

# **THE CALLING CANVAS, WEAVING TOGETHER WORDS AND IMAGES: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO THE CREATIVE VOICE OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM PARTICIPATING IN A CREATIVE LUNCHTIME PROGRAM**

*Kelly Ann Kotowski, EdD (kellykotowski@gmail.com)  
California State University Los Angeles  
and  
The Help Group, Los Angeles*

## **Abstract**

The story of the Lunch Bunch includes a group of 4 students with autism, 1 student with a specific learning disability and their art educator/researcher as they ate lunch together and discussed creativity and at times made art. A chronological story of the Lunch Bunch was crafted utilizing narrative inquiry as the overarching methodology and methods borrowed from arts-based educational research, portraiture, and arts-based self-study research. An eclectic blend of methods was decided as the best fit to promote the students visual strengths and support their needs mainly in the areas of communication. This study was viewed and conceptualized through the lenses of social constructivist and disability theories from a strengths perspective. The researcher sought to craft a unique study that would bring the students voices forward, specifically for individuals who struggle with verbal communication, opening and co-constructing a space to learn from each other's perspectives; while at the same time supporting their strengths in visual and kinesthetic learning allowing their voices to be heard through their preferred means of communication that could be through words, their artwork, or a combination of both. Through data analysis the major themes that emerged were space, creative expression, socialization, caring/time and trust. These themes speak to what the students themselves desire from creative experiences and non-traditional learning spaces. This narrative provides a more holistic understanding of the benefits of arts based instruction from the perspectives of the students. The students themselves, when given the opportunity, can provide powerful insights of imagining creative educational opportunities that build upon their strengths in innovative ways. This information when shared with all interested stakeholders can impact the improvement of programs and services for students in special education taking into account the perspective of those individuals most impacted by what takes place within schools.

## Overview of Study



*Figure 1 - The Lunch Bunch's Art*

Let me begin by introducing the Lunch Bunch, a group of high school students (3 boys, and 2 girls) who proposed the idea of having creative lunch meetings in the art room, and myself, their visual art teacher, who was delighted to provide this experience. The student participants each chose a pseudonym to describe their personalities, and they are Insight, Public Relations (PR), Poetic, Maddie, and Eddie as well as myself, the art educator/researcher, Ms. K. This group known as the Lunch Bunch consists of 4 students with autism, 1 student with a specific learning disability, and their art teacher who is also the researcher as they ate lunch together, discussed the everyday goings on and their ideas about creativity as well as sometimes made art.

The narrative chronicles the story of the Lunch Bunch and took place at the Oasis School (pseudonym) within the art educator/researcher's visual art classroom 3 times a week during the 30-minute creative lunchtime program for over a period of 7 months. The Oasis School is a non-public therapeutic school in Southern California that serves students solely with special needs, which include autism, Asperger syndrome, anxiety disorders, and non-verbal learning disabilities.

At the time I conducted this study, I had been a visual art teacher for over nine years and I could share countless stories as to why I believed creative experiences provide meaningful benefits to students with special needs. However, I wanted to delve deeper, discovering from the students themselves how and why artistic experiences support their needs and strengths. Therefore, I sought to craft a unique study that would bring the students voices forward, specifically for individuals who struggle with verbal communication, opening and co-constructing a space to learn from each other's perspectives; while at the same time supporting their strengths in visual and kinesthetic

learning allowing their voices to be heard through their preferred means of communication that could be through words, images, or a combination of both.

