INTERPLAY OF IDENTITY FORMATION AND ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT
IN THE EMPOWERMENT OF SELF-WORTH OF THREE VISUAL ART
GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DYSLEXIA

by

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ABSTRACT

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Brian Joseph Bulfer

Developmental dyslexia is a learning disability caused by neurological differences in language processing, affecting approximately 5-10% of the U.S. population’s ability to speak, read and write. Difficulties with literacy within this culture have social and emotional implications that can influence a sense of otherness. Artmaking is a significant form of expression for students with dyslexia during early education, and influences emotional and social development, such as identity formation. There are findings indicating that the development of an artistic identity during adolescence has implications for the continued cognitive, emotional, and social growth during higher education. This multiple-case study examines the educational experiences and artistic practices of three visual art graduate students with dyslexia. Patterns of cognitive and instructional experiences are considered, such as dyslexic characteristics, learning strategies, special assistance, educational environments, subject interests, and artistic identity formation. Emotional and social experiences that contribute to psychosocial development during education are discussed, such as the students’ experience realizing their difference from peers, the sense of social otherness, being misunderstood by educators, labeling, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization. Coping strategies, such as artmaking, are discussed, along with the importance of the sense of social belonging during education. Participants’ artistic development is
considered in terms of the significance of being an exceptional artist, the arts as an emotional outlet, and their orientation towards figuration during high school and college. In college, participants’ artistic development is compared to post-formal patterns of development, such as dualism, multiplicity, relativity, multiple conflicting commitments, and social awareness. Findings show the significance of the visual arts during identity formation and social development, and of participants’ ability during college to continue progressing towards their potentials. Implications for ideal educational environments, the full immersion of the visual arts into all classroom subjects, and significance of the arts for self-actualization for dyslexic students are discussed.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Nancy and Tim Devlin, who gave me a home while working on my graduate studies and always understood the value of my scholarly interests. Without their continuous support, generosity, unconditional love, and persistence that I should believe in angels, this document would not have been produced.
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While I started my doctoral work in the fall of 2012, this dissertation is a culmination of life experiences and investigations into the self that started way before I ever imagined that I would reach this caliber of research and scholarship. I would first like to thank my participants of this study. Without their generous time and willingness to discuss difficult life experiences this dissertation would have been impossible. I would like to thank both Dr. Judith M. Burton and Dr. Mary Hafeli for guiding me through this process. Their patience, dedication, and generosity always kept me focused on completing this project.

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B. J. B.
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Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The topic of this dissertation study developed out of my own personal struggles learning to read and write with developmental dyslexia. My K-12 education was particularly difficult because of the needed fluency in textual representational forms in order for later learning to take place in this environment. Often, most of my time was spent attempting to avoid social embarrassment and coping with an inadequate sense of autonomy. This issue had both an emotional and social influence, in particular during identity development and social relationships. Artmaking became a significant form of expression during early childhood and continued into my college studies. Being able to make meaning through other forms of representation allowed for communication that had both social and emotional implications. The impact of this form of communication was particularly important during transitions in life, such as moving from high school to college.

Within our contemporary information-driven culture, language literacy is one of the most important skills for becoming socially and economically independent. This is reflected in the U.S. school system, which gives precedence to written language as the primary form of representation. Yet, developmental dyslexia challenges one’s ability to communicate through textual forms of representation. Lack of fluency in reading and writing skills can have psychosocial implications, such as the sense of well-being, self-
esteem, peer relations, optimism for the future, and social anxiety (Eissa, 2010; Ingresson, 2007; Marshall, Hocking, & Wilson, 2006; McNulty, 2003) and ultimately leads toward a sense of inferiority, which can have an influence on identity formation during adolescence (Erikson, 1982).

While I struggled with literacy during my education, periods of artmaking proved significant in helping with difficult emotions, social integration, and meaning-making. Art educational research has shown how artmaking can allow for meaningful experiences and communication directly through the sensory and emotional dimensions (Burton, 2000; Gilmore & Smith, 1982; Hurwitz & Day, 1995; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982). Artmaking spaces also allow for non-discriminatory interactions between those with and without disabilities while communicating through alternative modes of representation other than written language, allowing for healthy social development (Hall, 2010).

