. I often acted as a helper to the teachers and joined in the activities with the students. Observations began in mid March 2009. I observed eight times in art classes, 16 times in the drama classes and thirteen times in the general education classrooms. As the data revealed, one of the children in the study was revealed to be an “art kid,” two were strictly “drama kids” and one who appeared to have significant experiences in both art and drama. Because the children attended drama and art once, and sometimes twice a week, the arts teachers were only on campus on certain days of the week, often on different days. This may accounted for the varied number of observations for the arts classes. The goal of these observations was first to identify children who seemed to be particularly engaged in the arts, and then to record the experience (behaviors, comments, interactions with teachers and

peers, affect etc.) of the selected children while participating in the art and general education classrooms.

Data was recorded in the form of field notes. Notes about observations were used to identify patterns in the individual experiences, as they related to particular focal students individually and comparatively between the arts and general education classrooms. I looked for patterns that I noted in the field notes, as compared to the interview responses and used that information to aid in the conceptualization and modification of hypotheses about the significance of arts experiences for children with autism spectrum disorder. Field notes about observations acted as my contributing piece to the “whole picture” of the data as participant observer, along with the interviews of parents, teachers, and selected children to allow for triangulation to best represent the significance of art experiences for the case study children. Observations were continuous during the data collection phase of the research.

Teacher/Parent/Child Interviews

Interviews are a qualitative measure designed to gain a deep understanding of human experiences and central themes in the lives of participants. Kvale (1996) defined qualitative research interviews as "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (p.126). According to Merriam (1998), interviews are the best technique to use

with case studies, in order to gain detailed information about the participant's situation and experience. I conducted two in-depth interviews with the arts teacher, Diana and Ben, as well as several informal conversations and meetings with each of them by email or in between classes. I conducted one formal interview with each of the four classroom teachers. I conducted one formal interview each with each of the four participating parents, and two follow-up interviews with selected parents for member-checking purposes. I conducted two student interviews. The other two students were not formally interviewed. One was not attempted because I believed the child would not be able to represent her arts experiences with oral language, and one because the child expressed a desire not to be interviewed at the time it was attempted. I also communicated with parents for follow up information by email.

All of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. All of the classroom teacher interviews took place during teacher off periods during the school day. On two occasions, I met Ben, the art teacher, at restaurants in the city. One of the parent interviews took place at the school, two at a mutually agreed upon location off campus and the remaining interviews took place in the participants' homes.

My goal for these interviews was to start to understand the perceptions of each child's experiences of the arts in the art or drama class, the regular classroom, and outside of the school setting as explored with teachers and the parents of each child. As I became more familiar with the children in the study, I

used my knowledge to guide the specificity and content of follow-up questions and analytic memos. Initial interviews followed the same format and can be reviewed in detail in appendix III.

Expanded Field Notes

Expanded field notes allowed me to take an extended look at the gathered data after which I provided supplementary detail and enhancement of notes taken during the actual classroom observations. Field notes are often written quickly, in shorthand, and need to be revisited soon to add elements that fully describe the meaning of the interactions and situation. Maloch (personal communication) recommends that this revisiting and expansion of field notes occur daily as soon as possible after observation. After leaving an observation I would go to a quiet place to reread my written notes to elaborate and expand on these notes at the end of each observation to include my own thoughts, reflections, and remembrances of the events. I periodically shared my field notes with the teachers for the purposes of triangulation and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Artifact Collections

Artifacts were collected to aid in my representation of art experiences that were especially meaningful for the children in my case study. Artifacts included paintings, drawings, child created books and a viewing of the annual school

musical or dramatic presentations. I was able to study artifacts of drawings from Sasha and Fred which I was given to review by their mothers, Tommie and Wilma. I attempted to view Sasha's drawings with her present and get her feedback, to which she reacted by asking me to, "Put those away" (field notes, May 21, 2010). The reason she was reticent to share her work with me is unclear, but may be due to the fact that the drawings were collected from home and given to me without her knowledge. Two of the students, Fred and Will, had previously participated in an after-school class headed up by Ben called "Project Read/Write." In this class, the students created illustrations for an original story that they wrote themselves. The drawings and text were then combined using sophisticated computer software by Ben, and sent of to a publisher to be made into a very authentic-looking picture book. Both Fred and Will shared their books with me during informal interviews with the boys. Lastly, I attended the annual musical production of the school where each child's classroom put on a one song number performed by the students. Although I did not videotape the performance itself, I took observational notes during the performance and when I acquired a copy of the DVD made by the school which I reviewed the DVD at a later date to describe the performances of the children in the case studies.

Data Analysis

In order to understand what teachers, parents, and children believe to be salient features of arts experiences for children with ASD, how art experiences of

children with ASD in the arts can be characterized, as well as how arts experiences impact the stories we tell about lived experience of children with ASD, I used a variety of data I collected with a qualitative analysis framework, namely *grounded theory*. The core of qualitative analysis lies in three related processes: describing phenomena, classifying it, and seeing how the concepts interconnect (Dey, 1993). In addition, theories developed from qualitative research are “discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 230). The meaning of events is contextually bound, therefore analysis of interview and observation data began shortly after data collection commenced and continued throughout the course of the study.

In grounded theory, (Glasner & Stauss, 1967), the researcher utilizes a process for generating theory, not just verifying it. Through careful observation and systematic documentation, a phenomenon is conceptualized into categories and then organized from within to form a new theoretical interpretation of the observed phenomenon. Grounded theory allows for data collection and theory construction to occur simultaneously. By allowing preliminary hypotheses to be brought back into data collection, they can be refined and shaped through further data collection. Hatch (2002) stated that this process allows the researcher to shape prospective data collection based on what he/she is finding or not finding, bringing analytic rigor to qualitative methodological approach.

Coding plays a pivotal role in grounded theory. Strauss and Corbin (1987) described the types of coding, namely, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. It is important to note that in grounded theory, there is no rule that one type of coding be complete before another is begun, rather, the researcher is allowed to move fluidly between the different coding strategies, even allowing for co-coding to occur. This is referred to as the Constant Comparative Method. In this method, the researcher reads and re-reads the data, attempting to categorize items around a central theme, idea, or phenomenon. The following paragraphs will define the three type of coding used in this study.

Open coding occurs when “concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.11). Data are chunked into meaningful categories, which can occur line-by-line, paragraph by paragraph, or episode-by-episode. During open coding, I coded anything that seemed to stand out to me as statements about art for kids with ASD by parents, teachers, or children, or direct observations about children’s experiences in art classrooms. Nineteen categories emerged from open coding which included, but was not limited to: the arts provide a place to be successful, the arts provide a place to take risks, the arts increase social interaction, the arts allow kids to be seen “in a different light”, and the arts allow for alternative means of communication.

Axial coding is “the process of relating categories to their subcategories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 123). At this level of coding, relationships between

categories are established and subcategories emerge, with all categories being constantly compared between research participant interviews (teachers, parents, children) and observational field notes and analytical memos. During this phase, I took my initial categories and looked for overlap and broader headings under which one or more themes could be joined. Examples of overarching categories in my study included “Talk about what the arts do for children with ASD,” “Talk about what children with ASD do in the arts,” and “Identity Talk.” I then revisited the data from all participants and sources and looked for evidence of these elevated categories, or lack thereof, for each case study. I began to develop definitions and examples of each category for each child, looking for consistencies and inconsistencies among the four cases. I obtained teacher and parent feedback at this phase of coding during informal member checks.

As I began to organize the categories into a grounded theory, selective coding was used. During this process, the central phenomenon was related to a central category, as I went back to the data over and over again to see how interview excerpts and field notes could characterize when, how, and under what conditions relationships between categories occurred. These findings were validated against the data and compared for accuracy and fit. I compared interview responses with observational field notes, analytic memos, and member feedback. The process led me to themes for the significance of experiences in art and drama classrooms for children with ASD and the stories that people tell about these experiences.

Quality, Rigor, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

Demonstrating quality and rigor is important in any research project. In qualitative studies, results are evaluated in terms of trustworthiness, where quantitative studies look at reliability and validity. I focused on strengthening my study's trustworthiness using measures of transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility. (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability is the extent to which the results are applicable to individuals beyond those who were sampled for the study performed. The participants in this study were chosen through a process of theoretical sampling to represent a range of experiences. In theoretical sampling, the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of analyzed cases and facilitate the development of analytic frame and concepts used in the research. Initially, I did general observations of arts and general education classrooms, making notes on the responses and behaviors of as many children as I could feasibly pay attention to. As I analyzed my observation notes, I began to notice that certain children stood out for me as having more notes written about them (quantity) or seemed to be particularly engaged in the art and drama classes (quality). At this point, I began to narrow down the number of children I actively observed by speaking to teachers about their opinions about the particular child's responsiveness or investment in the arts classes, and whether or not the child was identified as being on the autism spectrum.

Dependability is concerned with the replicability of the study to the end of similar findings. Dependability is established by providing the reader with evidence that the findings could be replicated in other studies, if all procedures were followed. The audit trail enhances dependability of the research and consists of a record of the process of data collection, and analysis including raw data (interview transcripts, observation transcripts, and field notes), and analysis data (coding pages, analytical memos, journals, theory generation notes).

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. Throughout my study I sought feedback from others about the hypotheses generated from the data in the form of member checking with teachers and parents and peer debriefing with my dissertation co-chairs and other colleagues. In addition, case reporting provides the report with pieces of “raw data” to illustrate assertions and to allow the readers to draw their own conclusions or decide whether to further agree with the researcher about the accuracy of the representation.

To safeguard the credibility of this study, I used (a) data triangulation, in which multiple sources of data are used to create descriptions, analyses and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Hatch, 2002), (b) prolonged engagement (Hatch, 2002); (c) member checking, in which interview transcripts, expanded field notes, and initial findings were reviewed by participants for accuracy (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and negative case analysis. I observed in the classrooms at The Acorn School for a three month period. Because of my former

relationship with the school and personal relationship with the art and drama teachers, I was able to have trust at the onset of the study. I acted as both participant and observer for a three month period to record and examine the experiences of the students. This helped me to understand and interpret the experiences of the case study participants in their arts experiences.

I conducted 16 interviews with parents, teachers, and students over the course of the study. The interviews of the parents, teachers, and students were transcribed and the responses were compared with each other and with observation notes for triangulation of the data sources to ensure a wide range of perspectives. For the purposes of peer debriefing, I regularly discussed my tentative observations with my dissertation chairs, in face-to-face meetings and by email. I also discussed my findings, design of my model, and my conclusions with a graduate school colleague. Additionally, I met with both the arts teachers and two parents to share results of the study for member checking purposes. I selected one of my cases and conducted a negative case analysis, to be discussed in the results section to highlight the emerging theoretical model and to showcase that not all of the cases easily fit into the model. My data were triangulated through the use of journal notes, interviews, observation notes and artifacts.

Ethics

As I revealed in the site selection of this chapter, I was mindful about the

ethical complexities that might arise as I conducted this study. Research relationships are ethically complex in qualitative research. For example, Goldstein, citing Woolf (2000) wrote, that “serious power differential separate the researcher from the researched” (p.521). I understood that I was in a position of power over these parents and teachers not only because I was attempting to represent their children’s “stories” but also because I am a speech-language professional with insider access to the school and a history with the teachers and staff. Measor and Sikes (1992) warned us that the researched must have power over the stories told about them.

Lincoln (1993) suggested that collaboration with research participants allows them to have power over the framing, the scope, and construction over the study. Additionally, Lincoln proposed that collaboration provides safeguards against what he called the “singularity of values” in which the story that gets told reflects only the mainstream culture’s values, over and over again, and not the unique individuals’ experiences. Therefore, information gathered from this research was shared with all teachers and parents for member checking and triangulation of data in both formal and informal meetings.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter is divided into three sections. In each section, I describe the emergent categories that I discovered during analysis of the parent and teacher interviews, as well as my observational notes and notes from informal meetings. In the first section, I describe the categories that I observed grouped under the theme labeled *What the arts do for kids: Salient features of arts experiences*. In the second section, I describe the subcategories in the theme: *What kids do in the arts: Children's outcomes from arts experiences*. Finally, in the third section, I describe the category of *Identity Talk: "Drama Kids" and "Art Kids"*, in which I outline data revealing the creation of an artist's identity for the focal children in my study.

Emergent Themes in the impact of arts experiences for children with ASD

During data analysis, several themes surfaced showcasing the ways children with ASD experienced and were impacted by their experiences in arts classes at The Acorn School. As I analyzed the data, I began to think of these themes as fitting into broader categories wherein they seemed to be clustered, namely: examples and/or discourse about what the *arts* do for children with ASD, examples and/or discourse about what *children* with ASD do when engaged with the arts, and examples/discourse concerning issues of the artist's identity of the focal children in my study.

What the arts do for children with autism spectrum disorder: Salient features of arts experiences

As I conducted interviews and completed observations, I noted many instances of teachers or parents talking about what I came to think of as affordances of arts experiences that provide children with unique opportunities that no other experience does. An affordance is generally thought of as a potential for action that becomes possible in an individual's environment. Both the art and the drama teacher frequently talked about opportunities that being in art and drama classrooms provided for the children that were distinctive from what the teachers considered to be the norm for everyday classroom experiences or the home lives of the children. For example, Diana and Ben would often talk about how drama or art in *general* were just "so good" for children on the autism spectrum, in that these provided opportunities that would not otherwise have existed. Ben described this belief in one interview saying:

I think that so many of the things that you do with kids on the spectrum you know, you may or may not see the benefit. You may not know if it's helping them out. And, I feel like so many of the intimate interactions that you have with art materials and looking at what the product is, or the record is that you left, um, it's almost as if you are getting in on a deeper level there. And if you are able to get pulled into an art material...or really any of the arts. Like the drama thing, if they are able to get closer to being whatever role they are playing by repeating those words and having the experience of acting out that emotion or mood or whatever, it's like training wheels. It's like you get a little bit of experience with that interaction while saying those words. (interview, May 4, 2009)

General education teachers and parents alike seemed to believe that the arts are "good" for children on the spectrum. One of the regular classroom

teachers echoed this opinion of the arts being special somehow for this group of children by saying,

Well, I feel that it is truly amazing, and I feel that it is an area where our kids can really flourish. It is an area where they can just be themselves and they—it's not hard for them. So, I feel like it is an amazing program. I really feel that they are not that many programs out there like this one, that are arts-based (interview, May 29, 2009).

One parent agreed with this, even as she admitted that she did not seek out the Acorn School specifically for its arts programs. This mother stated, "I know they (the school) tout it as being one of the things they are most proud of... and I think it's lovely. It was not something I was looking for when we went there, but as we've been involved with it, I do think, for my child, it's great because that is where her interests lie" (interview, 6-4-09). As I searched for salient themes in my analysis, it was ideas like these that I grouped into the category of salient features of arts experiences for children with ASD. Specifically, these categories are: (a) The arts allow children to be seen in a different light: Characterized by participants' statements or observations of children as being "special," "unique," and "beyond what is typical" of the child; (b) the arts allow an alternative form of communication: Characterized by references to art forms being used as substitutes for oral language as a means of self-expression; (c) the arts allow for interaction/belonging to mainstream society: Characterized by references of participants to the arts being a venue in which the child can interact with typically developing children in extra-curricular activities, imagine possibilities for future employment, and in transitioning to non-specialized schools; (d) the arts

challenge personal ASD symptoms: Characterized by references to arts experiences being utilized to accommodate or remediate behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorder; (e) the arts are enjoyable and accessible: Characterized by references to arts experiences being inherently motivating *and* enjoyable for children on the spectrum; (f) The arts allow children to have agency: Characterized by references to arts experiences allocating power and decision-making roles to children.

Arts allow children to be seen in a different light

“Different, but in a good way”

“I think in order for any child to be whole, they have to have a place to shine and if that (the arts) is their place to shine, then that gives them self-worth.” (interview, May 20, 2009)

This theme was identified during my analysis as statements made by the participants about the arts being a place for the children to “shine,” or be storied in terms that highlighted their individual talents in the fine arts. Scholars talk about children with special needs routinely being defined by symptoms of the disability itself. Avdi (2005) wrote, “When referring to a child, the pathologizing and constraining effect of the diagnosis has implications not only for the child but also his/her parents, through the prevalence of the discourse of normal development, which associates children’s difficulties with parental failure, fault or pathology” (p. 497). In contrast to this pathologizing belief system, the category of being seen in a different light allows teachers and parents to talk about the

child in different, more humanizing terms. Teachers and parents seemed to share in the belief that children on the autism spectrum, who struggle in the classroom, need a place where they can be special or seen as talented. Diana shared with me a statement that the school psychologist made about the end-of-the-year musical,

And our psychologist, she would talk about, “I love to go to the musical. Not for the kids. I would go and watch the parent’s faces and cry.” And so began this momentum of the parents seeing their children in a different light which is one of the most important things of all that drama, music and art do for these children is that the kids are not seen as problems, but in a different light. In a different way by their peers by their families, by the people in the audience. It gives them a way to be different, in a good way. (interview, April 23, 2009)

Diana talked openly about this being very important for parents at the school, to have something to hold on to that is special and positive about their child. She shared with me another story about a mother who observed her child in the musical and was able to see her child in a different light than she had before.

To this day when I see her she talks about his solo in the musical. That she knew his brother could sing, but she never knew he could sing and that he’s still riding the wave. He’s still riding the high of the solo in the musical. I had never gotten any attention from her or any recognition that the arts did anything until that one moment at that night at that show. And she is pushing him to be in choir. She recognizes his talent. I don’t think that they saw anything about him as special before. (interview, April 23, 2009)

Will’s teacher, Leigh, reiterated this belief saying, “These are children who know that they are not the best in the classroom. Those children in the fine arts

find a place where they shine. That they have a special gift. I think it's terribly important for children on the spectrum" (interview, May 20, 2009). In the same interview, Leigh, Will's classroom teacher, went on to say that arts are important for Will specifically explaining, "I think it is because he does not always shine. And it gives him a chance to stand out and be something special. Of course, I happen to think he does all the time." In each of these examples, talk about the children when associated with the arts was characterized by what they could do, not with what they struggled. Will's teacher could talk about her student in terms of what he was good at proclaiming, "This is an area that he excels at. He is good and needs to be constantly reminded that he does have a gift. Even though there are some things that are very difficult for him, you know he has a gift, and that is his gift." (interview, 5-20-09)

When talking about Sasha, it became apparent that many of the adults in her world viewed art as her special gift that served to silence all of the other discourses about her deficits. Sasha's teacher Ashley stated, "She struggles in a lot of areas, especially socially, and you don't want her to feel like she is in the back of the crowd. So people tell her her art looks great and she is a great artist, and it builds her self confidence" (interview, 5-29-09).

For Rose, "a place to shine" in the arts emerged not only at The Acorn School, but in her participation in Big Street Theater (a pseudonym), which was a local theater group that produced plays for children and adults. Big Street Theater did not cater specifically to children with special needs, although they

had a good reputation at the Acorn School as being open and welcoming to working with children of varying abilities. Rose recently had had a speaking part in a production of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* where her mother described her performance saying, “And so Rose went on and not only did she love it, but, she thrived. She had a starring role last fall as the littlest Billy goat in the production. She’s up there on stage earnestly saying her little lines and she is so cute and I was actually very proud of her” (interview, June 4, 2009). Seeing children based on their talent and not their disability appeared to be very important to the parents and extended family members in the study. In describing Rose’s performance in the end of the year musical, Betsy goes on to say,

It took me by surprise the way my dad reacted. You could see that they could not believe that my daughter could be standing up there doing this. They just couldn’t believe it. Even with the disability what they do, they do very well. They hadn’t seen her since she started having spontaneous language, and it is just amazing. (interview, June 4, 2009)

Another example of the arts providing a place to shine came about during my interview with Fred’s mom. We were discussing what the arts did for her child, and Wilma explained it from a parent perspective,

K: What do you think the arts allow Fred to do or what does it say about him?

W: Well, like singing that solo in the musical. He doesn’t have any embarrassment or fear. That’s what I like about it. I think the arts allow him to be everything he could be without the shame, ridicule or embarrassment. I think the Acorn’s schools ICATs (Intra-curricular activities) are just phenomenal. That is where he got all of it, through them giving him a chance to sing and act on stage. (interview, June 6, 2009)

In an informal conversation, Diana, the drama teacher, drove this point home in her statement, “Non-PDD (Pervasive Developmental Disorder) kids does not need to be seen in a different light, they are allowed to be seen as a talent. Our kids are often seen as “sick” or “different” first and foremost” (field notes, March 24, 2009). As demonstrated by the data, success in the arts appeared to be a very compelling way to challenge medical model terminology and pathologizing discourses for children on the autism spectrum.

Arts provide alternative means of communication

Data were coded as *alternative means of communication* when they indicated that art or drama artifacts were being utilized by the students as surrogate representations of meaning. Many of the statements about alternative means of communication concentrated on children expressing their feelings through art, or as an adjunct form of communication, secondary to low oral language skills. Ava, Rose’s classroom teacher, explained this saying,

I think children on the spectrum, a lot of times their thoughts are so different from ours, so it’s hard to figure out what they are thinking. The arts are a way for them to express themselves, not in the way that we want them to express themselves. Not in words. They can do it many different ways.” (interview, June 29, 2009).

Ben, the art teacher, explained that in his art program, “I concentrate on the drawing because so many of the children have language issues and the potential not to get out in words what they are thinking which causes all of the frustration that comes with that (interview, May 4, 2009). Ben was well aware

that many children with autism spectrum disorder lagged behind in regards to language development, and might be best able to communicate through aesthetic representations of their ideas. In my observations of his art classroom, I noted that although enriching language development was always a goal, Ben equally valued the use of drawing, painting, or sculpture as a means to communicate.

For the children in the study who were more oriented toward the theater arts, namely Will and Rose, alternative means of expression took the form of using art not to express feelings, but as a supplement to or to bolster oral language skills. Will, for example, was often reported as using utilizing drawing to express his thoughts or interests. Will participated in Project Read/Write, which was an after school activity offered by Ben, where the children wrote and illustrated picture books and then presented them as authors at a local bookstore. Ben mentioned to me during an informal conversation on March 25, 2009, that Will struggled to come up with original language to narrate his book. Ben soon realized that the illustrations he created were from a video game that Will played over and over. With this knowledge, Ben was able to help Will to manipulate the characters into different scenes to fashion an original story. In talking about Will struggling to demonstrate his academic skills, his teacher discussed how she uses art saying,

He tends to be angry if he thinks he cannot do something, or is fearful of blowing it. So we try to step back and use art whenever we can. If he is struggling in the classroom, often times it will help him to draw a picture of it. Even in math, when we are working through a word problem, or learning something difficult. He gets involved in the drawing and it releases some of the frustration and he is able to come up with the answer. (interview, May 20, 2009)

For Sasha, drawings appeared to be her main form of expressive language from an early age. Sasha's mother, Tommie, shared with me that she would often use drawings to help her daughter understand changes in her environment and to learn routines.