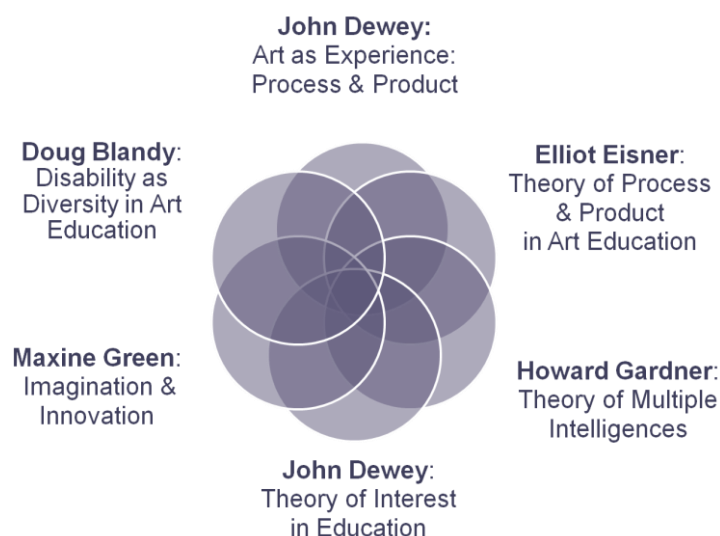
Currently, the CDC has estimated that “1 in 68 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)” (CDC, 2015). This knowledge is especially important when considering that stakeholders throughout all levels of education are striving to improve programs and services for students with autism due to the rise in the number of these students being served in our schools nationally and beyond. Information available on this topic is growing but the uniqueness of this study is the focus on the students’ perspective. The students themselves can provide powerful insights of imagining creative educational opportunities that build upon their strengths in innovative ways.

Within an emerging body of literature there is a call for further studies to investigate the benefits of visual experiences that are unique for this population of students (Furniss, 2008; Gerber & Kellman, 2010). Therefore, it makes sense to study schools that provide arts programs and art instruction for students with autism. Such an opportunity existed at my school site. And, who better to provide such insights than the students themselves when they are most affected by what takes place from within the classroom? With the intention of providing a narrative that allowed for the student’s voices to emerge, the following research questions guided the study:

What is the story of the Creative Lunch Bunch a group of 4 high school students on the autism spectrum and 1 with a specific learning disability participating in Creative Lunchtime Sessions?

- a. What were the participants’ (student and art educator) experiences and perceptions of the Creative Lunchtime Sessions?
- b. How did the Creative Lunchtime Sessions promote the students’ creative voice?

