

Diversity in the art classroom: Students with autism

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In the forward to *Understanding Students with Autism through Art* (Beverly Gerber and Julia Kellman, Eds. 2010) Temple Grandin wrote,

Art and drawing enabled me to have a successful career. When I was a child, my mother always encouraged development of my art and drawing skills. Through drawing skills, I went from being a child with autism to a successful designer. (p. 7)

The purpose of this article is to recognize the challenges and potential strengths of autistic children and youths as they participate and learn in the art classroom. The discussion will first provide an overview of autism and how this affects those who have the disorder. Then we'll hear from teachers who write about their experiences with accommodating and encouraging these students. And finally we'll hear from one young person, now in her early twenties, about the learning and social challenges as well as the successes she found as she progressed through home and school, using art as a means of chronicling her understandings and relationships as well as her hopes and achievements.

Autism

Before proceeding, we make no claim to being experts on the subject of autism. Our aim is not to contribute to the large and growing body of literature on the disorder; rather, our aim as art educators is to draw from the literature, from the experiences of art teachers, and from our own research to understand and contribute to the conversation. From teachers' stories we can appreciate and share their insights and strategies of accommodation. From our own research we gain an added dimension or perspective through a single case study, a glimpse into the world of one young woman through an interview around an amazing archive of drawings from early childhood to young adulthood – 'Gen's world.'

Like art educator Julia Kellman (2001) we are interested in studying and documenting the art of children with autism and we interpret the data "to create stories that focus on the child as artist, rather than as an example of a handicapping condition" (p.7). As Kellman points out, such an approach "places the child in the role of a valid artist who is able to develop a visual vocabulary of sustaining narrative images that seem to both create and express meaning for the child" (p.7). Gen's drawings as manga-influenced narratives provide a window to understanding her experiences.

Statistics on the incidence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are probably not all that important to teachers; what matters more is the individual student in the

classroom who has been diagnosed. Nevertheless it would appear that the number of students with autism has exploded over the last decade. In 2001 Kellman reported the frequency as one in a thousand children having autism, more commonly found in boys than girls with a ratio of 4 to 1. In 2008 Furniss set that statistic even higher, reporting that one in one hundred and fifty children in the USA are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The likely explanation for the dramatic increase is a much greater awareness and diagnosis of the disorder. Compounding the difficulty of diagnosis is the considerable range that exists within the autism spectrum, a continuum that extends from mild to severe.

According to Kellman (2001) autism involves the following characteristics:

- (1) Autistic people seem to lack a sense of their own integrated self and have difficulty making sense of the world in a coherent and meaningful way.
- (2) They struggle to interpret social exchanges between humans or read the 'cause and effect' relationship in others' behaviours.
- (3) Despite their difficulties in interpreting human behaviours they often seem to have empathy and intuitive understanding of animal behaviour.
- (4) And they tend to be visual learners, often showing a talent for drawing.

While it is useful to provide such general descriptors, it is also important to remember that every person with autism is unique; there is a considerable range of manifestations. In her introduction to Jill Mullen's book *Drawing Autism* (2009) Temple Grandin suggested that individual's across the spectrum tend to be visual thinkers, pattern thinkers or word thinkers (p.7). Visual thinkers (like Grandin herself) think, create and solve problems in meticulous, representational detail. Pattern thinkers think visually, but in geometric or abstract form that can be reflected in their art. Word thinkers focus on written, and sometimes spoken language, and have little interest in visual materials or processes. Combine this with the range of developmental capacities in the spectrum and the uniqueness of each student becomes clear. As art educators, our particular focus, of course, is in students interest, ability or giftedness – the tendency to be visual or pattern learners, often revealed as a talent for drawing. Kellman provides snapshots of a number of well-known cases such as Nadia, Stephen Wiltshire, Richard Wawro, Jessy Park, and Jonathan Lerman. Common to each of these individuals is an ability to manage spatial relations in representing structure and perspective. It is also noteworthy that artistic activity tends to be solitary rather than a social activity and one that doesn't rely heavily on language skills. As our understanding of the many faces of autism becomes clearer, resources become available to help teachers and students alike to imagine a growing diversity of what is possible in the classroom (Mullen, 2009; Reynolds, 2011)

Before moving on to hear the stories and experiences of art teachers from British Columbia, it is worth returning to an earlier reported and admittedly puzzling statistic. Autism is more commonly found in boys than girls with a ratio of 4 to 1. Wilkinson (2008) observes that diagnosis of boys with Asperger syndrome is much higher and is done much earlier than diagnosis of girls with the disorder. The author

believes that girls are under-identified; this is attributed to gender role socialization. Girls generally have better coping mechanisms and are therefore less likely to be noticed by parents and teachers. They also tend to have fewer special interests, better social skills, language and communication skills, and are less aggressive and hyperactive than boys. Girls with Asperger syndrome, for example, are likely to have special interests that are more gender appropriate as well. All of this means girls are less likely to be identified as having impaired social skills, a leading symptom of autism spectrum disorder. A girl who has difficulty making sustained eye contact and seems socially withdrawn may simply be regarded as shy or sweet or “in a world of their own” rather than autistic. Wilkinson concludes that a male model is applied in diagnosing autism spectrum conditions and this results in misleading statistics.