K: Do you think Tommie, that you made a conscious decision to make the arts part of your family or do you think that you were already that way?

T: I think with Sasha, because of her communication issues, I had to use a lot of drawing to communicate with her. Like at first she was scared to get out of the car to come to school. So I have to draw a picture: 1. Ok, Sasha comes to school in a van. 2. Teacher coming, but we don't know which one 3. We say "hi" or "good morning" etc.. So, I would draw a picture of that for her so she could feel prepared for it. So after she learned her routine, she started picking that (drawing) to communicate. She started showing her emotions this way and that really started taking off. Once she started drawing the picture with the kind of detail she is able to add, she started using that as a tool.

K: So you feel like this is really a tool to communicate with your daughter.

T: Yeah, she's doing well now, verbally, she is catching up. But um pictures will always kinda help her communicate.

A powerful example of this category exists in a drawing that Sasha made about her pet dog (see appendix H) In this example, Sasha has drawn a picture book of all the naughty things her pet has been doing. One page depicts the dog barking too loud in which the character of Sasha is holding her ears and saying "Too Loud!" In another picture she has written, "No out" and drawn a picture of

herself locking the door to “dawty” room. Her teacher supported these ideas of art being a useful alternative form of communication for Sasha, saying, “For someone like Sasha, who is so introverted, there is just a lot of anxiety and it is easier for her to show me a picture and let me talk about it with her” (interview, May 29, 2009).

Parents often talked about music or acting out stories as being the first line of communication they used to converse with their children in any reliable manner. As is typical in many children with autism spectrum disorder, parents reported that their children were demonstrating normal language development, which at some point stopped, and the children consequently lost most of the functional language they once had. Wilma, Fred’s mother, talked about using the popular Wee Sing books to inspire communication with her son: “In fact, he lost language, and when he started talking again at age three, he had a song book that he would sit and memorize and sing from the songbook and that is where his language came back from” (interview, June 6, 2009).

Even though I did not study music directly in this study, it became clear that it was an important avenue for Fred to communicate. Rose’s mother, Betsy noted, that her daughter gravitated toward music and acting very early on. She remembered a time when Rose was acting out the character “Baby Bop” from the Barney videos--having a tea party and making invitations for her friends. Rose stated, “She was three and had not developed much language at that point, and was echolalic, but she could pretend” (interview, 6-1-09). In all of these

examples, the use of drawings or scripted songs or play-acting/pretend were alternative means of communication that the children, teachers and parents used as tools to express their thoughts, feelings and interests.

The arts allow for interaction with and belonging to mainstream society

Another category that emerged from analysis of the data was discourse that surrounded the idea that the arts were a way for the children with ASD to have access to the community at large. This category seemed to encompass three different kinds of talk about the opportunities and benefits of kids belonging to art programs outside of the school: talk about kids having future employment in the arts, talk about opportunities for children with ASD to interact with typically developing children, and talk about the arts as benefiting children in transitioning to a new school environment.

Teachers at the school often commented about their knowledge of art programs for children with disabilities within the city surrounding The Acorn School. There were two main theaters in the city that were well known for working with children with special needs. As discussed earlier, Rose had been involved in Big Street Theater (a pseudonym) for several semesters and had had leading roles in a few plays in this theater group. Rose's mother saw this outside activity as extremely beneficial to her daughter, as revealed in her interviews with me. Betsy discussed what she believed to be the impact of Rose's involvement with Big Street Theater during an interview:

And I do think that Rose is an experiential learner and my objective this summer is to get her around as many normal kids as I can. We experimented a little bit with that last year, but I tend to be an overprotective parent and it's part of the reason we are not doing summer camp at Acorn, because I think that it serves a purpose, but she needs to be challenged by normal kids and find out what it is like to be a six-year-old girl—she doesn't really know that. How do girls interact? What does it mean when they are "snippy"? She has to learn how girls are. She'll get some of it from TV, from the different shows she watches, but now it is time to put it into practice in real life. So back to the arts things, in school is great, but OUT of school is so much more important because they get to meet people that they would not necessarily get to meet everyday who they are going to have to get along with in real life.

These interactions with normal peers seemed to be of particular importance to the parents as they imagined a future for their children outside of the protective environment of the Acorn School. Betsy saw arts experiences outside of the school as a place where it might be safe to experiment with social relationships in that new frontier. As disclosed in Betsy's comments, a fear existed about how Rose would navigate the landscape of "typical" girl relationships with normally developing peers. Rose did experience some difficulty when participating in the arts program at Big Street Theater. Betsy described such a situation,

Apparently Rose had been touching a friend in class (pulling her shirt, etc.), and they were upset about it and wanted it to stop. Well, I brought it up the next week. I may have went in ahead of time. It just freaks me out and causes great concern, and it was something to tackle with Rose and we did work on it (interview, June 4, 2009).

The second theme that seemed to exist under the heading of the arts allowing for interaction with mainstream society were statements made about transitioning to other schools after attending the Acorn School. Transition to

mainstream schools was a major topic of concern for these parents. Based on my experiences as a teacher there, even parents who were very positive about the school and believed that it was the ideal place for their child, were always looking ahead and dreaming of the time when their child would be ready to leave. Transitioning signaled to parents that their child had made enough progress that he or she was prepared to function in a regular school environment. Fred was in the process of transitioning the semester after he was a participant in my study. His teachers and parents had spent a good part of the year conferencing, looking at schools, and preparing Fred for this transition. The availability of the arts to aid in the smoothness of Fred's transition was seen as a major factor in his being successful in the new school. Mary, his classroom teacher talked about her concerns about Fred attending a new school saying,

He might get a label of behavior problem, because of his meltdowns. But I think of all the things he really excels at. And if I had him in a typical classroom where they did not have the arts, say in the public schools, the teachers would never know that. We need to make sure they know, and I think he will be able to tell them." (interview, May 21, 2009)

To this end, Diana spent much of her time in drama classes role-playing with Fred and other children who were transitioning to other schools with the goal of helping them deal with bullies and to advocate for themselves. During an observation on May 18, 2009, I noted a role-playing exercise in which Fred and three other friends took turns playing the bully and thinking of comebacks to putdowns. I wrote, "A big smile comes over Fred's face when he is called to act. He identifies his friend's feeling as being angry. When it's his turn to 'squash' the

bully, Fred retorts with a resounding 'SO!' to the insults. Diana is always working on such practical situations and real ways to handle problems. I love the 'not being a victim' mantra." Diana often talked about how important she believed these exercises were for transitioning children because of how mean kids can be to kids who are different. She felt that not preparing them for these difficult situations would be a true disservice to the children. Fred's classroom teacher Mary also took a role in helping him prepare for his new school, and tying in the arts as she described in the following comment,

I hope that they give him the ability to excel. I know they don't have as many arts as we do but I think he will be able to advocate for himself. We've been working a lot with him saying things like "Hey, I'm really good at this." "I would like to have a part in that play. I really want to try out." "I'm better if I can see that visually." (interview, 5-21-09)

Fred's mother was naturally also very invested in this process. She often talked about the autistic world vs. the real world, and that Fred was going to have to use all of his strategies in order to overcome his personal struggles.

K: What do you see the arts' role in Fred's life as he grows up?

W: Well, we would like to see him in choir. I think he would be great in drama. And I think at Holy Christian they have all of those programs for him.

K: What would that do for Fred?

W: Oh he would love it! It would be his thing. He's not very athletic; he's not going to be into sports.

Although the arts were a strength for Fred, Wilma did share with me that this did not always translate perfectly into interactions in the outside world. The

following is a story she shared with me about Fred singing at a neighborhood picnic.

And I see kids, like at our pool party, at the beginning of summer, for example. Fred sang the national anthem, and he doesn't have the perfect voice and I think of lot of boys think.. well, mostly they think wow, he has a lot of nerve to get up there, I wouldn't be able to do that. But on the other hand, I see snickering from the older boys or you know, laughing. And if the parents are standing around it's the perfect opportunity to go, "Do you know that Fred has autism and here are some of his positives." (interview, June 12, 2009)

Although the arts may help children find a place to belong in the outside world, it was clear to Betsy and Wilma that being able to act and sing did not completely shield their children from difficulties in belonging outside the school.

Analysis of the data also revealed that parents spent time contemplating the role of the arts in their children's futures beyond the school years. In talking about Rose and her future in the arts, Betsy stated, "Maybe we've found an outlet for something she might want to do as a job down the line" (interview, June 4, 2009). In the same interview, Betsy shared with me a story she recalled about a student who came back for a parent education night at the Acorn School. This particular student was involved in the arts while she was at Acorn and throughout her adulthood. "That very well could be Rose, depending on her talent will develop and allow her to pursue that as a paying career," Betsy stated. Tommie, Sasha's mom, had considered this option for her daughter as well stating, "So the art, when she grows up she might have drawings that are more complicated. But if she likes it and she wants that for her career, than that's okay too. But, whatever she loves, I want her to have something for herself" (interview, May 23,

2009). For parents who were anxious about their children's future, the arts seemed to provide a possibility for future employment that made sense to the parents.

The arts challenge ASD symptoms:

Children with ASD sometimes display a set of behaviors that can make daily living challenging. These symptoms can include perseverations on an object, color or topic of interest, tactile defensiveness, and rigidity (website, NIMH, 2009). Analysis of the data revealed that the teachers and parents believed that one of the benefits of the arts is to interrupt or challenge these symptoms. The data reflected that this *challenging of symptoms* can also manifest itself as the teachers making accommodations for the symptoms, that is, as allowing for children to engage in behaviors and seeing them as *meaningful* in the development of the child.

Making it better: using the arts to interrupt patterns and behavior.

Role playing is a powerful example of the ways in which theater arts is used as a tool to work through some daily challenges of children with ASD. As discussed before, Diana often used role-playing to help children on the spectrum take on another's perspective. Jasmine, Will's mother, stated this clearly as she discussed her thoughts on role-playing during drama: "Will loves to role play and he always wants to pick what he wants to be (character), but she (Diana) tries

to—you know, ‘Oh no, you cannot be this guy today’ So he can change perspective. I think because he likes role playing so much, that he can change his mind” (interview, May 24, 2009). In this example, Jasmine believed that Will was able to overcome some of his insistence on routine and sameness, a common symptom of ASD, through Diana compelling him to switch characters and try to understand other characters’ point of view. Her statement also reflected that Jasmine felt that Will was able to tolerate these changes because he enjoyed participating in drama a great deal. Diana explained the need for role-playing and pretend play for children on the spectrum in an interview on May 8, 2009.

Children on the autism spectrum often are so very concrete that they don’t know how to pretend. So, it is my belief that pretend play is paramount to children’s development. They have to be able to pretend because that involves perspective taking. That means you are thinking outside of who you are. So, I think that that is probably one of the most beneficial, one of the greatest benefits that drama can give the kids on the spectrum.

One of the most striking examples of this theme became apparent as Diana explained to me how the arts team prepared the themes and skits for the end-of-the year musical. Every year, each class in the upper school participates in an all-school musical production, which is an original work written and cast by Ben, Diana, and the music teacher. The arts teachers write all of the scripts themselves and choose the music to go with the theme of the production. Diana and Ben told me in many informal conversations that, although it was incredibly time consuming, they wrote an original musical each year because that was what was best for the children. They explained to me that they chose songs, subject

matter, and lines for the production *specifically* for different classrooms in order for the material to be the most meaningful for the kids. Ben and Diana felt strongly that the performers must be able to *understand* and *connect* to the music and language of the musical in order to perform it successfully.

The skit and songs that were written for the children in Fred's classroom were excellent examples of the use of the arts to *challenge* symptoms of ASD, as well as use of the arts to *accommodate* deficits the children exhibited. The skit for Fred's classroom was centered on the children role-playing parts of "homeowners" and "electrical workers." The arts teachers explained to me that this theme was chosen because hurricane Ike had come through the city earlier that year, leaving thousands without power for weeks at a time. Many of the children in Fred's class were particularly affected by Ike, having to miss a great deal of school, or having to leave town for a period of time. The classroom teacher, Mary, told me that experiencing all of the frustrations of not having power was especially hard for children on the spectrum who garner a great deal of comfort and stability from routines. The children voiced many of their frustrations about why it was taking so long to get the electricity back on, and anger that they could not watch their favorite television show or play their favorite video game. The children in Fred's classroom often blamed the electrical workers themselves, saying that they were not working hard enough to restore the power. Mary explained it in this way:

And it's really hard for kids on the spectrum to take the perspective of someone else. So having an experience like that ...any kind of world experience for them is beneficial. I am not saying it was a good experience for anybody – but at the same point, but one of the things they have a really hard time with is – is world knowledge. They can read about it – but it doesn't really mean anything to them. (interview, 5-21-09)

Because the real world experience of hurricane Ike was so salient for these children, the arts team felt the class would be especially connected with a skit written about this experience for the musical. Even beyond this goal, Diana shared with me in an informal conversation that the class had been struggling all year with children who were the “protagonists” and the “antagonists.” There was a core group of kids who were positive and got along well, and another group who tended to tease peers and disrupt the classroom. In choosing the players for the skit, Diana told me that she purposely assigned the children who were usually “the pickers” as she called them, to play the electrical repairmen. It was her idea that she might get the children to empathize with the workers and understand the difficulty of their task. She even chose a statement, made by one of the children themselves during Ike, that the workers were “doing the best that they can.” The thought and care that went into making the musical a meaningful experience for the children was also expressed in a conversation I had with Diana about choosing songs for the production:

D: We are always looking for words that the children can internalize. So you have:(song titles) “Think Positive,” “Have Heart,” “You Gotta Have Hope,” “Make your dreams come true,” “Look through my eyes”... Everyone's journey is different and I think we deliberately chose songs thinking about the challenges that the children will come up against and can internalize the lyrics. All of that sets up that the songs will be uplifting

and advisory and ways to live your life.

K: And if kids can take on the idea of stepping outside of themselves, what do you think that allows them to do when they walk out of the drama room?

D: Ya know, I think it's different for all the kids. I think for some of them, it does allow them to see outside of themselves. I'm not gonna say that is true of all the kids. It can be really hard for the autistic children. (interview, May 8, 2009)

In the art room, Ben described that one of his goals is to reduce some of the tactile defensiveness that he saw in some children with ASD. Tactile defensiveness is a sensory processing issue, a hypersensitivity to tactile input that may include certain textures of food, tags on shirts, dirty hands, etc. During an observation of an art class on April 14, 2009, I noted that the kids were making recycled paper in a blender, or, as Ben called it "Paper Soup." In my notebook I wrote of the resounding cries of "Ewww!," "Gross!," or "Disgusting" from the children during this activity. However, Ben became a model for the kids, saying positive statements like "I love paper soup," "Let's stir it up," and "Now it is called slurry," and the children all took turns stirring the soup and handling the paper pulp after all of the colored paper had been mixed in. Ben affirmed this in his statement, "Above all, I want them NOT to think that any of those things are 'yucky'. We tend to have a lot of kids who are tactile defensive. I'm always trying to get their hands in the paint. I see kids who miss out on stuff because they are afraid to get their hands dirty" (interview, May 4, 2009). In another observation of Sasha's art class on May 29, 2009, I made notes about such an exercise in which the children were encouraged to paint on their skin. I wrote, "Sasha is at

first hesitant about painting, while some of her peers ripped off their shirts to dive into the paint. She finally allows paint to be on her hands and seemed to enjoy peeling it off. She also enjoyed painting other peers' skins. She did not tolerate paint on her body, but did join in a way that felt most comfortable to her."

As mentioned before, one of the themes reflected in the data was that the arts were able not to just challenge symptoms of ASD, but to *accommodate* them as well. *Perseverations* are typical symptoms seen in some individuals with ASD. To *perseverate* means to repeat behaviors over and over. These types of behaviors are seen in the art room, with some kids getting "stuck" on the use of a particular color or drawing the same symbol again and again. However, Ben had a different perspective of this symptom. He stated,

Like teachers say all the time, God, he is so stuck on blue, he's always using blue. Considering if a kid is persevering on an activity that's not getting you anywhere--that's more evident in behavior. But I would say if they are loving a color, and they are looking at a big box of colors, and they are able to pick out a certain color then that's a story right there. And if they really enjoy using that color, then why not push for more of that? Like, sometimes I'll say "Is there only one blue? How many blues can we find? Would we call this one blue? And then a lot of the kids would say, "Well that's green.... I've never seen a kid go on for years and years with one color, or a kid who is really into a color at one time, not be able to get past that color or not be into art or not make things a different color or whatever. (interview, May 4, 2009)

Clearly, Ben viewed this "symptom" as an opportunity to understand the inner world of the child or let the child work through whatever issues were making him or her repeat a behavior. Ben discussed his views of this type of scenario with me during our initial interview,

Well, we had a child last year that had some visual eye issues and wore glasses and had fine motor issues that made it difficult to write. There was this symbol that he would draw that was basically a circle with a cross in the middle of it. It was an interesting little symbol. He would just do rows and rows and rows of it. Again, these kids are limited by their language and if you try to explain it, you run the risk of misunderstanding them or perhaps curtailing them, or showing them that they are not good enough to get it across to you. I feel like anyone who is into something like that they are into it for a reason. (interview, May 4, 2009)

A good example of this idea of using art to accommodate for children was when Ben told me about the time he introduced one of these classes to wire sculptures. The assignment was to draw something 3-dimensional, but one little boy did not follow directions and did something on his own,

He had some defiant bad behavior here and there, but he was a major art kid. This kid, Dale, was into dinosaurs at the time, and he bent his wire around the way you would as if you were making a line. And he made this flat line drawing of a T-Rex out of wire. I was flabbergasted. (interview, May 4, 2009)

Ben again viewed this as an opportunity to understand an inner meaning to what the child was working through. Betsy, Rose's mother resonated with this idea when she stated the following about the arts programs at the Acorn School:

Because as you know with kids on the spectrum, it's often "Who cares about you?, it's all about me!" I think art is great, and Ben does wonderful things with getting them working on the fine motor and gross motor. My daughter did not like touching like half the stuff that she had to touch, but it's good for her to have that exposure, and she will now illustrate stories and stuff that has happened to her, she will draw it out and put words with it and the music and the singing has helped her find her voice sooner than she would have otherwise. (interview, June, 4, 2009)

The arts are enjoyable and fun!

This category may appear to be a simple one, that arts are engaging and rewarding for children on the spectrum, but the meaning of that for the children at the Acorn School seems to be profound. The teachers, parents, and I found it easy to notice that the children seemed more engaged or more “turned on” when participating in the arts. From my own teaching experience, I have seen that school is not always a joyful experience for children who struggle with social and academic skills. The arts seemed to be a place where children can simply have fun and enjoy themselves. This was something that struck me profoundly when I had my own classroom of ten children who all seemed to become more alive when they were engaged in a play or making a piece of art. In all of my observations, I noted a change in the demeanor of the children when engaged in the arts, as Mary did when she described Fred’s demeanor when he was in a play: “He is just animated!” (interview, May 21, 2009). I noticed this during an observation, as I wrote, “Fred is really animated, funny, and has a great sense of humor” (April 23, 2009). I also noted in an observation of rehearsal for the musical in Will’s class: “The kids are so excited before the performance. They are sitting closely together in a circle and boisterous and talking about their cues and playing with their costumes” (field notes, April 2, 2009).

Rose was a child who readily expressed her joy and enjoyment of arts activities both in her seeking out these activities at home and in her affect. In talking about her daughter and participating in drama, Betsy said, “For me, I

know it is a good fit because I see her and she just lights up. In fact, just before you came, she was in the toy closet and she was cleaning up and singing the closing song to the elementary school musical” (interview, 6-4-09). Betsy also noted this state of excitement and joy in her daughter in the following quote:

And one of the things that has developed is when we are playing. She is doing the Three Bears at school and part of what she is doing is reading a story and then acting it out, and she has brought that home. We’ll be playing and she will ask “Can we act out the Three Bears?” Which really becomes Mama Bear, Baby Bear, and Goldilocks. And so, she does that spontaneously because it’s how she likes to play and interact so that also tells me she is enjoying it. And she chooses to do that on her own. (interview, June 4, 2009)

For parents of children with ASD, finding something that their child liked is a significant event. For example, Sasha, who was so adroit at drawing, was also a piano prodigy. Her mother shared with me that she could pick out any note told to her on the piano. “Most of the time when she’s happy, she will go to the piano, but when she is mad, she doesn’t” (interview, May 13, 2009). Ashley, Sasha’s teacher was unsure if Sasha could understand her talent, but was sure that she enjoyed art, “I don’t know if she really looks at her artwork and knows, the difference—I am not sure. I know she really enjoys it. I know she really likes to do it”.

In some cases, however, the data revealed that the presence of joy, as a state of being when engaged in the arts, was not always clearly evident for all participants in the study. Will is a good example of a child who appeared to be very animated and engaged in drama class, but did not always express this in

words. As a participant observer, I had watched Will in rehearsals for the musical on several occasions. I made several notes about how uplifted he seemed, so different from the affect he displayed in his regular arts class. On March 23, 2009, I noted that Will was “very excited, his whole body is into it! Very in character and great at being ‘scared’ “(field notes). Will’s mother, Jasmine expressed that she wondered why Will never talked about drama at home. She expressed her concerns in a conversation we had on June 24, 2009.

K: In my opinion, I think on some level he does recognize that he enjoys drama. His peers will say “You are so funny, Will!” and he will get that look, that little smile. It’s not like he says “oh yeah” or “thank you”, but I wonder if that is an indication, still...

J: I’ve always felt that you know.. I’ve tried before to ask him the name of his drama teacher. ‘What did you do?’ He doesn’t talk much. I’m not sure what it means. I keep thinking he likes to talk about things like the Wii or the computer and although I know he loves drama, he does not talk about it. I don’t think he can describe it as good as he can –he cannot find the words to say “I enjoy it” or is it because he is shy?

Another instance in which Jasmine revealed that she still struggled with why Will did not express this enjoyment of arts is the following,

K: Did he say anything about his performance?

J: He does not like to talk about it. And if I start to say something about it, he will say “Oh that is enough...Don’t talk about it.” “Don’t look”. Something like that.

K: He’s kind of embarrassed?

J: Yes. But when he watches it, you can see him excited, jumping.
(interview, June 24, 2009)

However, Leigh, his classroom teacher noted a significant change in Will during his musical performance, saying,

K: So, he’s not always extroverted like that?

L: No! Oh no! He is much more extroverted in both of those situations.

K: And that’s neat that you’ve had a chance to observe that.

L: And even we had a play we did in drama that we got to come and watch and he was extremely extroverted in that. Sometimes, beyond being extroverted! Being a little silly! He likes the spotlight. (interview, May, 20, 2009).

Thus it seemed that these children might not always express their joy in words, saying “I love art,” but instead did so through their actions and demeanor. One might argue that this may not be unique to kids with ASD, and that art is enjoyable for all children, and I would agree. However, it makes sense to me that the opportunity to experience joy is more significant for children at the Acorn School because at other times during the school day they struggled to maintain focus, interact with others, and make sense of new concepts. These other aspects of school do not come easy for them, and so experiencing something enjoyable and fun is novel for them.