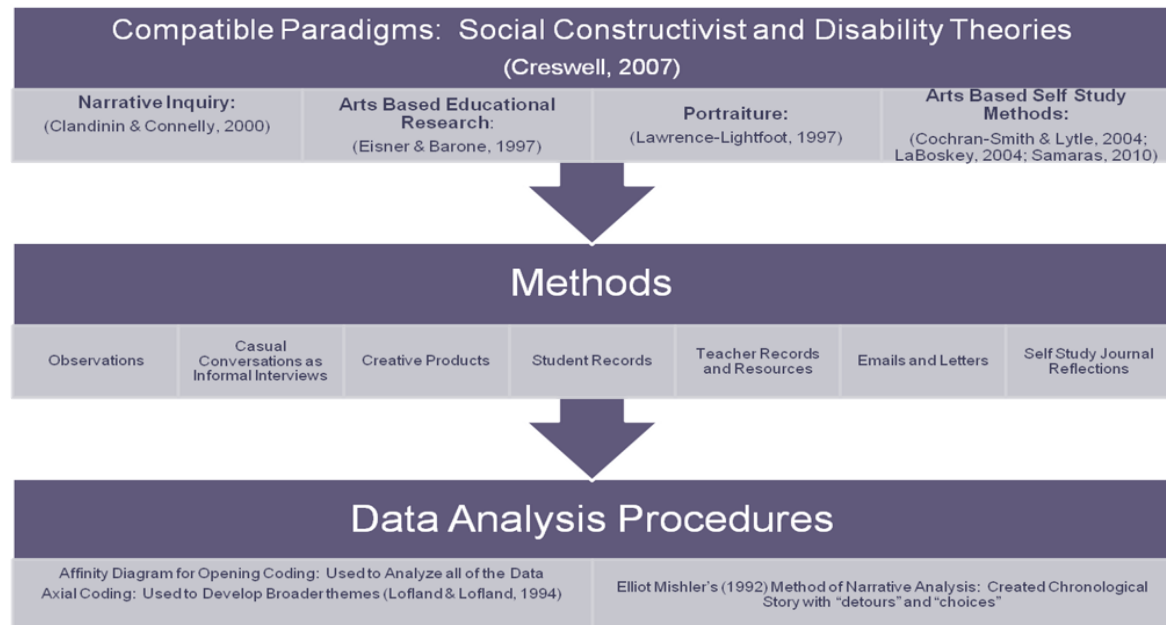
## Theoretical Perspectives



*Figure 2 - Theoretical Perspectives*

This study is situated within the intersection where special education, disability studies, and art education come together to create a unique interdisciplinary lens for considering visual art experiences within our educational system for students with autism and disabilities in general.

## Methodology



*Figure 3 - Methodology*

Using a blend of qualitative methodologies was necessary to capture the voices of the participants that allowed for sensitivity of their strengths and needs (Gardner 1983; Creswell, 2007). The overall methodology of this study was narrative inquiry based on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative of experience and story. Under the umbrella of narrative inquiry, a combination of methodologies was employed in order to fully capture the story utilizing the participant's preferred means of communication and expression (Gardner 1983; Creswell, 2007).

## Findings

Data analysis uncovered the key elements that spoke to what the student participant's sought from a non-instructional creative lunch program. Students' perceptions of the lunch bunch included the themes of space, creative expression, and socialization. Teachers' perception of the lunch bunch included the themes of caring, time, and trust.

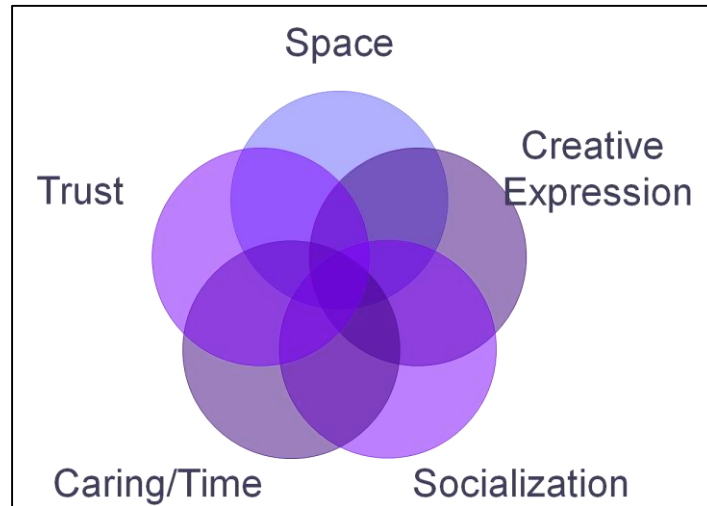


Figure 4 - Major Themes

Table 1. Central Themes.

Themes	Supporting Quotes/Reflections
<b>Space</b>	<i>"I like to come to the art room because it is quiet and there is open mindedness here and creativity". -PR</i>
<b>Creative Expression</b>	<i>"I like to talk about art and the creativity." -Insight</i> <i>PR said that she enjoys organizing the room by putting up paper on the door and painting." -PR</i>
<b>Socialization</b>	<i>"We could express our feelings and talk about things. Being together and eating lunch together". -PR</i> <i>"We would talk about art in lunch and what we like to do and how we can improve". -Insight</i>
<b>Caring</b>	<i>"I have to take care of and keep fostering a safe nurturing environment where she feels like she can take those risks and share of herself and bring that into the learning environment."-Ms. K</i>
<b>Time</b>	<i>"I can now see how this time is helping the students socialize, be happy, share ideas, build rapport with the teacher and each other and how that is making their time in their regular art classes more meaningful." The difference in their artwork is dramatic. -Ms. K</i>
<b>Trust</b>	<i>As an art educator, I think that the most important step in the artistic process is fostering relationships (art from life), the end product is all well and good but it is how you got there that tells the tale of that journey.</i> <i>-Ms. K</i>