Teacher experiences

There may be challenges for even the most experienced, patient, and dedicated teacher where there is a high needs student of any kind in the classroom. It is only fair to provide a balanced perspective. The first caution is to accept that while art can often play a role in making a place for students with autism in the overall success of their schooling, both academically and socially, it is by no means a panacea. Though the tempo and room for individual work in an art programme can be a benefit for many, not all students with autism will find art a useful vehicle for engaging the world. Believing that art is “the magic bullet” can lead to disappointment and frustration for some students, parents, and teachers. Parents desperate for their child to have a positive experience in school can sometimes overburden an art teacher who may be operating without an educational assistant and having to devote an inordinate amount of time to the needs of one student. More and more parents are turning to the art teacher as a sympathetic advocate, and the art program as a safe place within the curriculum. One experienced teacher writes, “I have modified assignments, purchased gloves for students who have issues with some of the more tactile materials, met endlessly with resource teachers and parents, and I have looked for patterns in my teaching style that work with autistic students. It has been my experience that the social behaviours of my autistic students generally create roadblocks to their learning and creates a frustrating environment for other students.” We ask a great deal of teachers these days and even the most caring teacher can be overwhelmed by special needs students within a class of thirty students, all within a one-hour block of time.

What follows is a series of six *success* stories. Accommodation strategies will necessarily vary based on many different circumstances, including the acknowledgement that each student with autism is unique. However, knowing that much of what we learn is through listening to the experiences of colleagues, we believe there is an important place for illustrations such as these.

Rielle Oswald described one of her students who had been identified as having Asperger syndrome. A high functioning student, she describes him as above average and a creative thinker. Her concern is with an education system that seems to have two classes of students, regular students and “special needs.” In the case of this student, his abilities exceeded those of other students in the subjects. While labelling and adjusting expectations can lead to understanding and support, it can also lead to segregation within the classroom. Perhaps in the art classroom more than anywhere else in the school, we aim to honour the distinctiveness of every individual. “Creating a culture that honours diversity despite categories is the way I would like to move forward in my teaching.”

Alix Hodson wrote about “the privilege of observing and working with an autistic child (waiting for classification).” She described this grade three student as anxious and unable to work unsupervised; especially frustrating for him was language-based work. “Fortunately, I discovered that he loved to draw; when he engaged in art activities he became much more relaxed and his anxiety level dropped.” Alix followed her instincts as a teacher by experimenting with visual-spatial strategies such as turning journal activity into storyboards and learning math concepts/problem solving through the use of pictures and manipulating objects. “A landmark for me was when he started to write a bit under his drawings.” The student has a twin who is also autistic. As a post-script she describes their involvement in an After School Art Program the following year; the twins really excelled producing amazing acrylic paintings. They were very focused in the process of painting; from the beginning it was clear that they had a definite mental picture of how they wanted to paint their piece, what colours they wanted to use, and how to apply the paint. Their paintings were shown in the community and received an amazing amount of attention and positive feedback. Alix writes, “Everyone was impressed by their work; I know the students were very proud and felt successful.”

Alison Pugh described a student in her Grade 9/10 art class who went well beyond expectations of the first day assignment. Students were asked to do a line drawing using fine tip markers. They were to choose any point of view in the classroom and record what they saw. Upon completing the small drawing, they were then asked to attach a second sheet of paper to the first and continue the drawing, extending the view. “My young student with autism proceeded to capture the entire space of the room between him and the far wall, including other students and tables in his view. To finish, he captured the space closest to him that included his hands drawing on the pieces of paper where he had so skilfully captured the space that stretched out before him. I was astounded as I had never seen anyone treat the process with such sophistication and ability.” Fitting well with the literature (Furniss, 2008), Alison noted that this student preferred to work in pen or pencil, creating line drawings that described experiences such as the first day of school or some event that happened during the day. His figures were simple but expressive with very accurate rendering of poses and gestures. Also noted was a fairly common feature of artwork produced by autistic students – a discomfort with colour. Here Alison found a way to accommodate him by making photocopies of his drawings enabling him to

experiment with colour washes or other media so that the original drawing could remain intact. He didn't like to work with clay either; "he had a tactile sensitivity that made working with clay physically unbearable. I encouraged him to try, which he did, creating a small pot he was quite proud of. However he was happiest when we were finished with clay."