The arts allow children to have agency

Agency is a term used to describe a state of acting or exerting power. For children with disabilities, having agency can be a rare occurrence in the daily living of world of teacher driven treatment plans and objectives. One of the themes that emerged as a result of my analysis was the belief of the arts teachers that experiences in the arts can give children an arena in which to exert power and control over their projects or productions. The arts seemed to represent, for the teachers anyway, a way to give back some of the control to the children over what they are designing or participating in. Ben declared this in an interview (May 4, 2009):

A lot of the kids here at TAS, I want them to be excited and I want them to experiment. I want them to feel like they have a role in controlling that. They are not just standing watching fireworks, they are going, 'I did that. Wow, I made that happen'. It's a much more active role.

Agency was not something I originally coded in my observations, but it became apparent to me after talking with Ben that the children in the art room did experience agency in the way that they were allowed to experiment with materials and have the time to make things on their own. In my observation notes on April 23, 2009, I described the set-up of the art room.

There is a free choice center that does not rotate. The contents vary with organization of the shelves, but contains pens, pencils, crayons, scissors, tape, scrap paper, paper clips, stamps etc...The children go to this center whenever they finish with the main project. They are given free reign to make whatever they wish. Some of them spend a great deal of time, cutting paper, attaching paperclips... it seems to be the highlight for some kids." (field notes)

Below, Ben described his goals for the free center in his statement and why he saw power and freedom is so important for the kids:

I want them to get familiar with materials so they can engineer projects. If they want to build something, they will have had experience with staples and tape. They'll know how to put things together and know that tape will work for some stuff and not a good choice for others. Glue takes a long time to dry. A little bit of glue dries quicker. A lot of glue, well they need to have the experience of dumping the glue out and enjoy having it, ya know, ooze out and learn that it did not dry for four days. They need to have all of those tactile experiences. (interview, May 4, 2009)

Decision making seems to be a place where children can demonstrate what they are thinking when they make art. Ben commented later, "I think it's really cool to see them taking control and making decisions and feeling special.

They need to feel all those experiences in life, but they are doing it right there” (interview, May 4, 2009).

The data did not show much talk about agency from parents or other teachers, perhaps because they saw the arts more as a means to an end. Diana echoes this idea of agency in drama in a different way, which will be discussed more in the themes related to what kids do in the arts, and which I came to think of as “taking back your power.” Diana’s use of role-playing social situations, especially role playing what to do when confronted by a bully is a good example.

What Children with ASD “do” in the Arts: Outcomes of Children’s Experiences

In this section, I will outline the categories that represented abilities, skills, and behavior that participants reported that children with ASD demonstrated when participating in the arts, different from what they could do in normal, everyday contexts. Discourse in this category was concerned with the child actions and behavior rather than opportunities that the arts themselves provided for the children in the study. Under the second heading of *What children with ASD do in the arts; Outcomes of children’s arts experiences*; I have included themes clustered around discourse and/or observations about abilities, skills and behaviors that the children themselves demonstrated during participation in the art or drama classes, or as a result of arts experiences in general. These categories include: (a) Child as risk-taker: Characterized by references to the

child daring to try new things, or make mistakes while engaging in the arts, (b) Child as successful: Characterized by references to the child's accomplishment in the arts and/or the recognition of his/her skill in the arts; (c) Child as social being: Characterized by references to the child's improvement in initializing of or apparent enjoyment of social interaction with peers or teachers during arts experiences; (d) Child revealing inner life: Characterized by references to the child's use of the arts to make known his/her inner thoughts, feelings or emotions.

Child as Risk-Taker

Risk-taking appears to be an important issue for children with ASD. Children with learning disabilities often experience many failures in their journey of navigating schooling. Risk taking in the arts might look like taking on a new and different role in drama, or working on a project or piece with which the child was unfamiliar or had had limited experience with. For the child with ASD, routine and familiarity are often vital components of every day living. The ability to transcend these comfortable environments and try new things was a life skill that enables the child to get the most out of his/her school experiences. For Ben, the skill of risk taking is a basic one as he stated so eloquently, "I feel like risk taking is a big part of art making and that one of the risks is getting dirty. But that's a really cool way of thinking; that risking getting your hands dirty in order to create a piece of art is worthwhile." Textures are often problematic for children

on the spectrum and getting dirty is problematic for them, an issue I described in the section about the arts challenging personal issues. In an observation on April 15, 2009, I was watching Sasha making “paper soup” in art class. My notes read, “As Ben demonstrated the steps, Sasha exclaims “eww!” as she looks at the soup. However, Sasha scoots right up to tear the paper when asked to do so. She is reluctant to touch the new “paper,” and but does so and later delights in seeing the mold of the recycled paper.” Ben believes that the consequences of *not* taking risks can carry on into adulthood:

My thought on art and art ability is that you learn or unlearn your art skills. The youngest kids will try anything. They are not afraid to mix colors, or say ‘oh those colors don’t go together.’ You don’t stop yourself and say that’s not going to look good, that’s not where I wanted that line to go. Older people have learned what they can’t do because they dropped skills along the way, or they decided to quit drawing that. (interview, May 4, 2009)

It seemed that, for children on the spectrum, the art teachers valued the ability to be a risk-taker because it is a trait that challenges the need for routine and highlights the potential for the child to succeed in other areas, such as academics or making friends. Ben translated this idea in his declaration:

I just think that kind of stuff adds to self-esteem. To take the risk and reach beyond what you are used to lays the foundation for any kind of additional socializing. And there is risk-taking in art. If you mess up, you know, those are the risks. And you want to know that you can do it no matter what. And I feel like kids on the spectrum, I mean you are always focused on so many other things. You are focused on getting them to look at you and come out of their own head. And to me, making a piece of artwork is coming out of your own head. You’ve created and for weeks you’ll look at it. You’ll have some memory of the fact that you’ve interacted with that piece of paper on that day and it’s still there. It did not disappear like words. It’s tangible. With the younger kids they are more open to whatever happens—happens, and testing it out. And the sooner

they do that the more chance they have at it before they bail out of art. The less likely they are to be so rigid. (interview, May 4, 2009)

Ben shared with me that he actively sought to promote risk taking in his arts classrooms, both by letting children experiment with materials and colors, and by taking care not to make judgments about children's work. He told me, "The risk with kids is that they might be drawing something and it might not turn out the way they wanted. Or worse, heaven forbid, the teacher walks up and says, "snake," and the kids is like, 'Oh that is so embarrassing, she thinks it's a snake and its supposed to be a whatever'(interview, May 4, 2009).

In drama, Diana state that she believes that there is risk taking on her part, as well as for the children themselves. She recalled a story about a child who wanted to take a solo song that the teachers did not think he would be able to pull off due to his extreme nervousness and shaky voice.

D: He rose to the occasion and did so much better than we ever thought possible, and he's so proud of himself

K; How do you know that?

D: Oh because of his face, when you watch the video, you can just see the pride and the beaming. And afterwards he said, "I did it, I did it. Terri, did you hear me? I did it."

K: So much of this is about expectation, isn't it?

D: Risktaking! And he initiated it! (May 8, 2009)

The teachers chose to take a risk on this child, and the benefits to the child were obvious to all involved.

In a member checking meeting with Diana on 09-28-09, she challenged some of my findings on risk taking. Diana mentioned to me that for some

children on the autism spectrum, the difficulties with social connection may enable them to take more risks than others, as they are not as tuned in to the opinions of those in their environments. She felt that these particular children might not perceive standing up and acting in front of a group as much of a risk. In my notes, I wrote, “For some kids, risk taking is not an issue at all because they are not connected with other kids or put stock in what other people think” (analytic memo, September 28, 2009). The “risk”, not doing well, or failing in front of peers would not be seen as such a risk for those children. This seemed to be a difference between theater arts and visual arts, perhaps stemming from what Ben discussed in that risk taking involved more materials and failing to create a project that reflected what the artist intended to make was a different, more internal risk. Diana also mentioned that this is why she did not mention risk taking directly during any of our interviews.

Child as successful

Success was a major theme in the analysis of the data that reached across all of the children, parents, and teachers participating in the study. When children in the study were successful in art or drama, participants interpreted this as good for their self-worth. Parents reported delighting in their child’s accomplishments, and all participants reported that success in the arts had potential for long term benefits in later life.

For the teachers, success was something they felt was vitally important for kids on the spectrum because of the general struggles they experienced in other activities. For the classroom teachers, the arts seemed to be something the students could do well and that was “on their level.” In line with Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development, the arts were viewed as activities in which children on the spectrum could do well with the appropriate amount of teacher support, were suited to the child’s prior knowledge and were also highly engaging for the student. Ava, Rose’s teacher, discussed this in the following exchange,

A: Academics are hard, so they naturally gravitate towards arts because it allows them to go with the flow and do what they want to do.

K: So, it’s more autonomy? Or control?

A: Just successful. Not feeling defeated. I think when children feel like they flourish because they can go to a different art and have that to look forward to, just doing what they enjoy doing at some point. It’s a motivator for them. (June 29, 2009)

Sometimes, teachers also used success in art as a measuring stick to gauge how far students had come in art experiences, as compared to where they started when they first began at the school. When I interviewed Diana about the musical and the teacher’s comments afterwards, she shared this story with me.

The team comments were a series of “Oh my gosh. Remember when he couldn’t talk when he was five?” There was a particular little boy last year who was in preschool, who was definitely on the spectrum and who at the preschool musical last year stood on the stage and cried. He would not wear a costume. He would not say any words. He would not sing. And his mother came up to me after the musical and said, “What a waste of time!” and it was like I had just been slapped. This child, this year, wore his costume, said his lines, sang with his peers and glowed from the inside out. It was amazing. And I just saw his mom out on the sidewalk and she came running up and hugged me and said, “I just got through talking

about you and the difference between this year and last year!” They were just thrilled and it was one of the highlights for me this year.

Ben also talked about how success in art can impact long term life experiences as he told the story of another child saying, “Well, early on, he had the experience that he could succeed, and he felt good about this effort in art. And that could be something that, at the end of a tough day, he could say, ‘This was a bad day, but I love what I made and can’t wait to finish it tomorrow.’” To the teachers, success seemed to be a life experience upon which other skills could be built. Although not expressed explicitly, it was as if the teachers believed that success was not something that comes easily to children at The Acorn School, and when they children are given some experience with it, they might be able to use it as a springboard for trying other activities.

For Will, the ways in which he experienced success in drama were regarded as highly important to his mother and his classroom teacher. Leigh, Will’s classroom teacher, noted that he was very deft at presenting the book he made in Project Read/Write saying, “He was very proud of his book. He presented it in the classroom and he presented it at the Blue Willow book shop for the people. He was quite the ham!” (interview, May 20, 2009). Later, in the same interview, she talked about Will’s performance in the musical stating, “Oh, it’s just fun to watch him. When it was his turn to be in front of the microphone to sing the song, he was more than eager to do so, and quite proud of himself.”

I had the opportunity to see Will in the classroom, during the rehearsals, and for the actual musical itself. During an observation in Will’s classroom on

3-9-09, I watched Will in circle time learning a math activity. I noted that Will seemed tuned out, his body turned away from the group. "He played with his laces and looked out of the window. He would respond to his name being called, to answer a question, after being given choices" (field notes). I noted this again during down periods while he was waiting for an activity to begin or walking from classroom to classroom. This was wholly different from the notes I made about Will during drama times and during the musical. During an observation of drama class on March 23, 2009, I wrote, "Will is very excited-whole body is into it. Very on target with attention. Very in character and great at being scared. He knew all his lines. Great voices. Adds his own scripts and asides!" I can recall my observation of the musical watching Will's whole body vibrate in anticipation of his lines and the infectious, confident smile on his face as he delivered his line. His mother Jasmine discussed his reaction to the musical in an interview saying,

J: If we put the musical DVD in the car and I am (driving) and am hearing and not seeing and I am asking "Oh who is that?" It's so not him! So confident! The first time I watched it I honestly did not know. So I asked my daughter, "Is that him?" and she said, "Yes!" and Will was like, "no". But he was not upset or angry.

K: You got to see a different side to him.

J: Yes, and he was so happy!

When asking about Sasha being successful in art, I had to rely on parent and teacher reports. Sasha is a shy girl, who, in my observations, had limited verbal output. However, her mother felt that she did experience success during art and assured me, "I think when she is drawing, she is more calm. I think she is more secure like. I think she feels she has accomplished something when

she's making it" (interview, May 13, 2009). During a conversation with Tommie, we discussed this sense of accomplishment further:

K: Do you think she has a sense of having a talent in that area?

T: I think she does, in the art area. I don't think the facial expression is at her age level. I mean, all the kids can draw, but each one—mad, sad, crying, and surprised, they are different from the other kids. I think it's very detailed.

K: Has she ever said, "I am good at this?"

T: I think she knows she is drawing pretty well.

K: Do you ever praise her about it?

T: I will say "Oh wow!" She will smile a lot and kind of show everybody. She likes that. I think she feels more confident and strong. (interview, May 13, 2009)

When I posed the same question to her classroom teacher Ashley, she responded, "I don't know. I wonder if she does. We tell her that her pictures are great and that she has talent, but we don't know how much she understands" (interview, May 29, 2009).

For Fred, success at singing and drama was evident in the interviews with his mother, his teachers, and Fred himself. His mother Wilma stated, "He does not say 'I am a great artist,' but he is proud of his work. He wants it to be perfect and he puts a lot of effort into it. And singing, I mean he is not vain, and he doesn't brag, but I think he is proud of the fact that he got to sing the solo" (interview, June 12, 2009). In my interview with Fred, he was not shy at all about his talents, and readily identified that he had talent in this area. I asked for an interview with Fred, and he readily agreed. I felt comfortable interviewing Fred, based on my observations of his ability to express himself through language, his comfort level with me, and the fact that he often discussed his talents in the arts

with his peers and teachers. I began my interview hesitantly, making sure that Fred knew that he did not have to speak with me and could stop the interview at any time. I planned a lunch time meeting so we could maintain a casual and fun atmosphere. Fred was eager to meet with me and even stopped me on the school grounds before lunch time to confirm where we were meeting. I asked him to bring his Project Read/Write book and anything else he wanted to share with me. He brought the hard bound book, and two other books he had created at home on his computer. He seemed at ease with me, and enjoyed hearing his voice on the tape recorder. I felt assured that my interview with Fred was conducted under ideal circumstances. I began with just asking Fred what were some of the things that he enjoyed most at The Acorn School.

F: I'm good at acting

K: And what about singing?

F: Yes, I am very good.

K: What is the thing that you like most about singing?

F: Well that's a hard question. I can show it off and record it for everyone.

K: Can I ask you a question about these drawings? Did anyone teach you to draw like this?

F: Well, for these pictures, they just pop out of my brain.

K: How does it make you feel when you are drawing?

F: It makes me happy because I can show people what I can do

K: And what was it like, Fred, when you stood on stage and sang that solo all by yourself?

F: Very wonderful. It makes me feel good.(interview, June 29, 2009)

I think that for parents, knowing that their child is successful at something gives them great joy, as would be the case for any parent, but it seems to go beyond that for the parents of children with special needs. In parenting special needs children, there is always a concern about what the future holds, a sort of

ever present anxiety—for future schooling, long term living situation, friends and relationships. Seeing, or believing, that the child is successful can help assuage these fears. This is reflected in statements by the mothers of both Fred and Rose. Betsy made some general comments about how being capable in the drama benefited her daughter by saying,

I think it's just good, to feel good about themselves and to find areas that they like. It will also give her confidence and get her out there. I mean, people have public speaking problems anyway and it's good for her to be able to get up in a room in front of people and be able to express herself. (interview, June 4, 2009)

Later, Betsy shared that being successful in the arts gives her hope for other children with learning difficulties, and specifically Rose herself:

So, I think as far as an outlet, or something, she will continue to be good at especially because we know there are going to be so many challenges for her and so many things she's not going to be good at. In everyday living, things will be hard for her, so I think that now that we know these are areas that she enjoys and had some success in that we want to continue to make sure that she has at least one of them to her avail. As far as long-term in her adulthood, I don't know. I mean, two years ago, we were fearful that we'd have to convert the garage into an apartment and she'd be living with us for the rest of our lives. Now I don't think that that will be the case. Now, she probably won't be very far away...but I do have high hopes that she will be able to be independent and have her own life and hopefully a family. (interview, June 4, 2009)

In this quote, Betsy identified that she believed that Rose was going to be challenged in life in many areas and that having an area in which she is successful will help counteract the areas in which she will struggle. This parent readily identified that life was not going to be easy for her daughter and she was ready to continue to provide access to any area that may aid her self-esteem and self-confidence in other areas. Betsy continued with this line of thinking saying,

So, knowing that they are going to struggle, that they are already way behind the starting line on things that all of us take for granted...I do think it is important for them to find areas that they are successful in and expose them to that as much as possible to supplement some of those barriers and fulfill those needs of "I need to feel good about myself," that aspect of it. (interview, June 4, 2009)

Child as a social being

In diagnostic terminology, difficulties in social relationships are some of the primary characteristics of children with autism. "People with ASD live in individual worlds of their own, in which they are socially disengaged from others. They are often stressed by demands for social interaction or intimacy that they cannot give or manage. These children are often described as socially stiff, awkward, emotionally flat, socially unaware, self-absorbed, devoid of humor, lacking in empathy, prone to show socially unacceptable behavior, and insensitive or unaware of verbal and nonverbal social cues"(Epp, 2008). The children in my study were also reported to have difficulties in social relationships. However, as my analysis showed, their art experiences allowed them to connect with peers and teachers in ways that they were not typically observed to do. These changes in social behaviors ranged the gamut from use of the arts to gain social acceptance, as motivation to form intimate social relationships, and as a tool to provide structure for social interaction. Diana explained the connection between drama and social skills, affirming,

Children on the autism spectrum often are so very concrete that they don't know how to pretend. So, it is my belief that pretend play is paramount to children's development. They have to be able to pretend because that

involves perspective taking. That means you are thinking outside of who you are. So, I think that that is probably one of the most beneficial, one of the greatest benefits that drama can give the kids on the spectrum. I also think that um, I know that research has shown that children involved in drama have an increase their social skills, and these kids as we know suffer socially. I also think that it is hugely important for special kids, kids who are different. Kids that struggle to have a niche in middle school and high school-- they need to socialize. And if we can provide a place for them to "hang," we can provide a safe place to fall through high school. It doesn't have to go through their whole life necessarily, but if we can give them a place to have friends...Cause kids who don't have friends are the kids that drop out, you know. (interview, April 23, 2009)

From the beginning of my observations of Sasha, I noticed what I believed to be her limited interaction with her peers, and particularly with me. I knew by from informal conversations with her mother and teachers, that Sasha took time to warm up to people, and so I tried to approach her carefully, little by little. In one observation note from March 3, 2009, I chronicled the following interaction: "I ask Sasha, 'Tell me about this' about her picture, but I get no response. I make some observations about her drawing, 'You have a red square and a yellow triangle.' Sasha smiles as she works, and glances up as others talk but does not converse with them or look a me." Later in my notes, I notice that Sasha began acknowledging me slowly by walking up next to me, rubbing me with her shoulder and standing there, but does make eye contact with me." During an observation on April 30, 2009, I wrote, "Sasha brought me a book today and sat down, touching me. She did not ask me to read, and I offer, but instead she takes the book and starts talking about the characters inside, 'She is angry.' 'She is sad.' Another time I noted, "I approach Sasha playing in the water

center. She plays with the whales and seems aware of what her friends are doing as she repeats the word “fishy” as she plays. Sasha ignores my attempts at role-playing with the sharks. She looks up at me and says ‘look, look’, but the rest of her words are said under her breath. Her play is parallel, not cooperative” (field notes, March 23, 2009). Sasha eventually grew to say “Hi” and “Bye” to me, but there was little other social interaction, save for a few smiles here and there. It is interesting to note that Sasha often interacted with her body first; standing near me, touching me with her hand or sitting on my lap, but rarely did she engage me with her words.

When I had originally chose Sasha for the study, Ben had mentioned to me that despite her social struggles, he and Sasha were really quite close and had a special bond. He described this during an interview,

She is often a child who doesn’t interact, or who does not engage, for maybe a long period of time. But she may engage say for a 45 min period of time at the art table. She had a real hard time at the beginning of the year getting comfortable with people. She didn’t like getting too close to me, but bit by bit, we started getting this quirky little bond where she would come stand close to me. (May 4, 2009).

I observed this first hand in observation notes from April 14, 09 as I wrote, “Sasha comes right in and half-hugs Ben. She is all smiles and says ‘Connie is absent today.’ She scoots right up to tear paper in the circle.” I reflected on this increased participation and verbalization later in an analytic memo saying, “Sasha really does seem to have a connection with Ben. Why is that? Is it because of him, his room (set-up?) or what she associates with Ben-(being good

at art?”. Without receiving direct answers to those questions, I know that I saw differences in her initiating conversations with him and volunteering more in the classroom. Sasha’s classroom teacher, Ashley, confirmed these types of social differences in the art classroom saying that Sasha had taken a long time to warm up to her as well. Her classroom teacher commented on Sasha’s early social skills and how they seem to improve in art classes, saying, “Like in art when she had a lot more interaction with the teachers and she’ll show her words. There is an outlet there” (May 29, 2009). In another conversation, Ashley described this further, comparing how Sasha seemed in her comportment in the classroom to how she was in the art room saying, “Like in my group, she participates but it is limited. But whenever we are in art class or at the art table, she does a lot more because she wants to show you her artwork. She does want you to come see. Even her peers” (May 29, 2009). The analysis of the data reflects that by all three accounts, Sasha initiated more conversation and engaged more with her teacher in the art classroom. Was this an off- shoot of the motivation or self-confidence she felt in the art room? I think I could make the case that it is. Ashley went on to say that she felt like using art as a conversation piece encouraged more social interaction from this student. For Sasha, she seemed motivated to talk about her art work, felt a special bond with her art teacher, seemed more motivated to stay engaged with social group activities that involved art, and felt more self-confidence to share her art with others.

These improvements in social skills appeared to happen with Rose as well. Rose was more interactive than Sasha, and in my observations, enjoyed volunteering information during group discussions in her classroom. In an observation of Rose during centers on March 23, 2009, I noted that she was sitting on the computer, doing a computer program. During this activity, I made notes to the effect that she appeared to be well focused, reading words on the computer and asking a peer sitting next to her “What are you gonna do?” and commenting, “I will be happy when I get to this level.” One of my observations was that Rose did not notice that I was watching her during my time in the classroom. I also noticed that although Rose made several comments during group, her eye contact was reduced, and she sat in a chair and held a small bean bag that I was told later helped her to focus and stay tuned in. Ava described this, “Attention is a challenge. She tends to miss facial expressions. She gets really focused on what she is doing and tends to miss those cues. Just pragmatics” (interview, June 29, 2009).