While there are numerous reasons why one may have difficulties with literacy, developmental dyslexia is a particularly challenging phenomenon to define because of the diversity of cases and the numerous neurological mechanisms involved in language acquisition. One primary characteristic of dyslexia is difficulty with grapheme-to-phoneme conversions (i.e., making a cognitive connection between the graphic word and the spoken representation) that occurs through reading and writing text. Alternative forms of representation through artmaking are not contingent on grapheme-to-phoneme relationships. Thus, those with dyslexia often find artmaking with materials to be a more applicable form of meaning-making, which allows for direct communication through the sensory and emotional dimensions. Artmaking may also function as a vehicle for meaningful learning experiences, allowing those with dyslexia the ability for unrestricted expression and communication. Art education programs may be able to create alternative educational environments that are cognitively, psychologically, and socially nurturing for those who struggle with textual forms of representation.
Background to the Study

Developmental dyslexia is a learning disability caused by neurological differences in how language is processed in the brain, affecting approximately 5-10% of the U.S. population’s ability to speak, read and write (Nopola-Hemmi et al., 2001). In the past, interview studies have provided insights into the psychosocial development of dyslexic students. Narrative studies have shown that dyslexic children may have more emotional and behavioral issues in school (Dahle & Knivsberg, 2014), as well as struggle with self-esteem and a sense of well-being (Marshall et al., 2006). During adolescence they may struggle with depression, social withdrawal, anxiety, aggression, delinquency, peer relations, and lack of optimism for the future (Eissa, 2010; Ingresson, 2007), which may follow them into adulthood (Ingresson, 2007; McNulty, 2003; Undheim, 2003).

The social experience of otherness is a primary topic within disability studies that attempts to elucidate mechanisms of marginalization that reinforce a dichotomy between abled and disabled (Oliver, 1996). Experiences of otherness during childhood can develop if a student is unable to participate academically among their peer group, such as when students with dyslexia struggle with developing literacy skills. Psychosocial implications for the inability to develop particular culturally significant skills during childhood can cause experience of inferiority, which can affect identity formation during adolescence (Erikson, 1980).

However, there are findings showing positive implications for dyslexic students developing an artist identity that allows them to continue their studies in college in the visual arts (Bacon & Bennett, 2013). The visual arts also allow for multimodal expression of personal narratives that can influence empowerment through reconsidering the self, relationships with others, identity formation, and supporting meaning-making through other forms of representation beyond verbal and textual language (Binder & Kotsopoulos, 2011).
Art educators have made notice of the emotional significance of artmaking during different periods of development (Burton, 2000; Hurwitz & Day, 1995; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982; Smith, 1982). There are examples of how artmaking in school environments has positive psychosocial implications for students with disabilities, such as social inclusion (Hall, 2010; Sibley, 1995) and emotional release (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982; Sulewski, Boeltzig, & Hasnain, 2012).

The significance of artmaking as a mode of communication can be understood in the context of evolutionary perspectives on how representation and cognition developed over time (Deacon, 1998; Donald, 1991). These theories illustrate the importance of embodied interaction during the meaning-making process that preceded linguistic communication. For example, research has shown that the motor cortex, a location of the brain involved in body movements, is still a vital contributor for processing meaning through gestures (e.g., Glenberg & Kaschak, 2002; James & Gauthier, 2006). Some forms of artmaking (e.g., performance, dance, theater, drawing, painting, and sculpture) can be understood as a pre-linguistic form of meaning-making that has a direct relationship to bodily experience (Donald, 1991).

While sensory modes of communication are a significant dimension of the meaning-making process during artmaking, there is little known of artistic development beyond adolescence. With a few exceptions, such as Elsa Bakkala (2002), who considers the post-formal artistic development of visual art undergraduate students, the influence of past educational experience on adult artistic development has been left mostly uninvestigated. For example, there is little known of the stories to be told by visual art college students with literacy difficulties. This dissertation study attempts to contribute to the understanding of the meaning-making process for visual art graduate students with dyslexia.
Research Question

In what ways do issues of identity construction and artistic development contribute to the overall meaning-making of three graduate dyslexic visual arts students?

Sub-Questions

1. How is the self-other meaning made, and personal identity formed, through general experiences of being a learner with dyslexia?
2. In what ways does artistic development in high school and higher education support self-other and personal identity formation in learners with dyslexia?

Assumptions

In response to the research question, there are underlying assumptions that will not be discussed in order to focus on the research topic. Defining assumptions before collecting data also determines personal presuppositions that could influence perceptions of the data during analysis. The research question was revised after defining emerging themes. Thus, current assumptions were reviewed and altered to support framing for revised research question. Assumptions to be debated will give an outline of the topics that will be investigated in this study.

Assumptions Not to Be Debated

- Developmental dyslexia is a neurological issue that affects one’s ability to acquire fluent and accurate speaking, reading and writing skills.
- The development of language skills in school has emotional and social implications within our information-driven culture.
- Struggling with literacy difficulties during education has psychosocial implications, such as identity formation, that can affect one through adulthood.
• There is a cognitive difference between how visual-spatial and textual representations are processed for meaning.

• Artmaking is an emotionally and socially significant activity for students who have learning difficulties in language literacy.