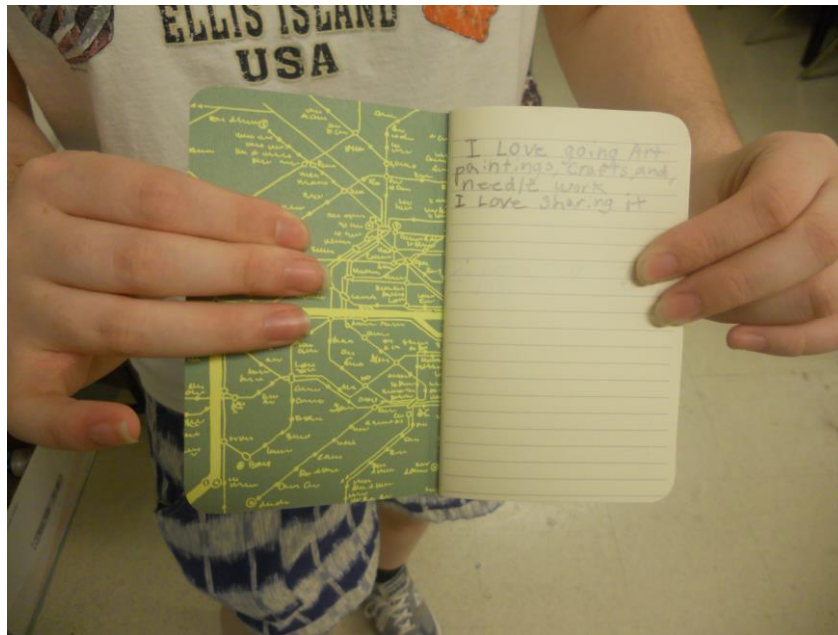


Figure 5 - Major Themes: Trust and Time a Student Sharing Thoughts in Words

Table 2 summarizes the story line of the Lunch Bunch that uses Mishler's (1992) method of narrative analysis that guided the writing of the story.

Table 2 - The Story of the Lunch Bunch.

Narrative Episode	Narrative Summary	Supporting Quotes/Reflections
Space: How the Lunch Bunch Formed	The art educator/researcher's (Ms. K) regular visual art class had 3 of the Lunch Bunch participants (PR, Insight, and Maddie) enrolled. The class was small, peaceful, and productive. This had dramatically changed after winter break due to an increase in class size. This change shifted the class dynamics and resulted in a revision of the curriculum. This shift was mainly due to the large number of students and also because some of the new students had behavioral challenges requiring teacher attention. As a result, the art teacher's ability to spend the same amount of individual attention with each student was no longer possible. The Lunch Bunch participants were accustomed to the small class size because it was peaceful and conducive for exploring more complicated art projects.	Art Assistant, Ms. Nancy's Reflections: <i>We tailored the curriculum based on the day and how that could be successful for them. There were so many of them that they were fighting for attention. There were just so many behaviors in one class, so having them create in a happy environment was key and that became the curriculum.</i>