Rose’s classroom teachers posited that her challenge socially was interact with peers in a true back and forth exchange, and not take on the motherly, directive role in the relationship. Ava described her social skills to me in this way, “Being on the spectrum, it can be hard for her to notice everything around, but she is in tune with her friends and what they are doing at times. She kinda will attach herself to one and almost becomes fixated on them” (June 29, 2009).

Rose's participation in theater seemed to decrease these types of social interactions. As Ava told me about a time when Rose was explaining to her school peers her role in a Big Street Theater production, she said, "I wish I would have video taped her explanation to the children. It was just her ability to interact with the children was so different. It was not a motherly sort of, 'Let me help you.' " (interview, June 29, 2009).

For Rose's mother, Betsy, drama represented a great teaching tool that helps children to learn "scripts" that will help simulate appropriate social interactions and get children engaged with their peers. In talking about Big Street Theater productions, Betsy commented, "I would not be surprised if she would be more attentive there, and I think you have to be where drama is concerned because you are relying on each other to tell the story" (interview, June 4, 2009). Betsy went on to describe the idea of using drama as a teaching tool as follows:

I also think with regard to drama, and I know that there is literature out there, that says that for kids who are on the high functioning end of the spectrum and in the Asperger's range where my daughter falls, it can provide them, as a teaching tool to either mimic or eventually internalize some of the things that they don't get. Scripting. They fake it and remake it. So, I think that that will eventually help Rose down the line. (interview, June 4, 2009)

Betsy also shared with me that belonging to an outside theater group is an avenue that she hope would help her connect with typically developing children. Betsy focused on how social skills lie at the crux of the problem with children on the autism spectrum in her poignant words,

K: Do you, as a parent of a child on the spectrum, do you believe it is important for these kids to have access to the arts, or outside activities that they are good at? Can you talk about that in a sort of philosophical sort of way?

B: Well in general I think it comes down to that these kids fail at the core things that make us human, they fail at relationships. At the core, people need other people, and these kids are not going to be good at that. And certainly within their family environment and hopefully their school environment, I mean, we are lucky that we make enough money that she can go to a school environment where they know what it's about and the kids in public school, well, hopefully they can get the support from teachers who understands. (June 4, 2009)

Rose seemed to use drama as a script that allowed her to step back and not take the bossy role: Like a structured script that allowed her to make more appropriate social forays.

Will was perhaps the best example of a child who was qualitatively different in drama classes in regard to social skills, connection with peers, and being tuned into to world around him. Will's mother recounted his painful social struggles in his everyday life and how he used drama to get positive social feedback from his peers and his teachers. I observed Will many times in his regular classroom and in drama classes. Will was often tuned out and distracted during class time, staring at the wall, looking at signs in the class, and not interacting to any extent with his peers. With me, Will did seem aware that I was watching him and would answer simple queries, but never asked my name or asked me what I was doing there as his peers did. However, I found him to be wholly different during drama class. During one such observation on April 2, 2009, I made these notes, "Will is asking Diana, 'Are we going to practice it out

there?’ (meaning the stage area). He is very on target with his lines and very in character. I notice that he enjoys humor from the other characters and smiles and laughs in response to their lines. Will is laughing so hard just before he is about to deliver his lines. Stays focused.” Unlike the deficits noted in the Epps article, Will did seem aware of humor. I observed this in the way he laughed at the other children saying their lines. In an unprecedented social initiation, I observed, “Will takes over a costume to another child and said, ‘What about wearing this today—I think it is good for your parents’” (field notes, April 2, 2009). This observation seemed to reveal that Will *is* aware of his peers and their role, not only in the play, but awareness of the life that his peers have outside of the classroom. One more example of increased social awareness was Will’s use of pantomime during a warm-up exercise of “Monkeys on the Bed.” I wrote in my notes, “As Will plays the doctor in the skit, he makes great eye contact as he ad-libs lines and becomes grouchier and grouchier as the doctor emphatically states, ‘No more monkeys jumping on the bed!’ He enjoys the feedback and laughter from his peers, which seem to push his performance one step further in this exercise” (field notes, April 30, 2009). Diana confirmed this in my initial interview with her on April 23, 2009, stating,

And we just performed our play a couple of weeks ago. And he was so great, and so funny, and the kids kept calling him by his name, and saying “You were so great,” “You were so funny.” And then just the other day I was reading the kids their lines for the musical and this particular kid is going to say, “You’re born, ya live, ya die” and one of his classmates said. “Oh, those are the perfect words for him, and he’ll do them so great!” Well, how much more stroking can you get than that?

Will's mother Jasmine identified Will's struggles outside of the drama room, in making friends with children in the family's neighborhood. His mother agreed that drama was Will's place to shine, and that Will was more interactive when he was in drama. Jasmine confirmed this with me in talking about drama, "I think he gets to be himself [in drama]. He would appear not to be social, but he is. He wants to be social and if the chance were not there, like with other kids where he doesn't always get picked to play" (interview, June 24, 2009). Jasmine believed that drama was a safe place wherein Will could initiate social interaction, receive positive feedback. She went on to describe how Will had made numerous attempts with neighborhood children and had not been successful,

K: You mentioned that when he interacts with the neighbor's kids that he would love to talk about whatever *he* is interested in.

J: Or if he gets to be the leader. If his idea is taken. And since he is the youngest, and with the problems, he hardly ever gets to run the show, so he has a very hard time playing with them.

K: And he has never gone back since that one bad experience?

J: He has not gone back. He maybe waves "hi" but he is not interested at all to go back out there. They were not listening to his idea. He did it for 10 days, but he does not even ask if they can come over. With a group of kids he always make the first move, but he is easily discouraged. At a party, he makes the first move, but you will see him playing by himself very quickly if they are not nice or just watching the other kids. He gets it if he says something and the other kids are like 'What?' But you find him playing in a place by himself. He knows this is not going to work.

K: Does that bother you?

J: Sure, I cannot even bring myself to ask him to play outside and I know that maybe it bothers him. And he's not going to tell me, so, I ignore the fact that they are playing together and try to distract him. (interview, June 24, 1990)

However, Jasmine noted that Will received positive feedback from his family when he initiated acting out a play for them or role-playing with his characters from the video games. Will's mother shared with me that she believed that this was a strategy that Will has developed to get positive social interaction. She discussed the role-playing/performing with me saying,

J: He loves attention. He feels that he is not going to get the attention from me at home when he is playing video games and I cannot sit with him for more than fifteen minutes then. I am dying-I cannot take it! And this is the only time he gets it the way he wants it. Everyone's undivided attention, and no one is telling him 'Stop it.' For my son, he loves attention. He just does not know how to get it.

K: It's a common ground, maybe.

J: He sees us all happy and watching and clapping, and he does not have to ask us to do that. Because he asks me all the time, 'Can you come sit with me?' He's always describing what is going on in the games. Ten minutes, 20 minutes, and then I say.. you know what, I have to go. But with drama he never asks, we are always sitting and watching, So, this is attention he is getting and he likes it. (interview, June 24, 2009)

Thus, it seemed that the positive social feedback that Will received through the use of drama was a mutually rewarding medium by which he was seeking and getting attention from his family.

From an outsiders view, Fred's social struggles seemed associated with handling transitions and disappointments. Fred was quite verbal. His classroom teacher described his struggle in this way,

The main reason he is in the Acorn School is that his social skills are a struggle. He prefers to be by himself still. He is a real interactive kid – he just really prefers to be by himself. Cooperating with the group is something he really has to work on. And then handling discipline is a real struggle –when he is upset something happens to upset his day. (interview, May 21, 2009)

Later, Mary continued this line of thinking, saying,

He's kind to all his peers –for the most part - unless he's having a problem or a meltdown – no one pretty much bothers him. He might lash out at them. In general, he is a kind person. Fred just doesn't go out of his way to want to play with anyone.

However, Fred did receive plenty of positive feedback from his peers regarding his singing and acting abilities. I wrote in field notes from an observation on May 12, 2009, at the end of the year musical rehearsal that, "Fred struts on stage and really steals the show. At the conclusion there is huge applause. 'Great Job!' says one kid. 'Fred, give me high five!', says another. 'You are so awesome!' exclaims a peer." Being special in drama was a way to connect with his peers and feel accepted by them. Diana shared with me that she shows the musical video to her students after the musical to highlight what they have accomplished and get their feedback. She said, "And another boy (Fred), today, has been chosen to have a solo. And he's a prodigy, a musical prodigy, and one of the kids said, 'Boy, It is gonna be so great. Will you please sing for us?' And these are eight year olds asking for this" (interview, April 23, 2009). She told me that children throughout the school made comments on Fred's performance. Diana stated, "And Fred did not get to hear the comments from his peers, but he did come up to the art and music teacher afterwards and ask if they had anything they wanted to tell him! He has no shortage of confidence" (interview, May 8, 2009). So it seemed that although his teacher identified him as preferring to be alone, Fred did seek out positive feedback from

his peers and teachers about his performances. In my interview with Fred himself, his want of sharing his talent with peers was obvious as he identified that what he liked about art and drama were social in nature.

K How does it make you feel when you are drawing?

F: It makes me happy because I can show people what I can do.

Fred also identified that drama will help him in his transition to his new school :

K: And Fred, you are going to a new school next year. Where are you going to go?

F: Holy Christian (a pseudonym).

K: How do you feel about going to a new school?

F: Great. I hope it is like the Acorn School.

K: Do you think you will do art and music and drama in your new school?

F: I think so. Even though I don't know anybody, I will make great friends. (interview, June 26. 2009).

Child revealing inner life through the arts

Comments and observations in this category are characterized by teachers and parents making statements that propose that children disclose their innermost thoughts and feelings through their drawing or performances. Data were coded as “revealing inner life” when comments were made about the child expressing emotions or working out problems through his or her art. Parent comments also revealed that the mothers believed that the way the child is when participating in the arts is “who” the child really is; not a person locked inside himself or herself who do not think and feel but one who is connected to others in their environment. The parents and teachers in my study, however, asserted that children on the spectrum do have an active inner dialogue about themselves and

about others, and could disclose them through the arts, often revealing a presence and connectedness that would otherwise be unknown. The data revealed that the arts could function as a window into what the child is thinking or working through—a literal interpretation of a thought, or in the process of using some material, staying with an activity etc. Ben summed up these ideas in the following:

That is important for all kids, but it's important for them (children on the spectrum) because they tend to be stuck on the inside. This is like bringing them out. And again, it is good for all kids. But come on, these kids are the ones that are more apt to stay inside, so if they find some way to express, or get some of their insides out...And this doesn't mean they have to draw pictures of what is happening inside their minds. You might have that, or it may just be feeling like they can decide to do something and it's going to work out. (interview, May 4, 2009)

Ben seemed especially tuned in to the possibility that children could be revealing their inner thoughts through the *process* of making art. He believed that children on the spectrum have an inner dialogue--ideas and decisions that were going on all the time to which we might not be privy without looking at the process and products of the artist themselves. He introduced this belief saying,

So our kids don't have as many spontaneous conversations, or interactive play with others, so much of what is happening to them is inside and not captured anywhere. So for them to create a record of their decision making, that lives outside of them, they played a role in that. They made an impression, left a mark like a footprint, you know what I'm saying? (interview, May 4, 2009)

He was willing to re-imagine what the child might be working on or working through in the process of making art. Ben described this re-thinking as,

I see the kids that label everything, especially on the spectrum and they'll be walking around saying everything that they see. They'll be saying "orange" or "scissors," or whatever. And I feel like the kids we don't hear anything from are probably doing that to some degree. You see a child who is maybe using the same color or using the same drawing, and I believe they are aware of that. I just believe that they are, and that they are creating some sort of a record of their thoughts. I can't imagine that their mind would be blank. (interview, May 4, 2009)

In an informal conversation we had about Rose, Ben related that at one period, Kate was drawing kites over and over again. This was becoming a concern for her teachers as she did not seem to be following directions during art class to make what the rest of the group was making. Ben believed that this "obsession" with drawing kites would run its course and was probably happening for a reason and advised the teachers to let it go for the time being. Ben shared with me that later it was revealed that flying kites was related to a conflict that Rose was working through with her friend Ada (a pseudonym) in the classroom (field notes, March 25, 2009). This example seemed to reiterate his meaning in the following statement, "Say they are making something with color. That may or may not have more meaning. I would imagine an older person who had great language would not be going "grey," "orange". It would probably be more like, 'Excited!', 'Happy!' 'Wow!' Look at this color!'" (interview, May 4, 2009). This willingness to re-interpret what is going on in making art was powerfully expressed by Ben in his testimonial,

For kids on the spectrum, it's almost as if they are locked inside somewhere. And they may or may not get any of their insides out anywhere. And we are trying to do that with them with language. We are trying to do that with all kinds of activities. The arts offer.. It's almost like it allows them to come out with them not even realizing it (May 4, 2009).

Sasha, as described before, was a child who used drawing to communicate with others and a child who was more facile in art than in the spoken word. Ben described Sasha as follows:

Let's talk about Sasha. I think we are going to see her as another person who is very into details. I see her as an amazing, like weaver, or painter. Because from the beginning, she was so observant. I mean, I could just see the decisions and the observations although she wasn't saying a word. That tells me that she is choosing not to use language with other people, out on the playground and such, but that there is rich language going on in her head. I believe it. And the evidence is that when she is in my room with hundreds of choices of brushes, she looks for brushes with a fine point and chooses a certain color, and goes in and does a certain detail. I mean, that is high level decision making and observation. (interview, May 4, 2009)

Sasha's mother, Tommie, shared the belief that her daughter used art not only to reveal decision making and higher level thinking but to work out problems within her own mind. Tommie told me, "And because she cannot use her language so well, she shows it in her pictures well. I've got a handful I can show you. It's all very detailed facial expression to me. It's not her age." In a discussion about a trip to visit her grandfather overseas, Tommie shared this story with me,

T: She had a problem with her own granddad. She doesn't like him. We don't know why. But I can tell. The other day, this is funny, it is his birthday and we have to get the card, you know. And so we ask each grandkid to sign it. And so we asked Sasha to sign it, and she started drawing pictures.

K : And she can write her name very well. (Shows picture). I'll have to ask your permission to make a copy of this. There is a picture of an angry girl and she is punching him! She wrote the word "poof." And then she drew a heart, which I've seen her draw hearts quite a bit and she wrote "wow."

T: We left her with him for a week, we had to go out of town and she stayed with her granddaddy, and we think that something happened. She says she hates him.

K: You sat down verbally with her...

T: Yeah, and she says "I don't like him," "I don't like him." That's what she say. But her pictures are very serious!

K: Yeah, this is a pretty dramatic picture. I need to make a copy of those.

T: There is another one actually before that where she draw the family and she says, "Here is the family" looking at him with mad face including pet. They are all on one side of the paper, and he is kinda like over here. We cannot show this to granddaddy. We have to pick another one.

K: Wow, so she's really using this to communicate.

T: But she cannot say what happened, but we know that her emotion is there. (interview, May 13, 2009) (See Appendix G)

Will's mother believed that Will's true self was reflected in his performances. Jasmine originally stated that Will did not talk about his excitement regarding the musical and did not express his hopefulness regarding his participation in the production. "Yeah, this part he was very excited about, and the script was sent home, and he was supposed to practice every night. And he was very good about practicing it. He loved it. The only time he showed how he feels." She described this further in the following:

I don't know, I almost believe that that is really him, you know. And my mother was watching, and she said the same thing. That that was really him. Around other kids where there is no script, you start noticing that there is something wrong, and he is not confident. But that is different from when he started having the problem. But I am always glad to see that. I've always felt that you know, I've tried before to ask him the name of his drama teacher. What did you do? He doesn't talk much. I'm not sure what it means. I keep thinking he likes to talk about things like the Wii or the computer and although I know he loves drama, he does not talk about it. I don't think he can describe it as good as he can –he cannot find the words to say "I enjoy it" or is it because he is shy.(interview, June 24, 2009)

Artist's identity, "Drama Kids and Art Kids"

As analysis of the data continued over time, I began to think of the next theme under the category of *Identity Talk*; "Drama Kids" and "Art Kids". On numerous occasions, I became aware that teachers at the school referred to current and former student at TAS as "drama kids" or "art kids." Even during my initial observations at TAS, I was asked if I had observed certain "drama kids" or "art kids" during my visits. Upon further analysis of the data, I began to hypothesize that "drama kids" and "art kids" were socially constructed identities given to certain children which were well defined and mutually agreed-upon within the school environment. This identity talk included a widely held belief or reputation of the child as being very talent in one or more of the arts, this being his/her primary "story" within the school. By identity talk, I mean discourse by teachers, parents and sometimes from the children themselves wherein the child is identified with the art form as the distinguishing character or personality of the individual, and held above all other descriptors of the child. This talk was characterized by statements about art and/or drama being the child's strength from an early age, believed to be part of "what they might become" in the future and socially recognized as a gift by teachers and students. This powerful descriptor seemed to be paramount above all descriptive terms from the parents, teachers and sometimes the kids themselves. This "identity" seemed to be more encompassing than any other descriptor of the child, and drew in the child's peers as well. The social aspect of the artist's identity is a crucial component.

Social identity refers to the common identification with a collectivity or social category that creates a common culture among participants concerned (Snow & Oliver, 1995). The artist's identity category appears to be similar to the way Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) described social identity as the groups to which people belong that provide their member with the definition of who they are and how they should behave. Parents and teachers often talked about their children in relation to art or drama as "who they really are inside" or what they were meant to be. The definition of "art/drama kid" encompasses many components which included; a propensity to engage fully with the arts, a hope for the future in the arts, social recognition of talent, and statements about children being drawn to the arts from a young age. The social aspect of the term "drama kid" or a "art kid" to describe a child was reinforced among parents, teachers, and other children throughout the school.

In the initial days of my observations, teachers would often ask me if I had observed a certain child, exclaiming that he or she was a "real art kid" or a "real drama kid." Ben saw art kids as those who were not necessarily unusually talented in their products, but as children who spent an inordinate amount of time and energy on their art projects, or who showed a deliberate thought processes in choosing materials and colors when making art. This was what composed the "engage fully" portion of the definition of "art kid" in my analysis. These children were able to make decisions and be seen as "critical thinkers" when making art. Ben explained this phenomenon in the following quote,

So one way that I'll know that it's an art kid, well, of course when they are really into the process of whatever we are trying that day. On the shelf, I do have a variety of materials that are there are, a whole bunch of drawing materials, there are tools: scissors, tape, glue, all that. And um one of the things that points out an art kid for me is that if we are focused on an activity, they are racing over there to get started. They are not asking me if they can use a certain thing, they know where things are on the shelf. It shows me that they are engineering their idea and they realize what they need also and where it is on the shelf. It shows all kinds of high level activity and thought processes that I was talking about earlier. (interview, May 4, 2009)

For Ben the kids that he defined as "art kids" had an understanding of the process of making art and showed initiative in making art happen for themselves.

For Diana, being a drama kid was very tied into hopes for the future and the children finding their niche later in life. Diana felt that having a place to fit in was very important for children on the spectrum, especially as they transitioned out of The Acorn School. She discussed what it meant to be a drama kid in the following conversation, about a young girl finding her niche in the drama room.

K: So, there is a social acknowledgement of who you are, really..

D: Talented. You have a talent. Um, I have a letter. I almost want to read it to you. Can I show you the letter?

K: Absolutely. Well, tell me about the letter. [We were not able to locate the artifact.]

D: We will try to find it. This little girl came to us. Much older. She came to us really beaten down. Her self-esteem was so poor and she never had been exposed to theatre before. No opportunity to act or anything. And she was amazing! She just had so much energy onstage, she was so captivating. Everybody loved her. And one day she wrote me a note and said "Thank you so much for showing me drama because drama is what I truly wish to be." And so for her, and she was a beautiful little girl, very much at risk for bad teenage girl risk behavior. She fought with her mother, had problems at home, that sort of thing. And I felt so good about giving her a place to belong in high school, I don't think it will go any farther than that, but I knew that I provided her with a goal, and

aspirations, and people to be with. And she'll be really good and they will cast her in the plays in the public high school.

K: Very powerful.

This conversation from Diana illustrated the ways that drama provided a hope for the future for this child, in having friends and possibly preventing problematic behaviors in later life. Similarly, Jasmine identified that drama was very special to her son, and also to his family and friends, saying, "With drama, it's the only thing he likes and it seems that everybody is also interested in him doing it"(June 24, 2009). Diana further illustrates the importance of the social recognition of talent in the artist's identify in talking about Rose,

I had another little girl that I wanted to tell you about. I don't think you could have seen it from the audience, but on the video, she stole the show. She totally dominated every choreography, every word. She just was fantastic. Well, I know she had watched it with her mother because she came in she said, "I loved it and my mother said I can sing like Fred and I'm going to take theater classes and I can dance". She talked the entire time to me about herself and how great she was and she would stand behind me and do the motions. She was so charged from the musical. And it was clear that her mom really bought into it and gets that especially in the school environment, and I have spent many, many conversations trying to convince her, that this child marches to the beat of a different drummer. So at least she is definitely going to keep her in after school activities. (interview, April 24, 2009)

This quote encompasses aspects of an artist's identity including social recognition of Fred's talent from a peer, aspiring to be like that peer, and taking on the artist's identity. During an observation of a rehearsal of Rose's class's song, "Think positive," I made the following remarks, " Rose is awesome, clear enunciation and voice. I am blown away. She has such a talent. Even eye contact was better" (observation notes, May 12, 2009). Rose's mother shared

the idea of drama being a central part of her daughter's story, "So, you know, it's there, it's part of who she is and it's natural for her where so many other things aren't. I think for my daughter the arts and in particular the opportunity to perform, are very vital and very central to who she is" (interview, June 4, 2009). When I asked Ava, Rose's teacher, about her views of Rose's talent and if the child herself recognized her talent, she stated:

I don't think she realizes just how talented she is, but she will. I think she will find it. I think it will take her peers to bring that out. I think parents can tell you a million times you are talented or what not, but I don't think she will get it until her peers really start to notice. (interview, June 29, 2009)

Ava herself recognized the importance of peer recognition in the formula of creating an artist's identity. Later she discussed Betsy's part in reproducing the idea of the artist's identity or being a "drama kid" in her statement,

We've talked about it in conferences and how she loves it, and that's her area. And we had a discussion about a student who had come back for parent night, where kids come back for Alumni night, and one of the girls who was a drama girl. And that in the future, a school that gears more towards that is really going to be important for Rose. (interview, June 29, 2009)

The data concerning artist identity and Fred were by far the most compelling in the study. In general, Fred's talent was well recognized and was often the first thing that was mentioned about him, as when his classroom teacher, Mary, was interviewed and said,

K: Ok. So academic are his strengths and we've also talked about the arts as being a strength which is something else I am interested in. Tell me how you have observed that to be one of Fred's strengths.

M: Fred is a fantastic artist. He is very detailed.

K: You are talking about visual art – now, drawing?