• While meaning is often constructed through experience, interviews can give an account of personal narratives that show patterns of meaning-making.

• Given that dyslexic students struggle with literacy, there is an inherent assumption that there is a difference in literacy experience between those with and without dyslexia.

Assumptions to Be Debated

• Given the significance of identity formation during adolescence, artmaking may have an influence on identity construction for students with dyslexia during high school that continues into college.

• Given the psychosocial difficulties students with dyslexia often experience within particular educational environments, an artist identity has an emotional and social influence on development.

• Given the sense of otherness experienced by those with disabilities, artmaking and the art classroom can influence social inclusion, empathy, and intimacy during education.

• Given that dyslexic students often excel academically through artmaking, the visual arts can play a significant role in identity formation and meaning construction.

• Given that artmaking has significant cognitive, emotional, and social implications for students who have dyslexia, artmaking also influences students’ overall meaning-making of self-other relationships.
Limitations of the Study

Participants

Participants for the study are limited to three visual art graduate students with developmental dyslexia with no bias toward gender, class, or race. Participants were selected based on age, between 25-35 years, to facilitate comparisons of educational experiences during roughly the same time period and eliminate other generational factors that can affect experience, as well as to have participants that are at a period of life when they can reflect upon their education. Dyslexic college art student participants were considered based on particular characteristics, such as difficulties with reading and writing during education and experiencing degrees of success academically later in life.

The participant group was located within a limited geographic area so in-person interviews would be possible. Participants were found through conversations about my research with visual art and art education graduate students (purposeful sampling), which led to locating more participants (snowballing) (Coyne, 1997). This study is limited to three adults living in the United States and cannot be generalizable to a greater population. There is no reason to believe any of the descriptions from the interviews are deliberately falsified. However, the participants have dyslexia and it is possible that they may have made errors when giving accounts of sequences of events. Yet, all participants, whether dyslexic or non-dyslexic, are prone to making errors in memory. It is more important to gain an understanding of how each participant makes meaning out of personal life experience rather than to be certain the events are accurate accounts.

Just as the participants may be fallible, the interviewer can also influence the quality of the study through tone, body language, framing of questions and the general issue of how meaning comes out of the social interaction, which can affect interview answers (Widick, Knefelkamp, & Parker, 1975). Prior relationships or experiences with subjects may have affected their attitudes and level of comfort with the questions asked,
affecting the answers given. In a pilot study I conducted (Bulfer, 2014—discussed further on p. 13), participants appeared comfortable with my presence as the researcher, which may be influenced by their past experiences with me, allowing them to feel comfortable sharing more sensitive and emotionally significant life experiences. Letting the participants know I also have dyslexia seemed to put them at ease. They all seemed eager to participate because they felt this research could benefit others.

**Research Method**

This interpretive phenomenological (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) multiple-case study (Stake, 2013) was limited to four forms of data: semi-structured interviews (Drever, 1995), artwork examples (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011), artist statements (Bowen, 2009), and cognitive surveys (Creswell, 1994; Tourangeau, 1984). Multiple forms of data were collected for triangulation (Denzin, 1970; Patton, 2005) in conducting a cross-case analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). The semi-structured interviews were limited to 45- to 60-minute meetings, which were influenced by the subject’s psychological state and/or other idiosyncrasies during that time. The interviews gave a sense of what it is like to have dyslexia from an observer’s point of view, but were limited to a single short period and did not show the fluctuations of perception that occur over time.

Interviews were also limited to the participant’s memory. Unfortunately, memory is fallible and a poor record of what actually happened because individuals remember their experience from a self-centered point of view. This process always distorts the actual phenomenon and thus any description of it in the future. Interviews must always be looked upon as records of the subject’s interpretation of any given matter during the time the interview was conducted and not as an objective account of events.

Participant artwork examples were limited to what was available through photo records or actual art objects or images that were photographed for this research.
Participants could limit the collection of materials by only sharing a select number of records and artifacts. Conversations with participants about their artwork were limited to their ability to remember why and how they made a work of art.

Artist statements were limited to one page and showed examples of how participants made meaning of their artwork during the time of the study, without showing a progression of thoughts and practices over time. The cognitive survey was collected to find patterns of dyslexic characteristics to determine if participants had similar cognitive difficulties. However, the survey was limited to participant memory and how they understood their own cognition. It is possible that participants may have misunderstood questions on the survey because of their difficulties with reading text due to their dyslexia.

