

Dr. Kelly Ann Kotowski
Visual Art Specialist
kellykotowski@gmail.com

Affiliation:

The Help Group West
12099 Washington Blvd
Los Angeles, CA90066

The Story of the Lunch Bunch:

Artistic Research and the Creative Voice of Students with Autism

The story of the Lunch Bunch shares individual stories as well as the collective experience of a group of 4 students with autism, 1 student with a specific learning disability, and their art educator/researcher as they ate lunch together, discussed the everyday goings on and their ideas about creativity as well as sometimes made art. Artistic research provided a means for engaging the Lunch Bunch to share their stories through innovative means that promoted their strengths and brought their unique voices forward. The ability of artistic research to provide a voice for these individuals is especially important to consider for a multitude of reasons. For instance, stakeholders throughout all levels of education are striving to improve programs and services for students with autism in schools nationally and beyond. Currently, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the United States has estimated that “1 in 68 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder” (CDC, 2016). On a broader scale, the United Nations has stated that “autism and other forms of disability are part of the human experience that contributes to human diversity” and they have made explicit reference to persons with disabilities in their educational, work improvement, and reduced inequalities sustainable goals for the 2030 agenda (United Nations, 2016). With such goals and needs, who better to provide insights into improving quality of life other than the individuals themselves with “disabilities” who are most affected by what takes place from within the classroom?

Therefore, crafting a study cognizant of the student’s strengths in the areas of visual and kinesthetic learning and needs primarily in the areas of social skills and verbal communication was purposeful. In doing so allowed their voices to be heard through their preferred means of communication that could be through words, images, or a combination of both. Even if the student(s) were silent during their lunchtime sessions, their voices could be manifested by others means such as their art. The overall methodology of this study was narrative inquiry based on Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) narrative of experience and was utilized to construct the chronological retelling of the Lunch Bunch experience. Under the umbrella of narrative inquiry, an eclectic combination of methodologies was employed in order to fully capture the story. Arts based educational research was utilized and weaved throughout because it offers limitless possibilities to conducting a study that provides non-linguistic forms of knowing within this world we live in (Eisner & Barone, 1997). Also, portraiture developed by Sara Lawrence-

Abstract

Lightfoot (2005) was utilized to create the student vignettes as small “portraits” contained within the narrative. And lastly, arts based self-study methods were used by the art educator/researcher to aid in active reflection of the process throughout. Within the data collection and analysis the positive impacts of artistic research with this diverse group of individuals became apparent. The positive implications on multiple levels for such research is worthy of further investigation and discussion.