M: Visual. Correct. He is very creative about that. And he is a talented, talented, talented singer. He can hear something once or twice and just sing it like there is no tomorrow, and he is dramatic—whether he is on stage acting or if his singing is dramatic. He’s just got all that going on. He is just fascinating to watch. He fascinates everyone. He’s easy to work with in the sense of you teach it to him and he can do. (interview, May 21, 2009)

From a very early age, Fred’s mother, Wilma, also recognized that Fred was a gifted artist and singer/actor. Wilma discussed that beginning when Fred was a young boy, he gravitated toward music and drawing:

W: He loves to make up stories. Last year the big thing was Webkins stories. I know I have a few laying around to show you. And he’ll do illustrations that are so detailed. He’s such a good artist.

K: When did you first notice that?

W: Young. He learned to read and write very young and he would lay here in the kitchen and pull it all out and lie on his belly on the floor and write stories and illustrate books.

K: So we talked about video games and writing and you noticed that his drawings from a very young age. What about his interest in music and how that has evolved?

W: He loves music, and of course he taught himself guitar here, but the other day he was playing the song “Somewhere Out There” on the piano and I don’t know where he picked that up. I think he wants to learn to play the real guitar. And then there are voice lessons. There is just so much. His talent is definitely music. There are seven intelligences, and his is definitely music. (interview, May 21, 2009)

More talk about Fred being talented from a very young age came as Wilma talked about Fred’s participation in the Christmas program at his former school,

No, I have to say at the Christmas program, he was the only one who did the motions. And he was a baby. The other kids were freaked out that there was an audience there, and they were crying and no one did the motions but Fred stood in the middle and when everyone clapped, he burst out with this “Yea!” From the get-go, I hate to say it, he stole the show at every performance that we did. (interview, May 21, 2009)

The data reflecting peer and teacher recognition of talent as part of the artist's identity were outstanding in the conversations surrounding Fred. Fred's solo in the musical was a very prominent part of the talk around the campus and his success during the performance illustrated as much. As far as recognition of talent in itself and belief in the future, Diana had this to say,

Of all the things I want to share with you today, that this child, Fred, we knew that he was going to be big, and I believe with all my heart that he is going to be a musical prodigy, and we have him in a huge song that was incredibly difficult. He hit some bad notes, for sure, but when you go back and look at the video, he brought that song home. (interview, May 8, 2009)

On recognition from his peers:

What I heard from the children who saw the video yesterday, one after the other, after the other said, "I want to sing like Fred" or "I want a solo but not one that hard!" And another child told me that "My favorite was Fred" and another child said, "I can sing like Fred. My mom says she is going to get me voice lessons and I want to get my hair cut like him." He is a true rock star. He is so admired and exalted and looked at like a talent and the kids know it, they recognize it and they go up to him and say, "How did you do that?" and I say to them, you know what? He was born knowing how to do that, that's who he is. (interview, May 8, 2009)

Diana went on to discuss that Fred's mother shared this belief in Fred's talent and hope for his future. Diana discussed an interaction with Wilma further stating,

D: Yeah, but I think she (Wilma) is completely aware that this is his talent. And we did discuss that after graduation, that he has got to have outside outlets for theater and singing and I recommended a place that is out near where they live. I told her how great I think this child is and that he could be whatever he wants to be –this is it for him!

K: And she was receptive to that?

D: Very receptive. She knows that this is his gift and she is proud of it. (interview, May 8, 2009)

Mary, the classroom teacher, also revealed that she observed Fred's peers' identification of his talent in this excerpt,

K: Back to social. Do his peers recognize that Fred is good in art?

M: Oh yeah, yes. They know.

K: What kinds of things do they say?

M: Oh you know, they compliment him..."Oh, Fred..." One of his classmates that never says anything positive about anybody – and I just wanted to cry when he said it – We'll call him "Ed" said, (we have to say something positive at the end of everyday) We had to say something positive and it is so hard for them and this particular child said "My favorite part of the day was listening to Fred sing that beautiful solo." And it just made my heart pump inside.

K: Wow!

M: Wow – This is a kid who we've been working on saying things that are positive and he might say, "Oh, I liked recess" or, "I liked whatever," but he never had something like that to acknowledge. I just thought that was wonderful. And another particular child said, "That was the most beautiful solo I have ever heard in my life" after he performed at the rehearsal at that school – not the day of the musical...the day of the dress rehearsal. It's heartwarming that they recognize that he is talented.

I had a chance to interview Fred and get his first hand account of what his opinions were of his talent and how he identified himself. In our interview, we discussed his part in the musical and what in which aspects he felt he excelled. The following conversation reveals this.

K: What did your parents say about your performance?

F: They loved my singing.

K: And your friends?

F: Well, they say I am good. "You have great singing."

K: What is the thing you like most about singing?

F: Well, that's a hard question. I can show it off and record it for everyone

K: Do you think you're good at singing?

F: Yes, I am very good.

K: What is something you like about drawing?

F: Oh yeah, drawing, that's good.

K: Are you good at drama, too?

F: Oh yeah, I'm good at acting.

K: When you grow up, if you could be anything in the world? What would you like to do?

F: Be a rock star.

K: I think it is really important for kids with learning differences to be in music and drama. What do you think?

F: I think it is really important because they can be like me. (interview, 6-29-09)

I interpreted this conversation to show that not only did Fred identify as being talented himself, but also that he understood that his parents and his peers shared this belief. Fred also shared that he had aspirations of being a performer one day.

Conclusion

The artist's identity seemed to be a culmination of all of the categories that were borne out of the analysis, as described throughout this chapter. The children in the study came to be defined as a "drama kid" or an "art kid," as a new, socially constructed identity wherein the child was not characterized by a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, or as the sum total of all of the symptoms or struggles experienced because of having a disability. I began to think of the evolution of this new identity as a central phenomenon that I call *Re-imagining the identity of children with autism spectrum disorder*, which unites the above grounded categories and which I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. Briefly, *re-imagining* consists of teachers and parents re-envisioning the future of the child, redefining the child by his or her talents versus his or her deficits, and a reinterpretation of the child's actions and behaviors. "Art kids" and "drama kids"

seemed to be defined by terms associated with the outcomes of children's experiences with the arts, namely the grounded categories of being successful, being social, having an inner dialogue, finding a place in mainstream of society, and being a risk taker. In Chapter five, I will discuss this central phenomenon, using a model to show the causal conditions and intervening variables included in how the arts allow for a *re-imagining* of the identity of a child with autism spectrum disorder.

Chapter 5

Theoretical Model

As I constructed the themes in this study, I began to see that impact of the arts in the lives of children with ASD was centered around new ways in which the participants defined the children's behaviors, accomplishments, and future possibilities. The emergence of the socially constructed label "drama kid" or "art kid" seemed to represent for teachers and parents a novel identity for the children in the study. This new identity was based on a change in ways of thinking about the children, how they acted, how they communicated, how they related to other people, and how they revealed their inner selves. I propose that thinking of the children as "art kids" or "drama kids" was, in essence, a *re-envisioning* of the identity of the children, in the context of their arts experiences, which prompted the teachers, parents, and at times the children themselves, to "story" their lives in terms that were different than their disability, performance in the classroom, or social deficits. During interviews, the participants identified traits of the children as "risk takers," "social beings," "communicators," and "revealing inner life" that they felt were unique to the children in the context of their arts experiences. I began to think of this process as *re-imagining of the identity of the child with autism spectrum disorder*. Re-imagining, by my definition, consists of three fundamentals; re-envisioning the child's future, re-defining the child by his or her talents versus his or her deficits, and re-interpreting the child's actions and behaviors.

Reflecting on how the themes worked together, I began the work of creating a critically examined view of a socially constructed identity for these children. The artist's identity was in direct contrast to the ways in which children with disabilities are typically thought of and described by professionals and teachers. The identity of "art kid" or "drama kid" seemed to exist in the art teacher's, classroom teacher's, and parent's discourse when they talked about the arts being at the heart of what made the children "who they are." As Fred stated in his interview, labeling himself as "singer," and "artist," so too these labels given by the participants became commonplace and accepted as truth by the school community. I began to question how this artist's identity, which by my definition included "art kids," "drama kids," or kids who were both was created, and under what conditions could it exist. Could any child be labeled an "art kid" or "drama kid"? What factors allowed for this re-imagining of the identity of some of the children with ASD? After modeling the relationships in many versions, and getting feedback from two participants in the study, I created a model that captured the creation of the artist's identity.

This chapter is organized into two sections. In the first section, I present the model of *Re-imagining the Identity of the Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder* and a brief interpretation of the model. In the second section, I illustrate how the model represented the individual re-imagination of identity for two different children in the study, as they moved through the context of experiences in the arts and were described by teachers and parents as an "art kid" or a

“drama kid.” The model was meant to illuminate the creation of a new identity based on data from interviews with the teachers, parents and students, as well as my own observations.

The Model

Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined *grounded theory* as the denotation of a “set of well-developed categories (e.g, themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of the relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing or other phenomenon” (p. 22). The working model was constantly compared with the data gathered. The themes and categories derived from the original data informed the final working model. I found I had to rework the model several times as my themes and categories became more refined and after member checking and peer debriefing. I termed the model, *Re-imagining the Identity of the Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder*. The model represents the circumstances that aid and make the arts experiences salient for the child with ASD, what parents and teachers say are the outcomes of the experiences, and how an artist’s identity is then socially constructed and perpetuated by parents and teachers alike.

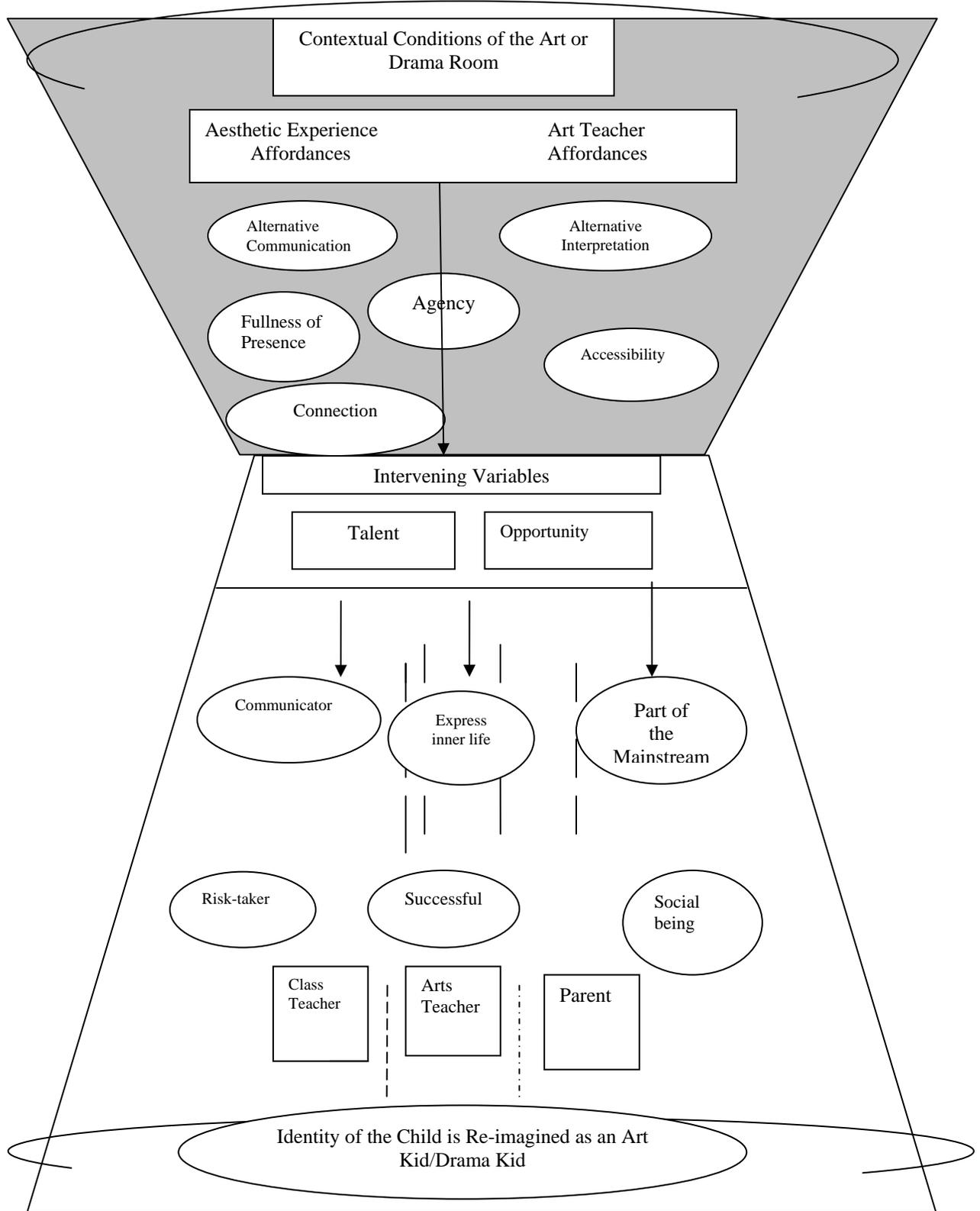


Figure 5.1

Interpretation of the Model

As displayed in Figure 5.1, the central phenomenon of the re-imagining of the child's identity is a process that unites the categories described in Chapter 4. Connections were determined through axial codes. These categories were related to the core phenomenon of re-imagining the identity of the child with autism spectrum disorder and analytically ordered as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The model in Figure 5.1 illustrates the results of this process and is a framework for how re-imagining of identity is exhibited in these groups. The process begins as the child with Autism Spectrum Disorder enters the art or drama class at The Acorn School. The model is pictured as a funnel type figure. The use of the funnel symbol is designed to evoke the idea that the child is moving through different phases of the re-imagining process as he or she passes through the funnel. The top part of the funnel is shaded gray, represents the context of the art or drama class itself, and is labeled Contextual Conditions.

Contextual Conditions represent for me the categories revealed in my analysis that corresponded to conditions that made arts experiences more relevant for the children. On the left side of the top portion of the funnel figure is the label Aesthetic Experience Affordances. Aesthetic experiences have been written about in the literature as highly unique and special experiences that can be difficult to pinpoint, yet everyone knows if they have had them. Jackson (1999) claimed, "The arts offer alternative ways of seeing and understanding the

world around us” (p.56). Drawing on Dewey, Jackson described the impact of aesthetic response, suggesting that it allows us to perceive, be moved and make sense of something which, in real life, we might not understand in the same. A key element to an aesthetic experience is described as, “The suddenness, the surprise, the eventfulness of an aesthetic experience have the power to transfer the mundane and the ordinary into the extraordinary” (Wang, 2005, p91).

Similarly, Bundy (2003) wrote, “The ultimate possibility of an aesthetic response is that it offers people new ways of seeing and understanding the world in which they operate” (p. 172). I came to think it was part and parcel to the specialness of the aesthetic experiences within the art and drama room that allowed for the transformative moments I witnessed in my observations, and that teachers and parents reported in the interviews. Like Dewey talks about *an experience* as an intensified engagement of the self with the world and a dynamic interaction between thinking and feeling, I believe that aesthetic experience affordances provide the same potentialities for the child with ASD. As described in Chapter 4, affordances are defined as, “an action that an individual can potentially perform in their environment.” The contextual conditions I outline in the model are elements that were present in the arts classroom that made those experiences unique and different from everyday classroom or home experiences. I began to conceptualize the affordances of the art/drama classrooms as being distinct and separate; those that are concerned with aesthetic experiences themselves, and those concerning what arts teachers

brought to the experience through designing curriculum, and their thinking and talking about the children.

Under aesthetic experience affordances, I place the original themes of: *the arts allow children to experience joy*, *arts allow an alternative mode of communication*, *arts allow agency*, and *arts challenge ASD symptoms*. I clustered these original themes into new groupings with the labels “*Alternative Communication*,” *Fullness of Presence*, and *Agency*, which are depicted in the ovals in the top portion of the figure.

The oval labeled *alternative communication* refers to the inherent nature of aesthetic experience being non-language based. In Chapter 4, I described in detail the ways that teachers and parents believed that the arts were well suited to their child (or student) because he or she does not have to use oral language as a means of communication, but rather find expression through drawing, music or dramatic arts. I have used the category of *fullness of presence* to describe the way that aesthetic experiences engender emotional and spiritual responses in people that they do not experience in day to day life. I believe that the *arts are fun* theme that I documented in the study represented this fullness of presence with multiple examples of describing kids as being “lit up” and being “really animated.” Many of my observations noted the animation or focus of children when engaged in arts activities that I did not observe in other settings.

The category of *agency* lies in an oval exactly at the center in the top portion of the model figure, halfway in aesthetic experience affordances and

halfway in art teacher affordances. I have placed the affordance of agency here to represent my assertion that agency is both given by the aesthetic experience itself and by the teachers giving agency to the children. Aesthetic experiences are written about as having a “felt freedom” in which persons can embrace the unexpected, distancing them from the taken for granted and routine (Bundy, 2003). This *venturing out* as termed by Wang, allows the children to release the imagination and become different beings. I propose that this “felt freedom” is particularly important to children with special needs, because much of their lives in schools are regulated to following IEP objectives that are dictated by regimented schedules, and because children with autism can tend to be rigid individuals who perform rituals in their daily existence. An aesthetic experience has the power to take them out of that space. As presented earlier, the arts teachers frequently talked about agency being the freedom they gave the children to improvise during drama, as Diana did when she designed improvisational exercises according to the children’s individual interests, and as Ben did in art class, where priority was given to allow children to select and use art materials in their own time and imagination.

Bundy (2003) described *connection*, represented by an oval under aesthetic experience affordances, as being a key component in aesthetic experiences. When she studied aesthetic response during the creation of a play, she defined connection as requiring the participants to make some association between the drama and previous personal experience or understanding. This

definition struck me as powerfully similar to what Diana and Ben described as the ways in which they developed the themes and song choices for the annual musical. This philosophy is further clarified in Bundy's work as she stated clearly that connection is not simply a connection to the work itself, but to the *idea* contained within the work, like the idea of "grief" not being in the song but being evoked by the song itself. In my data, *connection* affordances existed both in the experience itself, because it is a reaction of the children in participating in the making of art or performance, as well as a connection to the idea of the piece or art.

Next to the contextual conditions, in the top part of the model, are the Art Teacher Affordances. These are affordances that I believe the arts teachers bring to the classroom. Namely, these affordances are represented by two ovals labeled *alternative interpretation* and *accessibility*. The *alternative interpretation* theme contains the ideas represented in the categories of the arts challenging autism spectrum disorder symptoms and, conversely, accommodating these same symptoms when appropriate that were described earlier. As Ben stated, when a child is using the same color over and over again, he believed that the child was doing this for a reason, to work through an issue, or express a thought or feeling that might not be readily apparent. The art teachers instinctively challenged the idea that these quirks and behaviors were counterproductive to the experience of making art and instead viewed them as opportunities to learn what was meaningful for the child or asked what the child gained from this

behavior in the art experience itself. *Accessibility* for this model signifies the art teacher's skill in making art accessible for the children who were engaged in the processes. The art teachers were consciously adapting and choosing mediums and stories that they knew would be meaningful for the children and ones with which could be successful. Diana stated as much when talking about reviewing the tape of the musical.

You know the last songs in the musical are so intense and moving. There were two little boys in a much younger class yesterday and we were watching the finale and about halfway through the first verse, the little boy started crying and said, "This song makes me so sad." The song for the record is "Welcome to Wherever You Are." We wanted the kids to internalize the lyrics, "Everyone's a hero, everyone's a star. Don't listen to what other people say. Everyone's a hero in their own way." (interview, May 8, 2009)

Accessibility was reflected in breaking down the making of art into steps that the children could understand, modeling scripts, and repeating them over and over again in order for the child to gain facility with the material or script. Diana reflected on how accessibility can also mean really thinking outside of the box about the students and their individual needs.

Like, one of the things this year was that I knew very early on that our graduating classes were not performers. They are not actors. They are not singers, um, what can they do? Well, they can dance. They love to dance, right from the beginning. The kids loved it, and the audience thought it was hilarious. (interview, May 8, 2009)

In the narrowing of the funnel graphic there is printed the label of *Intervening Variables*, contained in a rectangle that connects the top part of the figure to the bottom part. Intervening variables are that factors that constrained

or enhanced the process of re-imagining the identity of the children through the art experiences. I wanted to understand why not all of children in the art and drama classes that had ASD were subsequently thought of as “drama kids” or “art kids.” Located beneath the rectangle are two smaller rectangles that are labeled *talent* and *opportunity*. From analysis of the data it became clear that having some natural talent in drawing, singing, or acting was a variable in children being more readily imagined as an artist. These were simply the students who stood out more to teachers certainly as being “good” at something. From there, perhaps, more emphasis was put on participation in the arts at home and at The Acorn School. I do not think this talent is the same as talent viewed in typically developing children, but for a child with ASD, talent is seen as even more special as compared to the deficits and challenges that the child faces. I also propose that it is a product of the comparison between how the children “were” in different settings that led their parents and teachers to label them as talented.- “Animated” versus “tuned-out,” “social” versus “withdrawn.”

Opportunity is an intervening variable in that the teachers acknowledged that some children were given opportunities to be “leads” when others were not. Diana recognized that they had taken chances on some kids, not expecting much from them, and were pleasantly surprised when the children excelled. She reflected on this,

And we spent some time talking about another child who has a very shaky voice and who is very afraid of sounds and who was so internal that it was painful, painful, painful to watch this child interact in his world. And this year, out of the blue, he asked for a solo in the finale. And we decided to

let him try- but honestly none of us thought he could or would. But we thought okay, we have backup. We have these two other talented, brilliant, memorization kids who will be able to pick up the slack if he can't do it. So he took the DVD home, plugged it into his iPod and apparently practiced it all the time. And he did do it, and he did do it by himself and our comments to each other afterwards were. "Thank God we did let him do it, and we are not like other schools who would have just said 'no.' We thought about it. Because we thought about our own egos and the fact that he probably couldn't do it. But, we gave him a chance and not only did he do it, but it was another highlight of the musical. And it was very apparent that he was very nervous and he worked through his nerves and came through it all with a glow on his face that I will never forget. (interview, May 8, 2009)

Clearly, some children are considered more talented than others, but I did find out that the teachers are willing to entertain the notion of giving those a chance and examining their roles as gatekeepers of sorts.

Below the intervening variable section, the figure opens up to the lower half of the funnel. Contained in the lower triangle are ovals with such labels as *communicator*, *express inner life*, *part of the mainstream*, *successful*, *risk-taker*, and *social being*. These ovals represent outcomes of the arts experience for children. Through their participation in the arts, with the affordances given by the aesthetic experience itself, and the affordances made by the art teachers in the design of the curriculum and philosophies of curricular programming at The Acorn School, the children were able to "be" in ways that they had not in other contexts. The children were given these new labels by their teachers and parents, challenging the labels given to them by their diagnoses. I will describe these labels more fully as I describe how the models worked for each of two focal students.