**Study Type and Rationale**

A qualitative interpretative phenomenological method is used in this multiple-case study through collecting personal narrative data from three visual art graduate students with developmental dyslexia. The intention of this case study is to find differences and similarities in meaning-making between participants in terms of psychosocial development, identity formation, and visual arts practice. Data were collected through multiple methods: interviews, artwork examples, artist statements, and cognitive surveys. The intention is to find patterns of meaning-making through data triangulation to construct individual portraits for each participant.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is appropriate for this multiple-case study because it is a method concerned with accessing participant meaning construction through their lived experience (Smith, 1996). The collection of narrative data is appropriate for elucidating meaning-making through telling stories. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) comment, “Life narratives are the context for meaning making”
This is consistent with educators who theorize that stories are an important way of gaining insight into the meaning of experience (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Bruner, 1994; Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Greene, 1995; Johnson, 1993; Witherell & Nodding, 1991).

**Theoretical Framework**

This case study is primarily concerned with elucidating the meaning-making process to gain an understanding of participant identity formation through educational experiences and artistic practice. Social constructivism underlies the theoretical framework for this study to understand the meaning-making process rooted in experience, cognition, and social interaction. Creswell (2007) describes the constructivist approach as an interpretive process that occurs through social interaction. As Creswell states,

> Individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meaning of their experience…. [Meanings] are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interactions with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives. (pp. 20-21)

Thus, constructivist theory embraces pluralist views, where reality is relative to cultural contributors (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

The constructivist approach originates out of the phenomenological tradition developed by Edmund Husserl (1900/2001) who was interested in a science that investigated the essence of human experience. Husserl’s method for accessing another person’s subjective experience is a process of reduction that includes the meditative practice of *bracketing*, the setting aside of one’s own presuppositions during research. It is through the bracketing process that transcendental subjectivity is possible; however, setting aside presuppositions may not be possible (discussed further in the following paragraph on Merleau-Ponty).
This phenomenological method was extended by Martin Heidegger who argues that the investigation of an individual’s state of being (also known as Dasein) is only possible by including the person’s environment and temporal state. As Heidegger (1996) points out, “The existential and ontological constitution of the totality of Dasein is grounded in temporality” (p. 437). According to this existential phenomenological approach, an investigation into life experience is not possible without considering the time period in which a person lives, including a particular cultural and social context within history.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2002) was influenced by the phenomenological approach of both Husserl and Heidegger in developing his thoughts on embodiment. Merleau-Ponty argued that all knowledge is constructed through bodily experience. Perceptual experience cannot be detached from lived experience and how one makes sense of the self and world, making objectivity impossible. Thus, a full phenomenological reduction is unachievable. The only knowledge conceivable is the knowledge that is constructed through personal experience that is always situated within the body.

The field of psychology, such as the work of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner, adopted phenomenological approaches in the attempt to understand the nature of the learning process. For example, through observing children in the classroom, Dewey discovered the importance of life experience during the learning process (Dewey, 1934/2005, 1938/1997). Jean Piaget is the most noted constructivist who described learning through a process of accommodation and assimilation. Accommodations are adjustments in schema made because of new information perceived and assimilation is an internalized process of incorporating new information into a schema. Piaget eventually developed a stage theory for understanding cognitive development of children as they move from embodied learning toward abstraction.
(Piaget, 1954, 1955, 1962). His work gives a foundation for understanding how changes in cognition during development influence the meaning-making process.

Lev Vygotsky is also an important constructivist who considered cognitive development through social interactions. Vygotsky (1978, 1980) perceived language development on two levels, internal and external speech, which are mediated through the internal sign system of a given culture. External social factors involved in language development were emphasized in his writings as he related the internal relationship between speech and action to development of tools for communication. This work lays a foundation for understanding how social environments influence the meaning-making process during language development.

**Role of the Researcher**

I take on the role of interviewer, observer, fellow artist, and one who has also struggled with many of the same dyslexic issues with reading and writing as my participants. In this sense, I have both first-person experience and third-person research knowledge concerning the dyslexic phenomenon, which gives me deeper insights into the participants than those who have only made third-person observations. However, it is still important to develop and attempt objectivity in the collection and analysis of data to avoid projection of personal experience onto participant experience. In terms of artwork analysis, I do not have a role in critiquing or advising the art careers of my participants. I am only interested in how my participants construct meaning through their artwork. Ultimately, my role as the interviewer is to create a safe and comfortable environment to conduct in-depth and open-ended interviews so the participants feel at ease to talk about difficult life experiences.
Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in 2014 that laid the framework for this dissertation study. This prior study was designed to examine the life experiences of four dyslexic visual art college students. Data were collected through single 45- to 60-minute semi-structured interviews with further probes into topics of interest, which were recorded and transcribed. Participants were found through conversation about my dissertation topic (purposeful sampling), which led to finding more potential participants (snowballing) (Coyne, 1997). The interview protocol originally included ten questions, with an additional two questions added after the first two interviews. While conducting this study participants were asked to reflect on their personal experiences with dyslexia. These reflections also include childhood narratives of institutional education, special education experience, psychosocial development, artmaking, and digital technology use.