Alison also added a post-script. "Last year the student ... was in my Photo 11 class. His drawings (very small tonal thumbnails approximately 2"x 2" of well known photographs) were wonderful. Gone were the days of using line only. Even more gratifying were his perceptive and thoughtful written responses to the photos."

Ruth Bain described herself as having been *fortunate* to teach autistic students over the years. Writing about one student in her classes throughout his four years at the high school, she noted that the art classroom was perhaps his favourite place in the school. He would often spend noon hours in the classroom where he played video games on the computer. Socially, he would occasionally join in a conversation with classmates but his slow and deliberate way of talking made other students uncomfortable, not quite knowing how to be with him. In his art he pursued his passion for drawing cars in his sketchbook. He was also passionate about orcas; he read books about the whales and both drew and painted them from photographs. "His painting technique was slow, methodical, and detailed." Ruth would offer suggestions about colour theory, for example, though any changes to his work were gradual rather than immediately apparent. There were successes that encouraged him, including a painting selected by the municipal arts council in a promotional pamphlet for the annual school district art exhibition.

Karlie McChesney understands from experience that accommodation for students with autism often means acknowledging their strong preference for certain media (and aversion to others) and also their strong commitment to particular subject matter/imagery. For one student in her class that meant a preference for paint (though the student would occasionally use felt pen). "Her colour choices were always warm happy colours – red, pink, purple; and her imagery included rainbows, butterflies, but mostly hearts." For another student it was robots, a theme he had started before kindergarten and continued right through grade nine. "I remember encouraging him to try pen and ink for one project to give him exposure to a medium other than pencil; he was really pleased with the success of his results. Describing yet another student with autism, a boy that needed much assistance, both Karlie and the Educational Assistant felt quite certain he would not like the feel and the messiness of clay but surprisingly he loved it. "A year after his experience making the clay project, he can't remember my name but he stops me in the hall to remind me how much he loved the clay project he made."

Siobhan Wright has also worked with several students with autism, perhaps most memorable is one who has been with her since grade eight and has just graduated.

The student remains “undiagnosed at the request of her parents but most of the teachers in our school feel that she displays many autistic characteristics. She loves to draw anime type figures and animals from computer games and cartoons.” These are quite successful in representing challenging poses and various angles of view. Finding ways to acknowledge the student’s comfort zone while also encouraging her to grow beyond it, “we worked out a system that she would be given time to work on her anime in class as a reward for trying the other subject matter and materials she was unaccustomed to.” The student worked best without distractions and frequently sought on-line resources for examples of bodies in perspective. Her optimal way of working was while wearing headphones and listening to music. In her final year the student was allowed to work independently in Siobhan’s office on an ambitious project developing her many sketches into a comic book consisting of 30-40 pages of finished work. Many students would find it difficult to sustain that kind of focus on a single project but this student blossomed.

Siobhan writes, “I was lucky I didn’t lose her in those early years. It took a lot of self-control and patience, and a different way of looking at art education to find the best match between her learning style and my expectations. I think she taught me more than I taught her.”

It is worth noting that several of the students were undiagnosed, or waiting diagnosis. The puzzle of recognizing and adapting to special needs whether they have been officially acknowledged or not is part of the work and skill that comes with teaching experience. The diplomatic balancing act of being adaptive without overemphasizing a child’s special needs and thus adding to the stigma experienced by students who are different and by parents struggling to support their children are part of the work the of giving students the best opportunity to learn.

Gen

Art teachers, of course, work to achieve a social environment that enables all students to learn and feel included in the classroom. School life can be especially difficult for teenagers and especially so for students with Asperger syndrome. Anderssen (2010) advises that young people with Asperger syndrome may inadvertently offend a peer or find their behaviour misinterpreted as harassing or dangerous. Difficulty in making friends can lead to isolation, anxiety, and even depression, this at an age when acceptance by the peer group is so important to one’s sense of self-worth. A further challenge for “Aspie kids” (as young people with Asperger syndrome sometimes describe themselves – see: <http://www.aspiekid.net>) comes from the school environment itself. Schools are typically crowded, with noise and light levels that sometimes create stress for Asperger youth. While it is fair to say they generally have difficulties communicating and engaging with other people, and may be obsessive in their interests Renzetti (2010) cautions against generalizing; there are many exceptions.¹

Recollections and experiences of a student

Interventions or teaching strategies that directly benefit an autistic student can be found, as illustrated in the above stories from the field. Howin (1998) suggests that because autistic students have difficulty identifying emotional states registered in facial expressions, this may be taught through the use of simplified and exaggerated schematic drawings that illustrate: happy, sad, angry, fearful, and so forth. Photographs could also be used with conversation about more complex and subtle aspects of emotion registered in expressions. And further, to teach about body language and develop empathy, children could be shown narrative drawings that have blank faces. Here the question becomes, “What would the characters within the story *feel* in such situations.” In her self-directed drawings, Gen has found an approach that addresses those needs.