Below the oval containing the above descriptors, there is a set of three boxes labeled *teacher*, *arts teacher* and *parents*. Dotted lines separate the boxes and extend down to the opening of the funnel. The dotted lines represent the sharing of information and influence of the art teacher, classroom teacher, and parents on the discourse of each other. This is meant to represent the social nature of the reconstruction of the child's identity. In Dyson's (1995) work on writing children, she quotes Thorne as saying, "define selves through relationships with others" (1987, p. 104). Dyson relates this idea about examining the dynamic social networks and social contexts in which children and their literacy develop. Wortham's (2004) study of social identification in classrooms sheds light on the importance of the discourse and interactions of the individuals' within the classroom context over time. Wortham demonstrated that social categories produced and installed locally in the classroom function to naturalize student's identities and make them seem obvious descriptors for them.

I believe that this was one of the complex socially constructed processes happening at the Acorn School. After many observations by the teacher and parents of the children "being" in different ways and interpreting that behavior as unique and special, the use of "art kid" and "drama kid" became the new identity for the child and was used and reinforced by the school community. Even I adopted the use of this term in my conversations with the research participants. Below the rectangles is the new and final label, the central phenomenon in my model, the *Identity of the Child is Re-imagined as the "Art-Kid" or "Drama Kid,"*

pictured as coming out the funnel representing the new identity of the child after going through the context of the art experiences. The children's behavior and teachers' interpretation of their behavior, gave them new labels that began to shape their "story" or "identity" at the school.

Section Two: Case Studies

I will now present case studies of two participants in the study, detailing how they moved through the processes of being re-imagined as "drama kids" and "art kids." I will share again statements from the data that confirm that the affordances offered in the context of the drama and art rooms mobilized the process, through the intervening variables, and how the children, Fred and Sasha, came to be thought of with their new identities as an "art kid" and a "drama kid."

Re-imagining Sasha

Sasha entered The Acorn School as a very timid girl with very little social or communicative language. Her classroom teacher described her as "shy and quiet, introverted, very willing to please, hard worker, very musically and art driven talented." As detailed in her interview, Sasha's mother, Tommie, first saw the potential of using drawing as *alternative communication* to reassure her daughter about changes in routine (e.g. being dropped off at school) and to prepare her for what was to come in the day. Sasha was described as struggling

socially when she first started school, and I readily observed her being reticent to communicate with peers and with me when I attempted to interact with her at the water table or during snack. However, in the art room, she seemed to come alive in demeanor and in attempts to communicate.

On April 15, 2010, I noted in my observations, a scenario of Sasha walking into art, hugging Ben, and announcing that her friend Clara was absent, and later volunteering in group and imitating utterances from her peers. Ashley, her teacher agreed with this transformation, saying , “In art it was like – during art class she always is just lit up. Always from the very beginning, she has had a special relationship with the art teacher” (interview, May 29, 2009). The quotes also represent the contextual condition of *fullness of presence*. Ben went on to describe Sasha in the following way, “She is often a child who doesn’t interact, or who does not engage, for maybe a long period of time. But she may engage say for a 45 minute period of time at the art table” (interview, May 4, 2009). Both the way that Ben set up the schedule of the day in art and the context of the art experience itself gave Sasha the *agency or felt freedom* to fully engage in art on her own schedule and become engrossed in the project.

Sasha’s engagement is re-interpreted as meaning that she is a child who can and does have deliberate and meaningful actions when doing art. In the context of *Arts Teacher Affordances*, there are several examples of the how these contextual conditions affected Sasha in a way that allowed her identity to be re-imagined. In the category of *alternative interpretation*, an example of ways

in which Sasha's actions or words were given alternative interpretations is revealed in the following statement from Ben.

She spells her name [real identity deleted for confidentiality] and it was written out in capital letters on a tag on her backpack. And we were sitting together and I looked down, and she was saying "Seventy-one, seventy one", no, she said, "seven, one, seven, one". And I was like 7-1, 7-1, and I tried to make a conversation out of that because she was offering words. And I just looked down at that moment and saw that the tag with her name on it was backwards and the letters looked like 7,1,7-1, And I was like wow, this is little girl who is observing and making notes in her mind. And for her to say that out loud, it was important to her as her name, and to interpret it as numbers...that says a lot, doesn't it? (interview, May 4, 2009)

In this example, Ben was re-interpreting this looking at her name upside down as a communicative attempt that to him meant higher level thinking. He was expressing an alternative interpretation of Sasha's words and actions.

Accessibility was definitely a context that Sasha experienced because Ben's philosophy was just to make the environment as welcoming to her needs, and the needs of all children on the spectrum. For example on the day the children painted their bodies, Sasha chose to paint her hands only and was allowed to experience body painting in this way.

The middle of model makes explicit how talent and opportunity can act as filters. Sasha was certainly recognized as a child with talent. Her mother described her daughter's talent, as she looked at a drawing she had made, "I don't think the facial expression is at her age level. I think it is very detailed" (interview, May 13, 2009). The demonstration of opportunity was clear as Sasha is able to use her drawings to expound upon her language skills both at home

and in her classroom. Her classroom teacher talked about it briefly, saying that they used art in the classroom as an outlet for Sasha, “Always drawing pictures and describing what her mom wrote. All sorts of arts and crafts and drawing. We have even more details since the beginning of the year” (interview, May 29, 2009). Clearly, Sasha was given to opportunity to use her talents in the art classroom, at home, and in the homeroom as well.

The fact that Sasha experienced connection with her work was clear in the ways that she used drawings to communicate her personal experiences. In one example is a drawing Sasha made in her Good News book. The Good News book is used at The Acorn School as a communication and language tool between the teacher and the parents about what the child did at school and at home.

The drawing in Appendix F shows an adult followed by a line of children. The adult has a small figure drawn on her belly. There is a row of five children following behind her. A girl with long dark hair stands in front with big sweat drops around her head, communicating the image of anxiety and fear. The children behind her all have large frowns on her face. Sasha’s mother told me that Sasha called this drawing “Line Leader” and from what she could remember of the communication she had had with the teacher, Sasha had been chosen line leader that day, but her closest friend was upset by this choice. The assistant teacher was expecting a child at the time. Although I was never able to engage Sasha to confirm the story about the drawing, it seems clear that this experience

had impacted Sasha enough to move her to express to her mother what had happened in her school day through the drawing.

Given her talent, and opportunities to draw in the classroom and home, Sasha was able to emerge and be characterized by the other labels depicted in the bottom half of the model. She was seen as a *communicator* using her drawings to express her inner life as Ben stated, “I mean I could just see the decisions and the observations although she wasn’t saying a word. That tells me that she is choosing not to use language with other people, out on the playground and such, but that there is rich language going on in her head. I believe it.” (interview, May 13, 2009) Here Ben is re-interpreting her lack of verbal language, because she could draw, and now saw that Sasha had many thoughts and feelings.

The act of using the label of *art kid* as a new identity made it possible for her mother to ask her teacher about the availability of arts classes for the future, knowing that art class is where she shines. She was seen as successful in art, characterized by her mother talking of her calmness and security,” I think she feels she has accomplished something when she’s making it as well as her teacher saying that” (interview, May 13, 2009).

Social being is seen in the connection of Sasha with both Ben and later in the ways in which she was observed chiming in on group projects in the art room. As for her choice of subject matter in her drawings that included her teachers, peers, and family members, for her mother and teachers, this meant that Sasha

wanted human contact and that human relationships were important to her. In my observation notes from April 23, 2009, Sasha asked “What are you making?” to Claire and showed her friends, “Look, this is for my Dad.” The example of looking at the letters in her name as numbers is a good example of how Ben was re-interpreting a behavior that may have been seen as very self focused and non-communicative as being “higher level thinking” and part of her artist temperament. The category of expressing *inner life* was supported by Sasha’s mother’s belief that her daughter has something to say through her art work,

I think she feels she has accomplished something when she’s making it. I think she is confirming this is, you know, how I feel. Otherwise, you cannot see it. By showing a picture, we kinda know what she’s trying to tell. I think it makes her feel, what is the word, confirmed that she’s telling people how she feels. (interview, May 13, 2009)

Finally, Tommie expressed to me her re-envisioning of her daughter’s future: “When she grows up she might have drawings that are more complicated. Probably people would have trouble understanding without more explanation, but I don’t know how much she can explain. But if she likes it and she wants that for her career, than that’s okay too” (interview, May 23, 2009) Ben’s comments also displayed a re-imagining of her future as an artist: “Let’s talk about Sasha. I think we are going to see her as another person who is very into details. I see her as an amazing, like, weaver or painter. Because from the beginning she was so observant. I mean, I could just see the decisions and the observations although she wasn’t saying a word (interview, May 15, 2009). Ben had begun talking about Sasha in a different way, reinterpreting her as being

observant, as being powerfully engaged with the arts in a way that was different from the ways she was described in other contexts.

Re-imagining Fred

If anyone at The Acorn School had the reputation of being a drama kid, it was definitely Fred. Even with his challenging behavior and tendency to want to isolate and play by himself, in the Acorn community, Fred enjoyed almost celebrity status because of his singing ability and his magnetizing performances in the end of the year musical. The examples of his status were uniform between his teachers, parents, and the other students. Like many children with autism spectrum disorder, Fred began to lose the language he had gained around fifteen months. His mother, Wilma, described this in her statement, “But then he stopped responding to his name, he stopped making eye contact, and he lost all the words that he had” (interview, 6-12-09). However, Wilma also related that it was through music that he began to speak again, using the Wee Sing books, saying “He would sit and memorize it and sing from the songbook and that is where his language came back from” (interview, 6-12-09). Music was, for Fred, an *alternative means of communication* to regain his voice.

Fullness of presence was never hard to recognize with Fred. There was a dramatic disconnect from the child observed in the classroom, and the dynamic performer that Fred became when performing. An example of this contrast is when I first observed Fred waiting with his peers in the library. I wrote, “Fred is

playing with a rubber squish ball, while his peers are making a card for the assistant teacher who is not present. Fred seems tuned in to himself, his focus tool is distracting him. Not really tuned in to what's going on" (field notes, June 12, 2009). However, later on that same day, during rehearsal for the musical I noted, "Fred struts onstage and is silly with the microphone. Bet this gets him in trouble sometimes. He steals the show and has a perfect sense of rhythm" (field notes, June 12, 2009).

Drama and role-playing gave Fred a place to be successful, take control, and have *agency*. Losing was a difficult issue for him, as reiterated by his mother, "He struggles with losing, and not getting things the way he wants them. Things not turning out the way he wants them" (interview, June 12, 2009). In the art and drama context, activities were less teacher-directed and there were fewer occasions for these behaviors to crop up for Fred. However, this sense of agency almost became a detriment to Fred. In an informal conversation, Diana shared with me that Fred had become difficult to manage in music rehearsals because he was often telling Josie (a pseudonym), the music teacher, how to direct the musical pieces, and being generally bossy and disrespectful. Diana, and the rest of the arts teachers, were able to remedy this situation by using a contract with Fred to get him to modify his behavior in a way that he was allowed to give suggestions in some areas, but that in others, Josie would make the decisions.

The above scenario is also an example of *alternative interpretation* of situations by the arts teachers. It had been suggested that Fred lose his

prominent role in the musical. However, the arts team decided to reframe the situation, and brainstorm ways in which Fred's leadership qualities could be expressed appropriately, to continue to let his talent shine. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Diana had integrated the interpersonal dynamics of Fred's classroom into a skit about the "protagonists" and "antagonists" for the musical.

I believe examples like this allowed for a deeper *connection* with the material for Fred. *Connection* and *Accessibility* seemed to overlap in some examples of the arts experience affordances for Fred. Fred and his peers were able to connect with the material because it was based on real-life experiences and used the words they expressed themselves. Diana told me that *Accessibility* of all students was very important to her. In allowing Fred to take leadership positions within well-defined boundaries, the drama and music teachers were able to *include* his need to be a leader in a positive way. I noted one of these inclusive role-playing exercises in which Fred was identifying emotions in pictures and what he might say to a bully. I wrote in my observation notes on May 18, 2009, "Diana is always working on such practical situations—real ways to handle problems and not be a victim."

There seemed to be no ambiguity in the idea that Fred was talented. Wilma, Fred's mother, recognized this from the very beginning. She stated, "His talent is definitely music. There are seven intelligences, and his is definitely music" (interview, June 16, 2009). Diana recognized Fred's talent as well, as revealed in her comment in the second interview: "He is a true rock star. He is

so admired and exalted and looked at like a talent and the kids know it. They recognize it and they go up to him and say, 'How did you do that?' and I say to them, 'You know what, he was born knowing how to do that that's who he is'" (interview, May 8, 2009). The recognition of this talent was surely a catalyst in Fred being given the solo in the musical, and being allowed to be the star, as confirmed by Diana: "This child, Fred, we knew that he was going to be big, and I believe with all my heart that he is going to be a musical prodigy and we gave him a huge song that was incredibly difficult". (interview, May 8, 2009). There was confidence from the teachers that Fred would be able to carry off the song and do it very well.

Through the context of the arts experiences and with the benefits of talent and opportunity, Fred was observed by his teachers and parents to have many positive characteristics. Although Fred was not largely nonverbal, like some of the other participants who used art forms rather than words to express themselves, he certainly used art to express his inner life. He created a book about his sister's birthday and communicated with me in his one-on-one interview, "I dedicated this book to my sister Ashley and it has her name in it" (interview, June 29, 2009), reflecting the importance of his family to him. I also believe Fred understood the significance of the lyrics and meaning of the song he sang in the musical:

K: But there was something really special about what you did in the musical

F: I had a solo.

K; And what was your song?

F: "Look Through My Eyes".

K: Tell me about that song.

F: It's really an amazing song.

K: Why is it an amazing song?

F: Lyrics, tempo. The notes were hard to hit.

K: What do you think that song is about?

F: It is probably about learning things and doing an adventure and if you get scared, you have to look through someone's eyes. (interview, June 29, 2009).

I had many examples of the social recognition and feedback Fred received because of his participation in music and drama. Diana shared with me that his peers commented, "That was the most beautiful solo I've ever heard" (interview, May 8, 2009). I observed rehearsals where the children high-fived Fred saying "good job," and another child vowing to practice very hard so that she could have the big part next year. The aspect of social recognition discussed at the end of Chapter 4 is a good example of how Fred was viewed as a social being, as Diana related to me, "And Fred did not get to hear the comments from his peers but did come up to the art and music teacher afterwards and ask if they had anything they wanted to tell him. He had no shortage of confidence!" (interview, May 8, 2009). Success was something that Fred readily identified with his acting and singing, proclaiming, "I'm a very good at acting and singing," and "I am something and I can show it off to everyone" (interview, June 29, 2009). Wilma expressed her sense of Fred's success, "But in the videos ---like every video he just stands out. He is the loudest, the most dramatic, the most enthusiastic..." and again, "That's (drama) where he got all of it, through them giving him a chance to sing and a chance to act on stage" (interview, June 12, 2009). Wilma

also clearly stated her hopes for Fred and re-envisioned his future as she said, “It gives us hope that he is going to continue to thrive in this area as long as we are giving him the opportunities. We are just so proud of him! I wanted to stand up and say ‘that’s my son!’” (June 12, 2009). In all of these ways, Fred was re-imagined as a “drama/music-kid,” by his teacher, his mother, and his peers. Fred said it best when I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, “I wanna be a rock star!”(interview, June 29, 2009).

In the examples above, and as revealed in the coding of the data, both Sasha and Fred were re-imagined as children with an artist’s identity. The social construction of this re-imagining typified new movements in the ‘sociology of childhood’ that “challenge traditional views of children, and recognize their role as skillful social actors with their own perspectives and experiences of the social world” (Connors & Stalker, 2007, p. 20). The children at The Acorn School who moved through the process of participating in arts experiences were re-imagined as successful, social, communicative beings who had a bright future, by their teachers and parents. As defined by Urietta (2007), “Identity is also very much about how people come to understand themselves, how they come to ‘figure’ who they are, through the ‘worlds’ that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds” (p 107).

Chapter 6

Conclusions, Implications, and Future Directions

This focus of this study was on the ways in which the arts impacted the lived experiences of children on the autism spectrum. In the study, I explored the ways in which children's identities were socially constructed by the parents and teachers at the Acorn School, and were re-imagined as "art children" and "drama children." These new identities were constructed through a dynamic process of observing and talking about the children's experiences in the art and drama rooms. The data demonstrated how the teachers and parents actively reinterpreted and reframed their conceptions about the children, as they talked about the children's behaviors, communication skills, and social intentions, within the context of aesthetic or arts experience. Although the experiences did not negate the impact of the disorder itself, the organic nature in which the children were talked about and thought of as a result of their experiences in the arts served to create an alternative identity for them. These alternative identities were not only broader than a list of challenges the children faced in communication or learning domains; they effectively disputed the deficits ascribed to the children before they were identified as being "art kids" or "drama kids." The children still faced all of the challenges that any child with ASD might, but identifying as an "arts kid" allowed them to be re-imagined as children who desired and initiated communicative attempts, who were successful communicators, who took risks in their arts experiences, and who had an active

inner life that could be revealed through their work. The study was guided by the questions:

- What do teachers, parents, and children say are the salient features of arts experiences for children with ASD?
- How can the experiences of children with ASD in the arts be characterized or thematically categorized?
- How do these experiences impact the stories we tell about lived experience of children with ASD?

To answer these questions, I drew on my own observation notes, as well as on the stories told by the teachers and parents. I constructed meanings that emerged from the participants' interviews, field notes, and my analytical memos across the four months of fieldwork. In Chapters 4 and 5, I summarized the findings and discussed how the children's alternative identities were constructed by parents and teachers as they moved through the art experiences. In this chapter, I discuss how the findings speak to each of the research questions. I also explore the theoretical implications of investigating autism and identity, the impact of parent and professional discourse on children with disabilities, and the implications of accessibility to the arts for children with autism spectrum disorder in schools and society at large. Last, I discuss the limitations for the study and I suggest areas of for future research.

Arts experiences for children with autism

To describe what was special about the arts in the lives of children with ASD, I turn to what teachers and parents said about the benefits of arts experiences for these children, and what participants reported children doing during arts experiences. Wang (2001) wrote about “the ability of the aesthetic experience to transform the mundane, the ordinary into the extraordinary” (p. 99). I propose that in the current study, the aesthetic experiences generated from the art and drama classes created a context for the children in the study that allowed them to “be” in ways that were out-of-the ordinary. As a researcher, I observed the children in both the arts classrooms and in the regular educational settings. It was from these experiences that I observed contrasts in their behavior firsthand. When engaged in the arts, the children seemed to be more attentive, more focused, more joyful, and more tuned into their peers. Teachers also made comments about children being “lit up,” “not as fidgety,” and “fully engaged.”

I propose these examples of the *fullness of presence* that I described in Chapter 5 are reflective of out-of the ordinary qualities that exist within the aesthetic experience themselves. Dewey (1958) described “an experience” as an intensified engagement with the self and the world. Likewise, Greene (1995) and Jackson (1998) emphasized the special role the arts have in bringing about awakening and transformative moments. I propose that the differences in attention and engagement that I, the teachers, and the parents detected when the children were engaged in arts experiences were a consequence of the

special nature of these environments to engender an “experience” in the children. Aesthetic experiences are written about in the literature as hard to quantify and something that “you just know when you see it.” However, Nicholson described interactions of this kind as “a particular kind of knowing and feeling which allows us to be both ‘fully present’ and ‘in the moment’” (1999, p. 81). Although the goal of the study was not to identify aesthetic experiences in children with ASD, I suggest that the differences observed in the children may be best characterized in this way. While scholars who write about aesthetic experience rarely write about children with special needs, data from this study would indicate that this population would benefit significantly from, as Bundy (2003) described it, the ultimate possibility of aesthetic response to provide “new ways of seeing and understanding the world” (p.172). I now discuss the affordances of aesthetic experiences and the affordances from art teachers for the children in the study, and the implications of these affordances.

Having an alternative means of communication was very significant for the children in my study. Through the creative process, the children were characterized by their parents and teachers as expressing feelings for others, displaying knowledge of current events, and wrestling with personal issues through their drawings and role-playing. Art forms were tools the children utilized to express themselves, as Sasha did with her drawing of her grandfather, and as Fred did in his role-playing of transitioning to a new school. Eisner (1997) proclaimed that the curriculum is a mind-altering device, and that decisions that

educators make about what is available to children in schools will “shape the minds they come to own” (p. 349). Eisner espoused that having a rich environment of “tools” in a school for the students will ultimately change the way their minds develop. He described it in this way:

If we have difficulty learning something one way, there are other routes that can be taken. These environments also reflect the belief in the importance of providing a wide variety of forms through which their students might represent what they wish to “say.” (p.350)

For Eisner, this was an issue of educational equity. He spoke of the short-sightedness of creating schools that wholly privilege language as the primary mode of communication saying that schools are obligated not just to open doors to all students, but to create the proper educational opportunities for them once they are there. Eisner (1997) summarized this belief in this way,

The forms of representation that an institution emphasizes influence who succeeds and who does not. At issue is the fit between the aptitudes of the students and the possibilities presented by the forms they are to use. When the primary game in town is the denotative use of language and the calculation of number, those whose aptitudes or whose out-of-school experience utilizes such skills are likely to be successful. (p.351)

Having options of alternative tools of communication allows significant opportunities for children with autism, whose language skills may be less well-developed. Although Eisner never wrote specifically about special education, but I can think of no other population that should be our concern when addressing educational equity. If students had opportunities to express themselves in ways other through written and oral language-based activities, like the students in my study, they might be able to express their unique perspectives and

understandings of the worlds that they occupy. The children in my study used alternative means of communication to express their sense of humor, their feelings about family members, and their likes and dislikes. It is important to have alternative means of communication, as Ben stated, “For them to create a record of their decision making that lives outside of them” (interview, May 4, 2009).

Risk-Taking and Agency

Teachers at The Acorn School worked in conjunction with the transformative nature of aesthetic experiences to make the context of the children’s art experiences salient and well-suited for children on the spectrum. The child with ASD’s daily living activities often revolve heavily around predetermined outcomes or skills that are to be attained, all guided by well-meaning professionals trying to meet these goal. However, data from the study contained examples of teachers supporting the idea of children being in control and believing that decision making is an integral part of the art experience. Bundy (2003) echoed this belief saying that a teacher’s ultimate goal should be for the child to have an aesthetic experience. The literature also contains examples of the belief in a felt-freedom and agency as paramount in aesthetic experiences. In his treatise for aesthetic teaching, Wang (2001) wrote, “An aesthetic way of teaching calls for an open and playful attitude toward the uncertain and the unexpected” (p.94). The ways in which the arts teachers, Ben

and Diana, talked about their teaching goals reflected an embracing of the ideals of aesthetic teaching. The data revealed that giving the children ample time and autonomy was important to the art experience from the perspective of the arts teachers, as Ben recalled:

I think it's really cool to see them taking control and making decisions and feeling special. They need to feel all those experiences in life, but they are doing it right there. I want them to be excited, and I want them to experiment. I want them to feel like they have a role in controlling that. (interview, May 4, 2009)

These beliefs are reflected in the affordances of agency and risk-taking explained in Chapter 4. Wang (2001) explained this further:

When students are allowed to play with ambiguity and doubt, they become more willing to take the risk of expanding limits and of accepting the challenge of being on the road to discovery and creation. By embracing the uncertain, the adventurous, the emergent, teaching as an art can be made alive with the joy of surprising encounters, unexpected echoes and alternative possibilities." (p.94)

So too, the children at The Acorn School were allowed to take risks with materials, with songs and with different roles. The art and drama teachers recognized the benefits of taking risks, as Ben stated, "To take the risk and reach beyond what you are used to lays the foundation for any kind of additional socializing. And there is risk-taking in art. If you mess up, you know, those are the risks" (interview, May 4, 2007). Support from the literature and statements made by the arts teachers at the Acorn School confirm the importance of risk-taking and uncertainty in aesthetic experiences.