All participants recalled challenges during their K-12 experience learning to read and write that are directly attributed to dyslexia. However, each had their own way of compensating for the struggles. These different ways of compensating show creative problem-solving abilities. Some of the techniques did not work as long-term solutions for the literacy issue, but would allow for temporary solutions to get a job done or to escape social embarrassment. Based on descriptions given during the interview subjects appeared to do well when they had a healthy social life. All participants were able to get past stigmatization, ignored criticism, and were able to continue in their academic pursuits.

Most participants received extra assistance during their early education, which came in the form of tutoring after or during school, parents helping outside of class, special programs, and teacher accommodations, which subjects felt had a positive influence on their education. Most of the participants experienced some form of social stigmatization and alienation from their peers if taken out of their main class for special
assistance; yet, this was not as severe if they stayed in class and received extra assistance after school.

All the participants described artmaking as a salient activity during their education. They mentioned that the arts helped with their self-confidence and sense of social well-being. Most of the subjects mentioned the physical activity of making as an important contributor during their education, allowing for alternative modes of processing information. For them the physical activity of making seemed to play an important role in engaging them in learning through sensory modes that made education meaningful.

All the participants had some experience with digital technology during education, but availability and time period had the greatest effect on their use. Two of the participants spoke about technology (e.g., computers and other devices) as helpful sometimes, but mostly problematic. Whether it was an issue with the computer crashing or spellcheck making errors, there was some hesitation to advocate for digital technology. Some participants felt they remembered content more often through handwriting than when typing on a keyboard. However, they could not deny the positive influence computers and other forms of digital technology had on their ability to participate in academic scholarship.

Emotional and social development were the most significant issues for all participants during education. Most participants remember being mocked and harassed during schooling, finding early education to be an isolating experience. However, most overcame these social obstacles, even though they still have vivid memories of these negative experiences. The study yielded insights into the ways dyslexic students construct meaning through recalling personal narratives and what forms of representation allowed for meaningful modes of communication. This dissertation extends upon this pilot study by considering a new group of participants with an additional interview concerning artistic practice, as well as a collection of artist statements, cognitive surveys, and artwork examples for triangulation.
Educational Aims

- Deeper understanding of the dyslexic college art student educational experience.
- Insight into the meaning-making process through art-making for students with dyslexia.
- A deeper understanding of identity formation of visual art students that would aid mentors, counselors, educators, and administrators.
- Deeper insight into the benefits of artmaking for inclusive educational programs that work with dyslexic students.
- Insight into the educational implications for visual-spatial learning for dyslexic students.

Justification

The research intention of this study is to gain deeper understanding of the meaning-making process during education, artistic practice, and identity formation for visual art graduate students with developmental dyslexia. This research is significant because everyone has his or her own unique form of meaning-making through different forms. Each learner acquires new information through their senses that is cognitively processed in unique ways for meaning, which is affected by materials and representation. For example, some students find it easier to learn through conversation, while others learn best through physically interacting with materials (Gardner, 1983). This research will contribute to the knowledge of how artmaking experience influences the meaning-making process that contributes to identity formation for visual art graduate students with dyslexia.
Personal Suitability

The topic of this study is personally significant in that I also have developmental dyslexia. I struggled with literacy during my childhood, and continued to adulthood. Learning to read and write during my primary and secondary education was challenging, which led to a sense of otherness and ultimately a negative self-image during adolescence. The primary issue I had with reading and writing during my education was with working-memory and making a connection between the words and their oral pronunciation (grapheme-to-phoneme conversion). While I struggled with making meaning of linear lines of written language, the visual-spatial allowed for information to be accessed immediately. The visual arts became a significant way in which I could express my abilities, gain a sense of belonging, develop self-esteem and confidence, and make meaning of my life. I have been able to overcome many of the literacy limitations with persistence, assistance from friends, family and educators, digital technology, meditation, and artmaking.

During my undergraduate experience, I studied visual art and religious studies at California State University Long Beach, receiving a B.F.A. and B.A. in 2008. During this time I became fascinated with consciousness, the mind-body issue in philosophy, mystical descriptions of unification, ritual behavior, meditative practices, and visual didactics. In 2010, I received an M.F.A. in visual art from Rutgers University with a thesis focused on referential modes, visual information, and cognitive sociology. During this time, I developed a body of work concerned with information visualization through encoding and decoding data through materials and forms.

From my early 20s to today, I have practiced mindfulness meditation (i.e., Vipassana), which includes the careful observation of mind-body phenomena and the formation of self during retreat periods. During my first meditation retreat in 2001, I had a significant experience that made evident the relationship between the cultivation of
concentration skills and artistic practices, sharing a common thread of fostering mindfulness, equanimity, absorption, the vibratory quality of bodily phenomena, object relations, and the emergence of self.