Narrative Episode	Narrative Summary	Supporting Quotes/Reflections
<p>Detour PR's Idea: A Knock on the Door During Ms. K's Lunchtime</p>	<p>Within the same week the class roster changed in the visual art class, Ms. K was eating her lunch and she heard a knock on the door and PR's head popped in and said "can we eat lunch with you?" Ms. K said "of course" so in came PR and Insight first and then Maddie who followed behind with a soft hello. PR and Insight said that they wanted to spend time in the art room outside of the HS visual arts class. Maddie said she didn't care where she ate lunch as long as she was with Insight and PR. Insight and PR wanted to spend time in the art room like they had before the alterations happened to the roster and the curriculum. They no longer felt comfortable in the High School Visual Arts Class because the same amount of time and attention was not being paid to them.</p>	<p>Student reflections on why and how the Lunch Bunch began:</p> <p><i>We were excited about the art you were talking about during the visual art class...so we came to talk to you during your lunch.</i></p> <p><i>Maddie just started coming to this school and we brought her and we did not want her to feel left out or depressed.</i></p>
<p>Caring: Making the Creative Lunchtime Program Meaningful</p>	<p>Now Ms. K has a non-instructional creative lunch class with 5 students, one art teacher, and one art assistant known as the "Lunch Bunch" eating together for a thirty minute lunch period three times a week. Ms. K began to wonder what this group was going to be doing and creating during the lunchtime meetings. The students had expressed that they wanted to be creative. How could she make this happen in a 30 minute period and make the time meaningful? She decided that only through time and active reflection the students would bring answers to her questions.</p>	<p>Art educator/researcher, Ms. K's, journal reflection:</p> <p><i>I have to shift my thinking to let this space and time unfold and reveal itself. So, as we (the Lunch Bunch) chat, I write the words unfold and time on a big sheet of paper.</i></p>
<p>Detour  The Lunch Bunch Gets Company</p>	<p>Within a couple of weeks, it seemed as if the word had spread about the Lunch Bunch and this news brought more students to the art room. The intention of this time is not for loudness, goofing around or complaining because any or all of these made for a negative atmosphere and quite frankly are better suited for the lunchroom. It was definitely time to make some decisions.</p>	<p>Art educator/researcher, Ms. K's, journal reflection:</p> <p><i>They started to come to the art room during lunch because they heard it was open. PR and Insight were saying that look Ms. K you actually have a class there are 9 students in here for your lunch...that is a class! It did start feeling like a class.</i></p>



Narrative Episode	Narrative Summary	Supporting Quotes/Reflections
Turning point  Decision Time/Official Time	It seemed vital to make this an enjoyable collective experience; therefore, some decisions had to be made. Reflection and conversations facilitated by Ms. K with the students (PR, Insight, Poetic, Maddie and Eddie) and the teacher assistant (Ms. Nancy) occurred to help decide what everyone wanted to do during the lunches. The Lunch Bunch said that they wanted the time to be exclusive to those who are serious about the experience. So, in order to be a part of the Lunch Bunch students needed to make a commitment to be a part of the group.	Art educator/researcher, Ms. K's, journal reflection:  <i>For the sake of the students, I am going to create a more official stance. These students, PR, Insight, Poetic, Maddie and Eddie have made a commitment and I want to honor this commitment.</i>
The Creative Lunch Bunch Has an Identity	As previously described it was now an official Creative Lunchtime and the sign went on the door each time we were in session. And, the door was locked so that students not in the Lunch Bunch could not just come in on a whim. And, if someone knocked, Ms. K or Ms. Nancy answered the door and explained that an important meeting was in session. The students liked that. The student participants made a commitment; Ms. K made a decision to make this time into what the students wanted and now it was turning into something good.	Art educator/researcher, Ms. K's, journal reflection:  Ms. K wrote in her journal that she is ... <i>learning and growing in ways that I had not anticipated. Just the importance of creating a space, a safe environment where the students feel nurtured and cared for</i> is so important in really getting to know them and in turn getting to help their creativity flourish.
Creative Expression: Get Creative!	The more creative Ms. K gets the more the students are engaged in the conversation and it serves as a catalyst for both creativity and conversation. For example, the day the Lunch Bunch read Insight's script a memorable event occurred. PR and Insight began singing a song for everyone. The song is original and written by Insight with a teacher in an after school program. The students definitely responded to art and the artistic process during lunch.	Art educator/researcher, Ms. K's, journal reflection:  Paint! Paint! Paint! At some point during the conversation today, the students noticed that I was painting while having our conversation and they got excited and started to chant: "Paint, Paint, Paint!" And then PR came over to the table and started to paint with me.