Accessibility, Alternative Interpretation, and Connection

Data from the study supported the ideals of accessibility and connection in providing arts experiences for children with autism spectrum disorder.

Accessibility was reflected by the arts teachers at the Acorn School designing their curriculum to ensure that the children's background experiences and interests were included in the materials they provided for their classes. They thought extensively about what scripts might challenge the children to push beyond their individual challenges of, for example, tactile defensiveness or difficulty with changes in routine. At the same time, accommodations were made to let children "remain" with a preferred color in art class, or portray a much-loved cartoon character in drama. The idea behind these decisions was that the child was engaging with those materials for a reason. Ben summed up his teaching attitude as follows:

And then you see a child who is maybe using the same color or keeps using the same drawing. I believe that they are aware of that. I just believe that they are, and that and they are creating some sort of a record of their thoughts. I can't imagine that their mind would be blank.
(interview, May 4, 2009)

Bundy (2003) wrote about the concept of connection in aesthetic experience as a connection to the *idea* of the work. She stated, "I conclude that the idea is not contained in the drama but in the response of participants as (or after) they experience it. It requires them to make some association between the drama and previous personal experience or understanding" (p. 177). The teachers at the Acorn School were dedicated to using materials that connected to

the children's prior knowledge, their struggles, and their strengths in order to give them the best chance to engage fully with the arts. This was clearly a goal of Diana's when she used the children's experiences of hurricane Ike, to create the end-of-school-musical, and the choices she made in the inspirational songs of the musical. Because the children had had personal experiences with the messages in the skits and songs, they were more invested in the process of creation with these materials.

Some groups are actively searching of how best to provide arts experiences for people on the spectrum, and all disabilities. The organization, VSA arts (VSA) is an international nonprofit organization founded 35 years ago by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith to create a society where people with disabilities learn through, participate in, and enjoy the arts. At the conclusion of its background investigation, VSA determined that educators might be able to use rubrics to facilitate arts integration and improve our ability to understand the impact of arts integration on student social, academic, cognitive, and artistic skills (Mason & Steedly, 2006). Other authors still see the arts benefit for personal reasons as the most important. Martin (2009) stated, "Art is an interesting crossroads for children with ASD because it is an activity in which strengths (visual learners, sensory interests) and deficits (imagination, need for sensory control) merge." She saw art as a "concrete conduit" that we can use "to help children learn how to use art in a way that is life-enhancing" (p.60).

Re-imagining the identity of the child with autism spectrum disorder

As I analyzed the how the themes worked together, I proposed the idea of the central phenomenon of *re-imagining the identity of the child with autism spectrum disorder*. The re-imagining of the participants as “art-kids” and “drama-kids” were examples of a socially constructed phenomenon of identity formation. Although identity is used frequently in everyday language, currently there is not a clear consensus its meaning (Elliot 2001, Ashmore and Jussim 1997). Erickson (1970) used the term to describe an individual's comprehension of him or herself as “a sense of sameness and continuity as an individual.” Identity is also classified as having a social component, in which individuals have multiple, changing identities that are expressed in specific, though fluid, social relationships (Bruner, 1990; Mishler, 1999). Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) defined social identity as the groups that inform their members as to who they are and how they should behave. The literature on social identity examines how people develop a sense of membership and belonging in certain groups. One way that this occurs is through people representing themselves through the voices or the worlds of others, in the discourses both of specific individuals and communities (Holquist, 1981; Holland et al., 1998). This is certainly true in classrooms, where children’s identities are constantly shifting in changing social networks. In my study, the children belonged to a special group labeled as “drama kids” or “art kids”, created in the discourses of parents and teachers. Wortham’s (2006) study exemplifies this phenomenon of socially constructed

identity, in which he wrote about a classroom in which a group of male, African-American students who were assigned the identity of “beasts,” and “outcasts”. These students, who entered the classroom at the beginning of the school year as good students, were later positioned as ‘unpromising boys’ through the evolution of the discursive nature of the classroom discourse and remained apart from classroom discussions in a marginalized position. Like the “unpromising boys”, the nature of discourse surrounding the research participants in this dissertation, had a powerful effect on who the children became in the eyes of their teacher and their classmates. Likewise, through the “storying” of the children in my study as “art kids” and “drama kids,” the teachers and parents at the Acorn School effected a new identity for the children, defining them in terms of their powerful encounters with the arts.

Limitations

The hypotheses and implications of this research were conceptualized within one school, six teachers, four students, and parent participants. As such, the generalizability of the study is limited in scope. I have attempted to provide sufficient description of the individual students, the context of the arts classrooms, and details surrounding identity transformation, to ensure that the reader can make decisions about the comparability of this setting, and these experiences, to other settings.

The environment of the Acorn School is a unique, even ideal, private school environment, with the benefits of a highly credentialed staff, low teacher-to-student ratio, and exceptional parent involvement. All of the participants in my study were students in the upper-middle to upper class socio-economic status. Readers may question how credible it is to generalize my findings to the public school environments, and to children of more varied social class. However, the affordances of the arts experiences and the affordances provided by the arts teachers described here are certainly not specific to the private school setting, and could be duplicated in the public school setting. My study has the benefit of children of a variety of ethnicities participating, which may improve generalizability. Future studies could investigate the impact of arts experiences in public school setting with children of varied socio-economic backgrounds.

Another potential limitation of my research was the use of only four children as case studies. My goal was to provide the reader with the depth and detail about the “lived reality” of the participants in this specific context. Case study research cannot make conclusions about cause-and-effect relationships, and cannot be representative of the general group or population. Other studies may utilize more participants to see if the arts impact the lives of the children in similar ways.

A final limitation of my study was the time length I had to collect my data. I theorized that the re-imagination of the identity of the children would powerfully

impact the stories that were told about these children. Two of the children have since transitioned to other school environments. It would have lent increased credibility to my study if I could have investigated if, or how these new, “arts” identities impacted the children in the ways that I theorized that they would. Although, the time period was sufficient to develop, refine, and support working hypotheses, additional time, following the same children, would have provided the opportunity to trace changes and determine the consequences of the re-imagined identity both at the Acorn School and beyond.

Implications of Arts Experiences for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

My study revealed that that children with ASD can and do have powerful encounters with the arts that impact them in meaningful ways. Implications of these findings would be in the continued research for the development of curriculum for children with autism spectrum disorder. My results showed that children benefit from teachers allowing ample time and a plethora of choices for students during arts activities, and from teachers more concerned with the *process of creation versus the product of the experience*. Arts teachers should choose subject matter of skits and visual arts that are within the child’s personal experiences. The teachers at the Acorn School would advise teachers to allow for some non-traditional or off-target behaviors such as messing up work, making messes, or staying with a color. These behaviors may indicate that the child is dealing with something that is meaningful to them and they must be able to

process it. Some researchers have attempted to quantify the skills inherent in making art. VSA arts (VSA), measured the child's art performance in the areas of creativity, craftsmanship, following directions and communication of message (Mason & Steedly, 2006). Their studies also included guidelines for instructing student with disabilities: suggestions for parsing of material, thoughtful grouping of students, frequent feedback, and priority seating. Others take a broader lens saying that the important learning outcomes for this population would be concerned with the imagination, as Eisner (2002) stated in his article, *The kind of schools we need*. He stated, "We need to invent curriculum activities that afford youngsters the ability to use their imaginations and engage in wonder" (p.16). The latter sentiment seems to be more closely aligned with what the arts teachers at the Acorn School would recommend for this population. Greene (1995) reiterated this idea saying,

I think I want mostly to argue for a centrality of imagination because of its power to enable persons to reach towards alternatives, to reach beyond: and I want to argue for the arts because of the ways in which they open windows in experience, provide moments of freedom of presence, and enable us to break with terrible moments of apathy and numbness." (p.379)

The arts curriculum at the Acorn School developed more organically, without specific learning goals. Ben summed it up simply in this way:

We do generally go by the guidelines as to what children should be learning at each level. The art program has been developed over years. Different art terms at each level. Like by 5th grade, children should know this, by kindergarten...But my whole deal is for children to get to love materials, and to be excited by new combinations, the fact that you can make something out of anything. (interview, May 4, 2009)

Perhaps the best arguments for including the arts in an autistic child's schooling are summed up in the words of a mother, writing about her daughter, from the book, The Girl Who Spoke in Pictures, by Eileen Miller (2008). She writes,

Since autism affects people in many different ways, it is difficult to apply an absolute and generalize. What may work for some may not work for another, and yet the characteristics for autism remain the same. In order to understand the keys to open up learning for Kim, she had to show us what having autism mean for her. It was up to us to observe, to analyze, to search for the answers as she defined for us the rules she needed to live by. In other words, she became the teacher (p. 101).

At a very basic level it seems that arts experiences are very beneficial for children on the spectrum and should be made available to them as a tool and potentially life-altering experience. The children in the current study were fortunate to attend an institution like the Acorn School that values arts experiences for the children they serve. However, many special needs students in public institutions are not afforded the same opportunities. Public school administrators should consider providing arts experiences for their special needs population, and look to new research being conducted on how to design and conduct programs for this population.

Implications of identity studies for research with Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

There is currently a scarcity of studies that examine autism and identity. Deficit driven literature suggests that because persons with autism have difficulty

with social interaction and communication, that there is an “identity hunger” in these individuals (Sacks, 1995). However, Donna Williams, a woman with high functioning autism, wrote an in depth description of her struggles to fashion her own identity in her book entitled, *Somebody, Somewhere*. The current dissertation and the supporting research outlined in the above paragraphs indicate that issues of identity matter deeply to persons with autism.

Thomas (1998) reported that parental interpretation of the meaning of impairment was crucial to the development of their child's identity. Parents who sought to challenge negative assumptions about impairment and barriers to Accessibility encouraged more positive self-perceptions for their children than those who emphasized their child's limitations. Thomas (1998) found that for the child this either meant “positive self-esteem and acceptance or self-hatred and embarrassment” (p. 31).

In examining professional discourses about children with disabilities, Kelly (2005) found that professionals who gave parents positive messages about their children helped the parents to reframe their own views of parenting a child with impairments.

Professionals need to consider alternatives to the negativity of current discursive professional practice that focuses on limitations of impairment. They should reflect on their assumptions, prejudices and attitudes towards impairment and consider the powerful impact of their view of disabled childhood on their daily practice.” (p.272)

Echoing these findings, Avdi's (2005) study used discourse analysis to look how problems and identities in therapy are created during therapeutic sessions (p. 507).

The current analysis of a systemic therapy, with a family whose child has been diagnosed as autistic, suggests that an important aspect in clinical work with families with a member with a psychiatric diagnosis lies in decentring the dominant, pathology maintaining accounts, and allowing for a wider range of less problematic narratives to emerge (p.493).

Brown's (2005) investigation of the appropriateness of summer school interventions for students revealed that teacher-student relationships can also play a powerful role in the silencing or perpetuation of deficit driven discourses. In the study, the "unsanctioned actions" (Bahktin, 1984b) of a ten-year old boy diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder were interpreted by his teachers as a result of his diagnostic label, serving to keep him cast as a student whose actions were seen as disruptive and counter-productive to the goals of the summer program. Brown wrote, "Ms. Klein's statements demonstrate how Steven's teachers read his actions through the authoritative discourse of schooling, which creates a situation in which any action or statement made by Steven carries the mark of his ADD" (2005, p.116). As Bahktin (1984a) affirmed, Steven became "clothed" by the language of his disorder in the discourses of his teacher. Brown explained:

These actions and the identity markers that Steven's teachers assigned him, which appear in the above interviews, seemed to prevent Steven's teachers from perceiving actions that fell outside their expectations as anything other than misbehaving due to his ADD (p.121).

Each of these studies would seem to indicate that the kind of discourse that professionals and parents use with children with autism and other disabilities have powerful impact on how these children understand their own disabilities and identities. Connors and Stalker's (2006) study of disabled children demonstrated how the children lacked positive language with which to discuss ways in which they experienced disability. However, the study suggested that if they had had more positive language with which to discuss differences, they might have been able to give a more complete and accurate picture of their lived experience of disability.

The talk that surrounds children with autism has powerful effects on how they come to understand their own abilities and limitations. In this dissertation, the label of ASD is used liberally, in framing the literature review, in identifying the participants, in parents' discussions about their children's struggles in daily living, and in teachers' explanations for their classroom practices. Despite the fact that the children in my study were *re-imagined* with a new label of "drama-kid" or "art-kid," the label of "a child with ASD" was a fixed reference point used by teachers, parents, and myself as a researcher to compare who the children were and who they might become as a result of arts experiences. Implications of the power in the use of labels and labeling cannot be ignored. Further implications of my study indicate that professionals and parents must communicate with children about their diagnoses and listen to what children have to say about their individual experiences. Parents and professionals should seek

to involve students in planning services and in getting feedback from the children themselves. The research would indicate that professionals need to examine critically how they participate in the pathologizing of children with autism by the continued use of medical model terminology. As current studies point to, reframing discourse to emphasize, for example, children's "behaviors" (i.e. not sleeping, preferring certain toys) as just behaviors, rather than as "symptoms", allows the possibility for change, and therefore, the possibility of hope.

Talking to and with children with disabilities would aid in the general understanding of the complexities of the lived experience of someone with autism. Understanding these experiences would aid parents and professionals in determining how best to meet the personal and rehabilitative needs of these children, and planning services for these children. For some children with autism, experiences with the arts may be an ideal venue within which to re-frame dialogue about children's ways of being, and re-imagine what these individuals can accomplish.

Need for further research: The lived-experience of the child with disabilities

The social model of disability contests discourses that view disabilities as deviant, and seeks to tear down barriers and allow people to participate in society on equal terms (Linton, 1998). Disability theory actively works against traditional medical perspectives that focus on individual limitations of impairment, and instead embraces a social model of disability that emphasizes the disabling

impact of oppressive barriers in society on the lives of disabled individuals (Campbell & Oliver, 1996; Dowling & Dolan, 2001). Focusing on children's experiences of disability is an area of future research that must be investigated in theorizing childhood disability. Connors and Stalker (2007), citing Thomas (2001), suggested that "acknowledging personal experiences of living with impairment and disability is politically unifying because it enable a full range of disability experiences to be recognized" (p. 21). Priestly (1999) stated that children are capable social players who actively resist pathologizing discourses to create their own identities. Future studies should look to telling children's stories of disability *in their own words*. Future studies might investigate personal accounts of arts experiences in relation to their potential power in resisting the dominant discourses of disability for children and young adults with autism. Barriers need to be overcome for access to society to include this growing population in mainstream activities, and the joy that the arts can provide to all human beings.

Appendix A

Teacher Consent Form:

Title: The Arts in the Education and Development of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder
IRB PROTOCOL # 2009-01-0071
Conducted By:

Karen W. Dickerson
Doctoral Student
The University of Texas at Austin
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
281-381-9922

Faculty Sponsor(s):
Diane Schallert , Professor, PhD
Department of Educational Psychology
512-471-0092
dschallert@mail.utexas.edu

Stuart Reifel, Professor, EDD
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
512-232-2289.
sr10@mail.utexas.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent for your records.

The purpose of this study is to describe the interaction between the arts and children with autism spectrum disorder. Your responses to the questions through the interview will help me better understand the ways in which the arts potentially benefit students in this population

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:

Participate in 3 formal interviews as well as allow my presence in your classroom up to 6 hours per week. **Interviews will be audio-taped with your permission.**

Total estimated time to participate in study is three months.

Risks of being in the study

- There are minimal risks associated with your participation in the study. That risk is loss of confidentiality. **Confidentiality will be protected by using a pseudonym to protect your identity and all transcripts and audiotapes will be kept in a locked cabinet at all times.** If you wish to discuss the information above or any other risks you may experience, you may ask questions now or call the Principal Investigator listed on the front page of this form.

Benefits of being in the study include contributing to the new theory regarding the interaction between experiences of children with autism spectrum disorder and the arts.

Compensation: There is no compensation for your participation in this study

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:

The records of this study will be stored securely and kept private. Authorized person from the University of Texas at Austin, Members of the Institutional Review Board, have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a participant. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have any questions about the study please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation call the researchers conducting the study. Their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are at the top of this page. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research please contact Jody Jensen, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at (512) 232-2685 or the Office of Research Support at (512) 471-8871 or email: orssc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and have sufficient information to make a decision about participating in this study. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix B

A. Parental Consent Form for the Participation of Children: Selected Elements

CONSENT FORM

The Arts in the Education and Development of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

IRB PROTOCOL # 2009-01-0071

Conducted By:

Karen W. Dickerson
Doctoral Student
The University of Texas at Austin
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
281-381-9922

Faculty Sponsor(s):
Diane Schallert , Professor, PhD
Department of Educational Psychology
512-471-0092
dschallert@mail.utexas.edu

Stuart Reifel, Professor, EDD
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
512-232-2289.
sr10@mail.utexas.edu

You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research study. This form provides you with information about the study. The person in charge of this research will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this consent for your records.

The purpose of this study is to understand the interaction between participation in the arts and the education and development of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask your child to do the following things:

- Be observed participating in art and drama activities at The Parish School and outside of school (if applicable).
- Be interviewed about his/her experiences participating in art and dram activities at the Parish School and outside of school (if applicable).

Total estimated time: over the course of three months I will interviewing your child approximately 2 times and observing them approximately 8-10 times during school hours. The observations will take place during their regularly scheduled school day and will not interfere with their normal routine.

Benefits of being in the study:

Benefits of being in the study will include contributing to the new theory regarding the interaction between experiences of children with autism spectrum disorder and the arts.

Risks of being in the study:

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in the study. That risk is loss of confidentiality. Your confidentiality will be protected by using a pseudonym to protect yours and your child's identity. All data records (transcripts, audiotapes) will be kept in a locked cabinet at all times. **No videotapes will be created by the principle investigator. Videotapes of your child participating in drama or art activities that are already in existence and available school wide (i.e Parish School Musical) may be viewed and analyzed.** If you wish to discuss the information above or any other risks you may experience, you may ask questions now or call the Principal Investigator.

Compensation:

- There is no compensation provided for your participation in this study.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:

- The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study.
- Participants will be given a choice of day(s) and time (s) of the interviews(s).
- If the interview takes place outside the school, participants will be given a twenty-four hour notice prior to a researcher's arrival in their homes or other non-public places where they will be interviewed or observed. Researchers agree to not show up unannounced at any time.
- Be aware that under state regulations, the law requires that any signs of child abuse will be reported to relevant agencies such as Child Protective Services or the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

The **records** of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from The University of Texas at Austin, members of the Institutional Review Board, and (study sponsors, if any) have the legal right to review your child's research records and will protect the **confidentiality** of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications will exclude any information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have any questions about the study please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your child's participation call the researchers conducting the study. Their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are at the top of this page. If you have questions about your child's rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research please contact **Jody Jensen, Ph.D., Chair, The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects** at (512) 232-2685 or the Office of Research Support at (512) 471-8871.or email: orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

You may keep the copy of this consent form.

You are making a decision about allowing your son/daughter to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow him or her to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your son/daughter to participate in the study, simply tell me. You may discontinue his or her participation at any time.

Printed Name of (son/daughter/)

Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Date

Signature of Investigator: Karen Dickerson

Date

Appendix C

ASSENT FORM

The Arts in the Education and Development of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

I agree to be in a study about participation of kids in art and drama classes. This study was explained to my (mother/father) and (she/he/they) said that I could be in it. The only people who will know about what I say and do in the study will be the people in charge of the study, my parents and teachers.

In this study, I will be asked to talk about my participation in art and drama activities at my school and after school. I will be asked to talk about what I like about these activities, how I feel when participating and what I think these activities help me to do. Writing my name on this page means that the page was read to me and that I agree to be in the study. I know what will happen to me. If I decide to quit the study, all I have to do is tell the person in charge.

Child's Signature

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix D

Initial Teacher Interview Protocol (February 2009)

In this interview I would like to talk to you about your experiences teaching arts classes to selected students at The Acorn School. As you know, I am interested in describing the interaction between children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their experiences participating in the arts. I will be asking you questions about your perceptions and opinions of these kinds of experiences for children with ASD, as well as specific impressions about children included in the case study.

This is a voluntary interview. You can refuse to answer any question, or stop the interview at any time. You can decide not to participate further with no negative consequences. Everything you say is confidential and no one other than me will be able to connect your words to you. If you have any questions you can ask me at anytime-now or during the interview.

I would like to record our conversation. The record will be kept with a pseudonym rather than your name so no one knows who you are. May I begin taping?

First of all, I would like to know more about how you came to be teaching here at the Acorn School?

Tell me about your teacher education and your teaching experience to this point.

Tell me about what you feel is most beneficially about the subject you teach?

Tell me about the impact of your work/classes on the children of The Acorn School in general.

What (if any) do you think are the benefits of art or drama classes on children with ASD?

What behaviors, reactions, skills have you observed when children with ASD participate in the arts?

Speaking specifically of _____ (child in case study), how and when do you work with this child.

Describe _____'s participation in _____ (art or drama) classes.

What kinds of things does _____ enjoy doing in your class(es)?

What kinds of things does _____ appear to not enjoy in your class(es)?

What kinds of things does _____ do in your class?

What kinds of activities does _____ succeed in or not succeed in?

Why do you think he/she is successful or not successful in those situations?

Is there a particular instance or experience that _____ has had in your class that stands out in your mind? Describe it for me?

Appendix E

Initial Parent Interview Protocol (February 2009)

In this interview I would like to talk to you about your experiences of your child in his or her participation in the arts programs at The Acorn School, in your home, or outside the school as an extra-curricular activity. As you know, I am interested in describing the interaction between children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their experiences participating in the arts. I will be asking you questions about your perceptions and opinions of these kinds of experiences for your child.

This is a voluntary interview. You can refuse to answer any question, or stop the interview at any time. You can decide not to participate further with no negative consequences. Everything you say is confidential and no one other than me will be able to connect your words to you. If you have any questions you can ask me at anytime-now or during the interview.

I would like to record our conversation. The record will be kept with a pseudonym rather than your name so no one knows who you are. May I begin taping?

First of all, tell me a little bit about your child? Interests, dislikes, likes, favorite activities, etc.?

How did you come to The Acorn School?

What are some things that your child is really good at? Describe how he/she participates in those activities?