**Dissertation Summary**

This introductory chapter considers disability studies, dyslexic psychosocial development, identity formation, dyslexic theory, language and embodiment, artistic development, and meaning-making. The field of disability studies frames this dissertation, considering the experience of otherness through the social model and the importance of the arts for cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, Erikson’s (1980) psychosocial stages, and Marcia’s (1966) identity status theory are considered for understanding the emotional and social development of dyslexic students that influences identity construction.

Dyslexic theory is briefly outlined, including the Phonological Theory and dyslexic subtypes, to understand the neurological and cognitive mechanisms involved in language and what happens differently for those who have dyslexia. Language development is discussed (e.g., Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978), as is the role that the body plays in thoughts, reasoning, emotions, and communication. Embodiment is also considered in relation to object-relations (e.g., Winnicott, 1971) and artistic development (e.g., Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982) to understand the importance of sensory-bodily experience through communication and expression. Meaning-making is discussed further in terms of Jerome Bruner’s (1990) cultural narrative perspective, Robert Kegan’s (1982) subject-object balance, and William Perry’s (1981) model for adult cognitive development.

The methodology chapter frames this multiple-case study within the interpretative phenomenological approach (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009) in studying three visual art graduate students with developmental dyslexia. Narrative studies are considered in
relation to participants’ life-stories collected through semi-structured interviews. Artist statements, artwork examples, and cognitive surveys were also collected for triangulation with interview data. A cross-case analysis is used to compare emerging themes among participants. The findings chapter offers portraits of each participant: Kara, Ben, and Deb. The portraits are divided into educational experience (e.g., elementary school to graduate school) and artwork analysis (e.g., artistic descriptions, materials, tools, process and inspiration).

The discussion chapter presents emerging themes from the findings in three sections: Learning and Instruction, Psychosocial Development, and Artistic Identity Formation. Learning and Instruction covers specific learning difficulties experienced by the participants during education, as well as learning strategies that were self-developed. Special education and tutoring and different classroom environments are compared among participants. Interests in school subjects (e.g., science and math) are considered in relation to their literacy difficulties. The influence of the visual arts on identity formation (Erikson, 1980) during education, as well as their foreclosure (Marcia, 1966) on the visual arts during high school, which continued during college is discussed.

The psychosocial development section considers participant motivations and needs (Maslow, 1943) and themes that contribute to a sense of otherness, such as realizing difference from peers, sense of otherness among peers, being misunderstood and socially embarrassed by teachers, labeling, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization. Psychosocial issues concerning educational inclusion and segregation during education are considered. Coping mechanisms for self-esteem are discussed, such as artmaking and the inclusiveness of the art classroom. The sense of belonging among peers and family is discussed, as well as the significance of the arts for social belonging and integration.

Artistic identity formation is discussed in terms of the significance of being an exceptional artist and the visuals arts as an emotional outlet, as well as participants’ interests in the concrete nature of realistic figurative representation through drawing and
painting, and their disinterests in conceptual modes of artmaking. Kara’s, Ben’s, and Deb’s artistic development is considered in relationship to post-formal operations, such as dualism, multiplicity, relativity, and multiple conflicting commitments (Bekkala, 2002; Perry, 1981), as well as social development (Gilligan, 1993; Kegan, 1982).

The conclusion and implications chapter covers potentials for appropriate educational environments, visual-spatial learning, and self-actualization through artmaking. First, there are implications for mentors, counselors, educators, school administrators and leadership for finding appropriate methods and learning environments for students who have literacy difficulties, such as finding a balance between cognitive variables (e.g., overwhelmed vs. boredom) and psychosocial variables (e.g., otherness vs. belonging). Second, there are implications for how the visual arts can be integrated into the mainstream classroom for further cognitive and psychosocial development, such as with STEAM programs. Third, implications for self-actualization through the visual arts are discussed, as well as asynchronous growth that can occur for students immersed in artmaking who have dyslexia. Finally, implications for further research concerning the meaning-making of students with literacy difficulties through artmaking are discussed.
Chapter II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The universe implies the organism, and each single organism implies the universe—only the ‘single glance’ of our spotlight, narrowed attention, which has been taught to confuse its glimpses with separate ‘things,’ must somehow be opened to the full vision. (Alan Watts, 1999, p. 98)

Introduction

In introducing this chapter with a quote from the philosopher Alan Watts, my intention is not only to express a drama between self and other that continues throughout this study, but also to revisit my late adolescence and obsession with listening to lectures on Eastern philosophy. This was a defining period when I was undergoing a transformation of identity from what seemed erroneous, incompetent, and isolated toward a self beyond limitations. This was a time of self-discovery of potentials while finding an eternal relationship within a network of wholeness.