Narrative Episode	Narrative Summary	Supporting Quotes/Reflections
Socialization: Food Was a Key Ingredient	It became clear that the relaxed setting and the creative element were a combination that the students liked and desired. The other element that made this time special was that we were eating together. The art assistant, Ms. Nancy, says that <i>food brings people together</i> . Food was definitely a key factor in the conversations and experience that brought our Lunch Bunch together as a group who shared meals together.	Art educator/researcher, Ms. K's, journal reflection:  <i>We are always crunching on seaweed and I am not sure how it started but it is always there because now I bring it in for everyone. I even tried collaging seaweed into my altered book. The students thought that that was amusing.</i>
Time and Trust: Reciprocal Relationship	One day, as I was cleaning the art room, Maddie walked in and said that she wanted to show me something she had written. From the beginning when she first came to art and the lunchtime sessions she would not share anything about herself. She told me that: <i>Ms. K I was sitting there not talking (in the lunchtime sessions) because I did not know if I could trust you. I had to wait and see if I could before I started to talk. Did you know that?</i> And then she opened up her little Eiffel Tower notebook to show me what she written inside: <i>"I love going (to) art, paintings, crafts, and needle work. I love sharing it."</i> sting of the environment and of the teachers.	Art educator/researcher, Ms. K's, journal reflection:  <i>The more creative and relaxed the time is the better it is for the students. I can now see how this time is helping the students socialize, be happy, share ideas, build rapport with the teacher and how that is making their time in their regular art classes more meaningful. There is a reciprocal relationship – a space ungraded that builds rapport that aides in the classroom-graded projects – brings them (the students) into their work – it is a cycle.</i>

## Conclusion

What was surprising and enlightening was the notion of the space. The Lunch Bunch did not set out to physically change the space, but it was transformed during that time and felt safe and secure due to our united and collective ownership of our shared vision (Frisch, 2003). The classroom became a hybrid space where the Lunch Bunch narrative unfolded; this was seen as paramount in providing the conditions needed for allowing the student's to have ownership in the process allowing their voices to come forward (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejeda 1999). This idea has its roots in Homi Bhabha's (1997) theory of hybridity and the "third space". This is where people of certain cultures create art while existing in "intervening spaces" that bridges and "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (Bhabha, 1997, p. 3). In this study, the work of Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda (1999) speaks to the use of hybrid third spaces created in classrooms that embrace differences and conflicts into rich learning experiences. The authors speak about "the third space" where "...alterative and

competing discourses and positionings [in formal and non-formal settings] transform conflict and difference into rich zones of collaboration and learning” (pp. 286-287).

The art room during lunch was a safe space for the students to begin (and continue) to communicate in multiple forms without little if any risk. Even if the student(s) were silent during the lunchtime sessions their voice could be manifested by other means such as through the art. In this sense part of their voice became the art pieces, which is especially important to consider when the artists are students with autism and SLD who typically struggle with verbal communication (Dewey, 1934; Gerber & Kellman, 2010; IDEA, 2004; Kellman, 1999).

The space was co-constructed by both the teacher and the students each having important roles that were of equal importance. The space held the qualities of a classroom yet had the familiarity of a “dinner table” where conversations were encouraged. As the art educator and researcher facilitating and participating in the Creative Lunchtime Sessions held within my room, certain privilege and authority was inherent in my role; however, that authority was shared to allow for the collective creation of the space (Frisch, 2003). In addition, even though I, the art teacher/researcher, storied the narrative that documents the Creative Lunchtime Sessions, conscious use of student work, stories, and comments is consistent with a shared, collective narrative where no one voice is privileged over another (Frisch, 2003).

Interested stakeholders working with students with special needs should consider the wealth of experience and knowledge these learners can provide and consider the conditions needed to open a dialogue using the child’s preferred mode of communication. Researchers desiring to conduct a similar study should take into consideration the limitations of this study that include a small purposive convenience sample and the short duration of the study. A strength of this study is the fruitful context where the arts played a significant role in the participants’ education. Arts based and nontraditional programs such as the Creative Lunchtime Sessions that allow students to access the curriculum by utilizing alternative means can be envisioned for greater numbers of students receiving special education services and I take this a step forward to ask why such opportunities should not exist for all students?

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