Gen is now in her early twenties. A mutual friend knew of our interest in youth and self-directed drawing. Recognizing Gen to be a prolific artist, she introduced us to this remarkable young woman. As we met with Gen and her artist/teacher mother we were shown an incredible archive of art reaching back to her early childhood drawings such as the story of Cinderella, illustrated with stick figures. There were many other visual narratives that, over the years grew in complexity and artistic sophistication. These reflect adolescent experiences, fantasies, and popular culture interests that provide substantive material for a case study.

Gen is diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, part of the autism spectrum. While there is so much that could be learned through a study of Gen’s archive of artistic production, in this article we will use her art as examples of one young person’s experience of school life as it pertains to her learning and accommodation. How can children and youth be encouraged to learn about art and be made welcome in an institutional setting where this is a prescribed curriculum that may not be as flexible as it could be? Having been away from school for several years now, she is in a position to reflect on her challenges and achievements in a way that a younger person may not.

Sensitivity within a critique

Much of Gen’s drawing was done outside of the classroom and apart from the supervision of a teacher or the direct influence of the BC Art Curriculum. On one occasion however, Gen made a poster in art class. As other students showed their work there were many affirming/admiring comments but when Gen’s work was put up by the art teacher, the room fell silent. Gen felt hurt by that, believing that her work wasn’t appreciated.

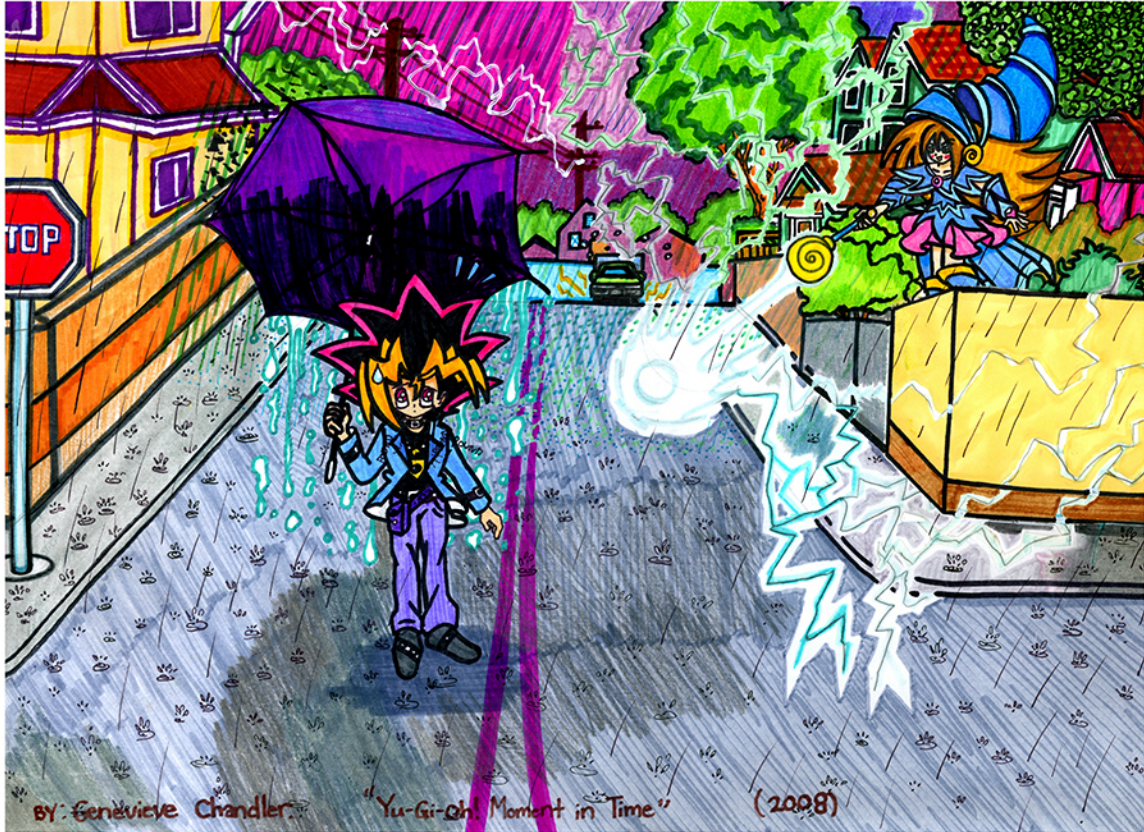


Figure 1. School project based on Yu-Gi-Oh manga character.