This literature review is divided into eight sections: Disability Studies, Dyslexic Psychosocial Development, Identity Formation, Dyslexic Theory, Language and Embodiment, Artistic Development, Meaning-Making, and Relevance for Art Education. The Disability Studies section considers the medical and social model for disability, as well as a psychological model. The importance of art education for disabilities studies is discussed. This section also covers the psychosocial difficulties experienced by disabled individuals that can influence identity formation. The Dyslexic Psychosocial
Development section considers emotional, social, and motivational dimensions of the dyslexic experience during education (e.g., Maslow, 1943). The identity Formation section describes research on the emergence of self through object-relations (Winnicott, 1971), identity development during adolescence (Erikson, 1980), and identity status during college (Marcia, 1966).

The Dyslexic Theory section briefly outlines the major theories of neurological causes for developmental dyslexia and the complexities of the all-inclusive dyslexic category. The Language and Embodiment section discusses some of the basic theories concerning language acquisition (e.g., Piaget, 1954, 1955; Vygotsky, 1978, 1980), as well as embodiment theories for the relationship between language and the body (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, 1964b, 1968, 2002; Damasio, 1999, 2006; Donald, 1991). The Artistic Development section considers stage theories from pre-symbolic to post-formal operations (e.g., Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982; Piaget, 1954), as well as non-linear artistic development (Darras & Kindler, 1994). The Meaning-Making section considers cultural narrative (Bruner, 1990), self-other balance theory (Kegan, 1982), and adult cognitive development (Perry, 1981) to understand how visual art graduate students make sense of their artistic identity and artwork. The Relevance for Art Education section discusses the contributions of understanding the psychosocial development of students with dyslexia, to developments in curriculum design, as well as to the helping of mentors, counselors, educators, and administrators in understanding students with literacy difficulties.

Disability Studies

Social Model

The field of disability studies has been developing since the 1980s and has become an interdisciplinary endeavor with contributions from feminism, medicine, ethics, psychology, sociology, law and public policy. Within disability studies there are two
primary models: the medical and social (Shakespeare, 1996, 2006). The medical model perceives disability as an issue with the individual and focuses on a cure. The social model, on the other hand, perceives disability as a social construction and strives toward a full integration of people considered disabled into society, such as in education and employment. Both models have their limitations; however, in terms of learning disabilities such as dyslexia, there is no cure. A person with dyslexia must adapt to their environment and navigate around their decoding difficulties to the best of their ability throughout life. The medical model does not offer a solution that accounts for the cognitive, psychological, and social needs of those with disabilities.

The social model is contingent on the distinction between impairment (e.g., physical or mental issue) and disability (e.g., other forms of social exclusion added upon the challenges of the impairment) (Oliver, 1996). However, within the social model for disability the notion of impairment and disability are not causally related (Shakespeare, 1996). For example, ethnicity and sexuality by themselves are not considered impairments; however, within a social context where there are tendencies toward racism and homophobia these groups are at a social disadvantage and considered disabled within this environment. Thus, the social model shifts the notion of disability away from the individual and toward social factors that have patterns of marginalizing particular populations.

Michel Foucault is a central figure in the development of the social model for disability through his writings concerning knowledge and power. *Biopower* is a term coined by Foucault as a way of understanding the self in relationship to other institutions of power, such as governments, schools, prisons, and psychiatric clinics. He describes biopower as, “bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them...” (Foucault, 1979, p. 136). He was not interested in the study of power in and of itself, but rather how power turns people into subjects over the course of time (in Tremain, 2015; Foucault, 1982).
The concept of *subjectivity* is not consistent throughout Foucault’s writing, but important for understanding the relationship between biopower and the self. Mark G. E. Kelly (2013) attempts to summarize Foucault’s notion of subjectivity after considering the progression of his thoughts over time in what “constitutes itself in different forms at different times through the use of varied practices, but always by distinguishing itself from the physical body that engages in those practices” (Kelly, 2013, p. 513). Similar to Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*, Foucault understands the construction of self through temporality that is influenced by cultural apparatuses, “techniques of the self” (in Kelly, 2013, p. 512; Foucault, 1982). Shelley Tremain (2000, 2015) further develops Foucault’s thoughts on power relations through describing how disabled individuals are unable to gain access to basic dimensions of community life, such as education and employment. Within our society particular abilities are given privilege, which calls for the need to challenge particular norms and advocate for those of different abilities that are on the margins of the mainstream.