How do you when _____ is really enjoying an activity or when an activity is a favorite of him/her?

What are some things that your child finds challenging? Why do you think this experience is challenging for him/her?

Tell me about some of the activities your child enjoys at home or outside of the school setting?

What things help your child be successful at certain activities? What are some things that are not helpful for your child?

Tell me about the arts programs here at TPS? Have you observed your child in any of these programs? What are your impressions of your child's participation of these experiences?

Do you think your child enjoys the arts? Why or why not? How would you describe how your child interacts with the arts?

What is different about how your child experiences in the arts? Does he/she exhibit these behaviors outside of the school setting?

Are arts experiences a part of your home life? Describe these experiences please.

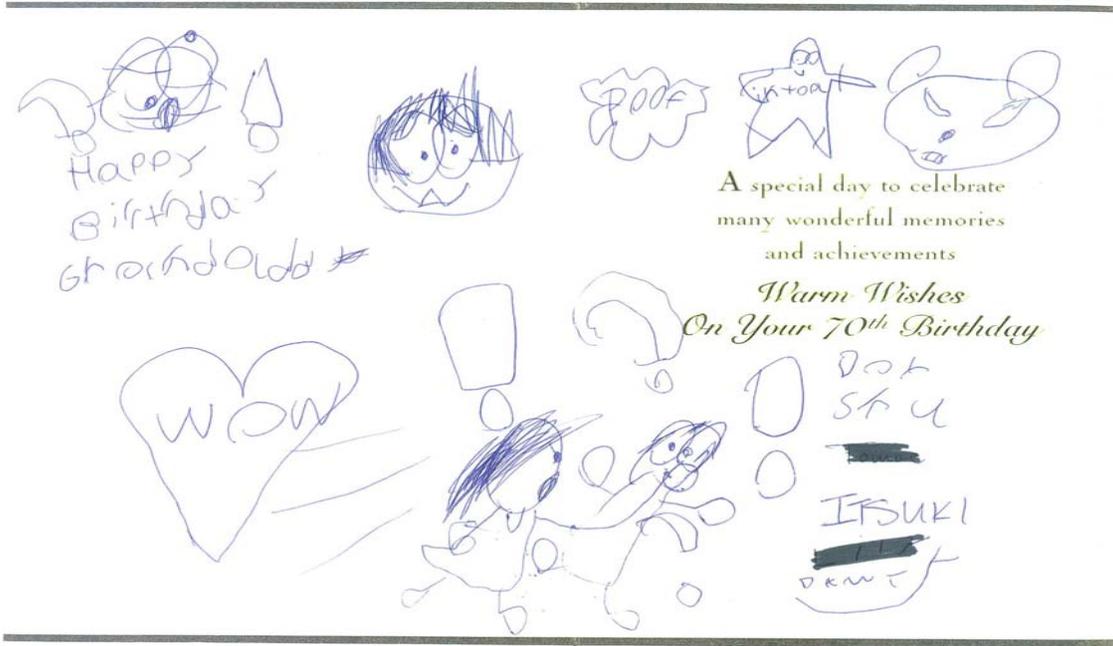
Appendix F

“Line Leader”



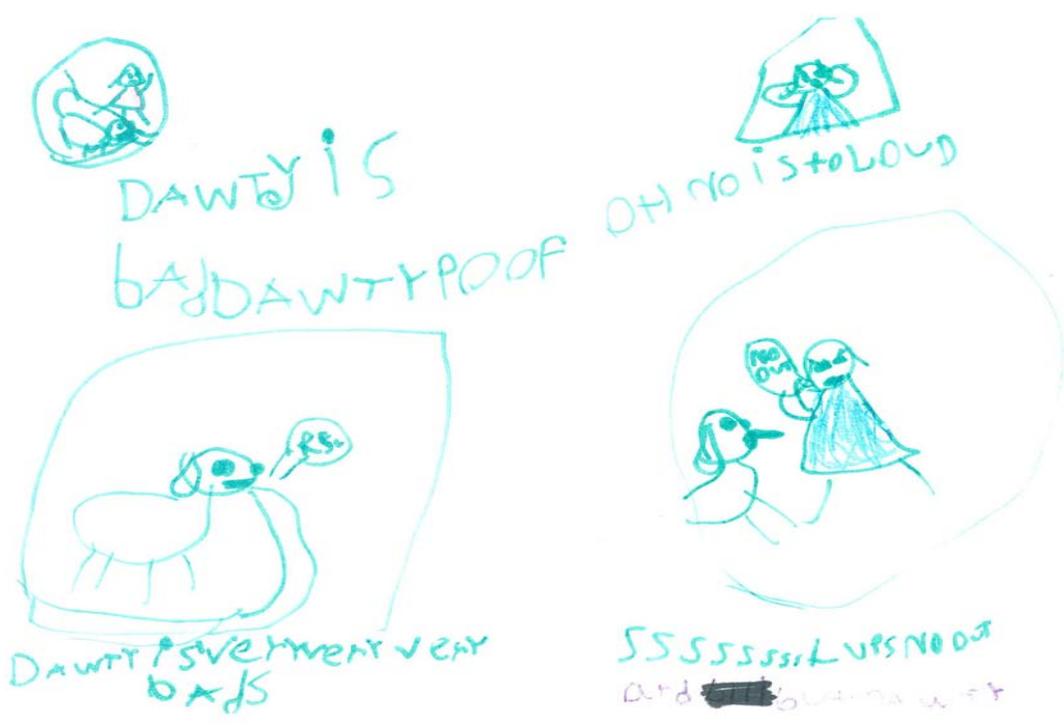
Appendix G

"Grandpa's Card"



Appendix H

“Bad Doggie!”



References

- Abberly, P. (1987). The concept of oppression and the development of a social theory of disability. *Handicap and Society*, 2,5-19.
- Alder, N.I. (2002). Interpretations of the meaning of care: Creating caring relationships in urban middle school classrooms. *Urban Education*, 37, 241-266.
- Alder, N. I., & Mouton, M. (1998). Interpretations of the meaning of care: Creating caring relationships in a middle school classroom. *Research in Middle Level Education Quarterly*, 21, 15-32.
- Allington R. L., Johnston, P. H., & Day, J.P. (2002). Exemplary fourth-grade teachers. *Language Arts*, 79, 462–466.
- American Psychiatric Association (1994). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental health disorders (4th ed). Washington DC: Author.
- Arabright, R. (2005) Connecting with music. *General Music Today* 18(2), pp.5-6.
- Ashmore R, J. L. (1997) *Self and Identity: Fundamental Issues*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Avdi, E. (2005). Negotiating a pathological identity in the clinical dialogue: Discourse analysis in a family therapy. *Psychology and Psychotherapy*. 78, 493-511.
- Bagatell, N. (2007). Orchestrating voices: autism, identity, and the power of discourse. *Disability & Society*. 22, 413-436.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1984a) *Problems of Doestoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. C Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1984b) *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press
- Beardsely, M. (1982). The Aesthetic Point of View. Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell University Press.
- Beesley, M. (1993) Spiritual education in schools, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 11, 22–28.

- Bogden, R., Bilken, S (1992), *Qualitative Research for Education*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA.
- Brantlinger, E. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children*. 72, 195-205.
- Brown, C. (2005). Creating Opportunities. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Education*. 6, 112-127.
- Bruner, Jerome. 1990. *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Bundy, P. (2003). Aesthetic Engagement in the Drama Process. *Research in Drama Education*. 6, 171-181.
- Bunt, L. (1994) *Music Therapy: an art beyond words*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell, J. & Oliver, (1996). *Disability Politics: understanding our past, changing our future*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2007b). *Autism overview*. Retrieved March 10, 2007, from www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/overview.
- Cooper, B., & Widdows, N. (2004). *Knowing yourself, knowing others: Activities that teach social skills* (p. vi). Norwalk, CT: Instant Help Press.
- Cowart, B., Saylor, C., Dingle, A., Mainor, M. (2004). Social skills and recreational practices of children with and without disabilities. *North American Journal of Psychology*. 6, 27-42.
- Connors, C. & Stalker, K. (2007). Children's experiences of disability: pointers to a social model of disability. *Disability & Society*. 22 ,19-33.
- Csikszentmihalyi, I. M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York. Harper Perennial.
- De la Cruz, R. (2005). *The effects of creative drama on the social and oral language skills of children with learning disabilities*. Doctoral dissertation. Illinois State University.
- Dewey, J. (1934/1958) *Art as Experience* (New York. Caparicorni Books.
- Dey, I (1993). *Qualitative Analysis: A user friendly guide*. London, England. Routlage.

- Donahue, M. & Pearl, R. (2003) Studying Social Development and Learning *Disabilities* is Not for the Faint-Hearted: Comments on the Risk/Resilience Framework. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 18, 90-93.
- Dowling, M. & Dolan, L. (2001) Families with children with disabilities-inequalities and the social model. *Disability & Society* .12, 21-35.
- DuPont, S. (1992). The effectiveness of creative drama as an instructional strategy to enhance the reading comprehension skills of fifth-grade remedial readers. *Reading Research and Instruction*. 31,41-52.
- Dyson, A. (1995). Writing Children: Reinventing the Development of Childhood Literacy. *Written Communication*. 12, 4-65.
- Edwards, C. & Mercer, E. (1995). *The guided construction of knowledge: Talk amongst teachers and learners*. Cleveland: OH Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Elliot, A (2001). *Concepts of the Self*. Blackwell Publishers, Malden.
- Eisner, E. (1997). Cognition and Representation. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 78, 349-355.
- Eisner, E. (2002). The kind of schools we need. *Phi Delta Kappan*. 83, 576-563.
- Epp, K. (2008). Outcome-based evaluation of a social skills program using art therapy and group therapy for children on the autism spectrum. *Children and Schools*. 30, 27-36.
- Erikson, E.H. (1970). Reflections on the dissent of contemporary youth. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 51, 11-22.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. Wittrock (Ed.) *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 3, 119-1616. New York. MacMillan.
- Everett, J, Steffert, B, & Smythe, I. (1999). An eye for the unusual: creative thinking in dyslexics. *Dyslexia*.5, 28-46.
- Feagin, J., Orum, A., & Sjoberg, G. (Eds.). (1991). *A case for case study*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

- Fisher, N. , Happe, F., & Dunn, J. (2005). The relationship between vocabulary, grammar, and false belief task performance in children with autistic spectrum disorder and children with moderate learning difficulties. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*. 46, 409-419.
- Frombonne E.(2001). Is there an epidemic of autism? *Pediatrics*. 107,.411-413.
- Furniss, G. J. (2007).Teaching artists with autism. *School Arts*. 106, 6-6.
- Furniss, G.J. (2008). Designing art lessons for children with asperger syndrome. *School Arts*. 107 (8) 15-20.
- Gair, S. B. (1980). Writing the arts into individualized education programs. *Art Education*. 8,8-11.
- Gargiulo, R. M. (2003). *Special education in contemporary society*. Beimont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Gee. C. B. (2007). Valuing the arts on their own terms. *Art Education Policy Review*. 108, 3-12.
- Germain, C. (2008). Art for special-needs students. *Arts & Activities*.143, 55-71.
- Ghanizadeh, A., Alishahi, M., Ashkani, H. (2009). Helping Families for Caring Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. *Archives of Iranian Medicine*. 12, 478-482.
- Glasner, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Goldstein, L. (2002). *Reclaiming caring in teaching*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Goldstein, L.S. (2000). Ethical dilemmas in designing collaborative research: Lessons learned the hard way. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.13, 517-530.
- Goldstein, L. (1999). The relational zone: The role of caring relationships in the co-construction of mind. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36, 647-673. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16, 861-872.
- Goodman, J. Unpublished Ed. D., Dissertation, 1990. George Peabody College for Teachers, Vanderbilt University., Nashville.

- Grainger, T. & Kendall-Seatter (2003). Drama and spirituality: reflective concerns. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*. 8, 25-32.
- Grandin, T. (1996). Brief report: Response to National Institutes of Health Report. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 26, 185–187.
- Graue, M. E. & Walsh, D. J. (1998). *Studying children in context: theories, methods and ethics*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Greene, M. (1993). Diversity and Accessibility: Toward a curriculum for human beings. *Teachers College Record*. 95, 211-221.
- Greene, M. (1995). Art and Imagination. *Phi Delta Kappan* 76 (5). Pp. 378-383.
- Greene, M. (2001). *Variations on a Blue Guitar*. The Lincoln Center Lectures on Aesthetic Education. Teachers College Press
- Haberman, M. (1995) Selecting 'star' teachers for children and youth in urban poverty, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76, 777–782. Haberman, M. (1991). The pedagogy of poverty versus good teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 73, 290–294.
- Hallam, S. & Price, J. (1998). Can the use of background music improve the behaviour and academic performance of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties? *British Journal of Special Education*. 25 (2). pp. 88-91.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: SUNY press
- Hawkins, B (2002) Children's drawing, self-expression, identity and imagination. *JADE*. 22, 209-219.
- Hesmondhalgh, M. (2010). Autism at Work. *Occupational Health*. 62,
- Hilt, R. J., & Metz, W. P. (2008). Autistic spectrum disorders. *eMedicine*.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D. & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Holquist, M. (Ed.) (1981) *The dialogical imagination: four essays by M. M. Bahktin* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.) (Austin, TX, University of Texas Press).

- Hogg, M. A., Terry, D. J., & White, K. M. (1995). A tale of two theories: A critical comparison of identity theory with social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 58, 255-269.
- Jackson, A. (1999). The centrality of the aesthetic in educational theater. NJ Drama Australia Journal. Vol 23 (2). P 51-64.
- Johnson, C.M. & Memmot, J. (2006). Examination of relationships between participation in school music programs of differing quality and standardized test results. *Journal of Research in Music Education*. 54, 293-307.
- Julian, S. (2004). *The efficacy of art therapy based social skills training in the treatment of children with Asperger's syndrome*. Unpublished master's thesis, Albertus Magnus College.
- Kariuki, P. & Honeycutt, C. (1998, November). *An investigation on the effects of music on two emotionally-disturbed students writing motivation and writing skills*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Mid-South Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Kasari, C., Sigman, M., Munday, P. & Yirmiya, N. (1990) Affective sharing in the context of joint attention interactions of normal, autistic, and mentally retarded children. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.20, 87-100.
- Kelly, B. (2005). 'Chocolate...makes you autism': Impairment, disability, and childhood identities. *Disability & Society*. 20, 261-275.
- Kuppers, P. (2000). Accessible education: aesthetics, bodies & disabilities. *Research in Dance Education*. 2, 119-131.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Inter Views: An introduction to qualitative research* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Langer, S. (1967). *Mind; and essay on human feeling*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.
- Lealman, B. (Ed.) (1993) *The Whole Vision of the Child. Education Spirituality and the Whole Child*. London: Cassell.
- Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Lincoln, Y.S (1993). *I and thou: method, voice and roles in research with the*

- silenced*. In D. McLaughlin & W. G. Tierney (Eds.) *Naming silenced lives: personal narratives and processes of educational change*. New York: Routledge.
- Lindqvist, G. (2001). When Small Children Play: how adults dramatise and children create meaning. *Early Years*, 21, 7-14
- Linton, S. (1998). Disability Studies/Not Disability Studies. *Disability in Society*. 13, 525-540.
- Mason, C.Y., & Steedly, K.S. (2006). *Lessons and rubrics for arts integration*. Teaching Exception Children Plus.3, .
- Martin, Nicole, (2009) *Art as an Early Intervention Tool for Children with Autism*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers London.
- Matthews, J. (1999) *The Art of Childhood and Adolescence*. London: Falmer Press.
- McAdams, D. (1997) The case for unity of the (post)modern self: a modest proposal, in: R. D. Ashmore & L. Jussim (Eds) *Self and identity: fundamental issues* (New York, Oxford University Press), 46–78.
- Measor, L, & Sikes, P. (1992) *Gender and Schools*. Cassell.
- Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: Revised and expanded from case study research in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mertens, D. (1998). *Research in methods in education and psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Miller, E. (2008). *The Girl Who Spoke with Pictures*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. London
- Mishler, E. (1999) *Storylines: craftartists' narratives of identity*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- Mishook, J. & Kornhaber, M. (2006). Arts integration in an era of accountability. *Arts Education Policy Review*. 107, 3-11.
- Montgomery, J. & Martinson, A. (2006). Partnering with music therapists: A model for addressing students' musical and extramusical goals. *Music Educators Journal*, 92 (4). pp. 34-39.

- Moore, B. & Caldwell, H. (1993). Drama and drawing for narrative writing in primary grades. *Journal of Educational Research* .87, 100-110.
- Nicholson, H. (1999). Aesthetic values, drama education and the politics of difference, *NJ Drama Australia Journal*, 23, 91–100.
- Noddings, N. (1988). An ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements. *American Journal of Education*, 96, 215-231.
- Numbers of Children with Autism Larger than Previously Projected. Curriculum Review. 2007 46,3-3.
- Okelford, A., Welch, G., & Zimmerman, S. (2002). Music education for pupils with severe or profound and multiple difficulties—current provision and future need. *British Journal of Special Education*. 29,178-183.
- Osborne, J. (2003). Art and the child with Autism: therapy or education? *Early child development and care*. 173, 411-423.
- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. (2nd ed.) Newbury Park. CA. Sage Publications.
- Plimley, L.A. (2007). A review of quality of life issues and people with autism spectrum disorders. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*. 35, 205-213.
- Priestley, M., Corker, M. & Watson, N. (1999) Unfinished business: disabled children and disability identity, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 9(2), 90–97.
- Pring, L., Hermelin, B., & Heavey, L. (1995). Savants, Segments, Art and Autism. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines*. 36, 1065-1076.
- Robertson, J. M., Tanguay, P. E., L'Ecuyer, S., Sims, A. & Waltrip, C. (1999). Domains of social communication handicap in autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 38. pp. 738-745.
- Roper, B & Davis, D. (2000). Howard Gardner: knowledge, drama, and development in drama and arts education. *Research in Drama Education*. 5, 217-233.
- Ross, M. (1984) *The Aesthetic Impulse*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

- Roster, Pariser & Grueber, (2002). The cross-cultural study of the development of artistic talent , creativity and giftedness. *High Ability Studies*. 13,125-155.
- Saracho, O. (2002). Young children's creativity and pretend play. *Early Child Development and Care*. 171,431-438.
- Shore, S.M. (2002). The language of music: working with children on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Education*. 183, 97-109.
- Sigman, M. & Kasari, C. (1995) Joint attention across contexts in normal and autistic children. In *Joint Attention: Its Origins and Role in Development* (eds C. Moore, P. Dunham),. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, USA, 189–203.
- Snow, D. & Oliver, P. (1995). Social Movements and Collective behavior: Social Psychological Dimensions and Considerations. In K. Cook, G. Fine & J. House (Eds.) Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives, Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Sperry, L., Whaley, K., Shaw, E. & Brame, K. (1999) Services for young children with autism spectrum disorder: Voices of parents and providers. *Infants and Young Children*, 11, 17–33.
- Standley, J. (1996). A Meta-analysis of the effects of music as a reinforcement for education/therapy objective. *Journal of Research in Music Education*. 44,105-133.
- Standley, J. (2008) Does music instruction help children learn to read? Evidence of a meta-analysis.: *Applications of Research in Music Education*. 27,
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing Grounded theory*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Taylor, B. M., Pearson, P. D., Clark, K., & Walpole, S. (2000). Effective schools and accomplished teachers: Lessons about primary grade reading instruction in low-income schools. *Elementary School Journal*, 101, 121-166.
- Thomas, C. (2001) Feminism and disability: the theoretical and political significance of the personal and the experiential, in: L. Barton (Ed.) *Disability, politics and the struggle for change* (London, David Fulton).

- Thomas, C. (1999) *Female forms: experiencing and understanding disability* Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Thomas, C. (1998) Parents and family: disabled women's stories about their childhood experiences, in: C. Robinson & K. Stalker (Eds) *Growing up with disability*. London, Jessica Kingsley
- Tieso, C. (2002). Teaching creative dramatics to young adults with Williams Syndrome. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 37,32-38.
- Trevarthen, C. (2002) Origins of musical identity: evidence from infancy for musical social awareness, in R. MacDonald, D. Hargreaves & D. Miell (eds) *Music Identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tsai, L. (2000). Children with autism spectrum disorder: medicine today and in the new millennium. *Focus on Autism & Other Developmental Disabilities*.,15,138-146.
- Urrieta, L. (2007). Identity Production in Figured Worlds: How some Mexican Americans become Chicano/a Activist Educators. *The Urban Review*, 39, 117-144.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1971). *The psychology of art*. Cambridge, MA.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind and society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wang, H. (2001). Aesthetic Experience, the unexpected and the curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*. 17, 90-94.
- Waters, E. & Sroufe, L.A, (1979). Attachment, positive affect and competence in the peer group: two studies in construct validation. *Child Development*. 50, 821-830.
- Wigram & Gold, (2006). Music therapy in the assessment and treatment of autism spectrum disorders: clinical application and research evidence. *Child: care, health and development*, 32, 535–542.
- Williams, J. (2003). Why great teachers stay. *Educational Leadership*, 60, 71-74.
- Williams, D. (1994) *Somebody somewhere* (New York, Random House).
- Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock.

- Wintson, J. (2002). Drama, spirituality and the curriculum. *International Journal of Children's spirituality*, 7, 241-255.
- Wolcott, H.F. (2001). *Writing up qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Wolff, U. & Lundenburg, I. (2002). The prevalence of dyslexia among art Students, *Dyslexia*. 8, 34-42.
- World Health Organization. (2006). Pervasive developmental disorders. *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th ed.; ICD 10*.
- Worthy, J., Consolvo, A., Russell, K., Bogard, T., & Shipman, S. (2010). *Fostering Academic and Social Growth in a Primary Literacy Workshop Classroom: Restorying Students with Negative Reputations*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Wortham, S. (2006). *Learning Identity: The Joint Emergence of Social Identification and Academic Learning*. York: Cambridge University Press.
- Yeargin-Allsopp M, Rice C, Karapurkar T, Doernberg N, Boyle C, Murphy C. (2003). Prevalence of autism in a US metropolitan area, *JAMA* .289, 49–55.
- Yin, R.K., (2003) *Case study research: Design and methods*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

VITA

Karen Waldrop Dickerson attended Baylor University receiving her Bachelors of Arts in Communication Disorders in 1991. She received her Master of Science in Speech and Hearing Sciences from the University of North Texas in 1993. She has been a practicing speech pathologist for fifteen years. Karen worked at The Parish School in Houston, Texas from 1993-1998, serving as both classroom teacher and Speech Pathology Coordinator. Karen became a faculty associate at Our Lady of The Lake University in 1998, where she supervised graduate students, and taught several courses including Introduction to Communication Disorders, Speech Pathology for Special Educators, and designed a course teaching Counseling in Speech-Language Pathology. Karen is currently the Clinic Director of the Carruth Center in Houston, Texas.

Permanent Address: 3406 Cape Forest Drive, Kingwood, Texas, 77345

This dissertation was typed by the author.