A practical joke

There were other similar experiences in art class. Nevertheless there have been intersections between her artwork and her school life. One artwork makes reference to the social life of school though is not specifically about an incident within the art classroom. The Whoopie Cushion (figure 2.) recounts an incident where a fellow student strategically placed a whoopie cushion on a chair. A classmate, Gen described as a mean kid, sat on it and made that embarrassing sound. The boy is shown to have an apathetic expression that says “Whatever, I don’t care what happens to you.” The drawing is one that Gen contributed to the school newspaper but she doesn’t know if it was ever published.



Figure 2. Woopie cushion revenge.

Relationships with boys

In her secondary schooling Gen made little mention of formal art instruction however her social life was very much in view in the artwork she created. One example is a drawing that uses *chibi* stylistic features. Chibi drawings have manga's exaggerated emotional expressions. A mouth may be a tiny dot or a gaping hole. In "Chibi Teen" (figure 3.) Gen moved away from representing herself as a cute bubble figure to one that is grotesque. We asked why she drew herself as an ogre. Her reason for doing that was that she didn't want a particular boy to have a crush on her. The thought balloon reads: "This big hideous kid is me. No, really it's me. My pretty un-cute self was putting me in danger so I made myself the opposite of pretty so boys wouldn't get crushes on me. Yikes!! I look stupid! Worse than stupid! I'm old!!! This is all just a dream isn't it?"

Her self-portrait has yellow teeth, giant zits, a scar across her nose, bloodshot eyes (one larger than the other and misshapen). And her hair is unkempt. Gen explained that if she presented herself as ugly, a particular boy would no longer be attracted to her. A male friend had taken an interest in her and Gen drew this as a way of

deflecting his interest; she didn't want to offend him but neither did she want her friends to think she had no interest in boys at all.



Figure 3. Self-portrait.

An opportunity to shine

Following the interview we made arrangements for Gen to have a solo exhibition of her work at the University of Victoria. Her parents invited friends and acquaintances. There was print coverage in the newspaper and a local television station provided news coverage. This also led to an interview for the website of the Autism Society. But perhaps most important to Gen was the recognition she received when her special needs class made a field trip from her senior secondary school to the university to view the show. School staff made arrangements for a field trip and Gen was admired for her impressive skill and accomplishment. Students were aware that she is an artist but with a gallery filled with framed work, this was a time to shine.

Conclusions

In a fully subscribed classroom where every student deserves space for individual growth and learning, what can we learn from the theory, practices and exemplars here? In describing dialogue as a teaching method Shor and Friere (1987) suggest:

[that] the teacher and the student transform learning into a collaborative process to illuminate and act on reality. This process is situated in the thought, language, aspirations and conditions of the student. It is also shaped by the subject matter and training of the teacher, who is simultaneously as classroom researcher, a politician and an artist. (p. 11)

As art teachers, we have the privilege and challenge of art as our curriculum, which means that together with our students, we are not limited simply to dialogue in supporting our student's thought, language, aspirations and conditions. To support students with special needs like the many forms that autism can take, we need to be attentive, adaptive, creative researchers who are prepared to study and learn from our students and from each other. As in the examples included here, the give and take of the studio can often reveal approaches that work. Armed with commitment and creativity, and information like Grandin's three kinds of autistic thinking we can develop curriculum, advocate for student success, and even guide administrators to recognize when the art studio isn't the best place for an individual child.

Endnotes

- 1.) Asperger syndrome: Within autism there is a subgroup known as Asperger syndrome – a high functioning autism that is sufficiently different to warrant its own diagnostic classification (Howin, 1998).

Some of the common characteristics of those with Asperger syndrome include:

- (1) Insisting upon sameness: they have a restricted range of interests and in drawing that means repetitive imagery that provides a sense of stability and order for them.
- (2) Impaired social interactions and emotional vulnerability.
- (3) Academic difficulties, though they tend to have average or above average intelligence quotients and adequate language skills.
- (4) They are able to talk about their experiences and feelings.
- (5) Their artwork is dominated by perception and sensation rather than by concepts.

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