While the social model has moved the emphasis of disability away from the individual toward social structures that marginalize different populations, there are other ways that oppression is embodied through physical and/or cognitive impairments. The social model does not include psychological and emotional dimensions of disability that can also contribute to a sense of internalized “disabledness” (Thomas, 1999). For example, Donna Reeve (2002) describes two forms of internalized emotional factors that can have a negative influence on a disabled person’s sense of well-being: the gaze and self-surveillance. A gaze from others can create a sense of otherness that is internalized through introjection of others’ thoughts and behaviors while in their presence. Emotional trauma can also be experienced through self-surveillance where perceptions from a gaze are internalized and result in the attempt to modify actions so that one will not be perceived as disabled even when alone (Reeve, 2002).
Disability and Artmaking

Art education and disability studies have much to offer each other when considering the cognitive, emotional, and social development of those with disabilities. For example, Alice Wexler (2011) studied three adolescents with Down’s syndrome in an art program, finding that artmaking allowed for cognitive development through understanding time and space sequencing. Wexler has gone on to argue that disability studies is an interdisciplinary field that allows for different schools to dialogue with each other and contribute toward recognizing the benefits of art education for disabled students (Wexler, 2011).

Inclusion during education is a significant theme concerning the psychosocial development of students with disabilities. For example, Sibley (1995) found that students who often feel excluded and fall outside of social norms often seek inclusive spaces. These findings are also supported by Hall (2010) who found the art classroom to be an inclusive space where students with disabilities are able to socially interact with non-disabled peers and freely express their abilities. The art classroom has consistently been shown as an inclusive space where students with disabilities can develop emotionally and socially.

However, there is still much work needed to be done for the full inclusion of disabled individuals into the arts. For example, Wexler and Derby (2015) discuss the implications of the medical model for those with disabilities and how the emphasis on disability, residing within the individual, inevitably creates outsiders within the art world. They point out that the art classroom is a location that continues to lack the capabilities to allow full access to studio spaces for disabled students. However, there are some all-inclusive spaces that move beyond the insider/outsider dichotomy, value the individual voice of the disabled artist, and serve as a model for what is possible, such as House of Artists, Grass Roots Art and Community Effort (GRACE), and The Community Growth Art Center.
However, there are serious issues when speaking generally about disabilities. Doug Blandy (1994) mentions the importance of making distinctions between individuals with different abilities rather than combining them into one single category of “disability.” For example, there is a significant gap between someone with Down’s syndrome and someone who has dyslexia. The needs of different disabled individuals within the art classroom can vary significantly (e.g., the need for special equipment for those missing a limb, an assistant who could translate sign language for someone who is deaf, or a developmental specialist who can work with someone who has Down’s syndrome).

While Public Laws (e.g., 94-145 in 1975) have led toward mainstream inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom, this has also led to new challenges for educators who are often witnessing budgets cut and resource reductions. Beverly Gerber and Doris Guay (2014) specifically discuss this issue and the complexities of teaching art to a diverse group of students within the broad category of disability in the classroom. Through considering the needs related to each characteristic of a difference in ability (e.g., difficulties with memory, reading, writing, attention, or visual perception) they differentiate specific accommodations that must be considered during the artmaking process.

Dyslexic Psychosocial Development

Motivation

When considering the social and emotional growth of dyslexic students it is important to understand their needs and motivations. Abraham Maslow (1943, 1968) developed a hierarchical model for understanding the needs and motivations that usually develop in a particular order. Maslow defines our most basic physical needs for food and shelter as fundamental, as they must be satisfied before one can consider their safety needs. Developing a sense of security and well-being precedes the need for social
belonging, such as friendship, family, and intimacy. Following social needs are esteem needs, such as self-respect and confidence. Physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs (also called “deficiency needs”) lie at the foundation and must be satisfied before an individual can reach their potentials through self-actualization (Maslow, 1943, 1968).

Self-actualization is a period of growth toward fulfilling learning, aesthetic, and moral potentials when individuals often ask existential questions, search for meaning, become concerned with ethics, explore their imagination and creativity, and have peak experiences (e.g., epiphanies). Maslow distinguished Helen Keller, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, and Martin Luther King, Jr. as examples of individuals who have reached such states of creativity, moral responsibility, and meaning during their lives. Maslow also mentioned that artistic activity is a manifestation of humanity’s highest needs where dichotomies often dissolved and the relationships between self and others are in constant dialogue through artistic expression (Maslow, 1943, 1968).

However, there is research on non-linear development of needs that breaks with Maslow’s hierarchy. For example, Goebel and Brown (1981) studied 111 participants between the ages of 9 and 80 years when considering patterns of motivation in children, adolescents, young adults, middle-aged adults, and aged adults. Participants were given a Life Motivation Scale survey with questions they rated from most important to least (4-0), finding motivational variations in age and sex for four needs, such as reversing the order of belonging and esteem. There were also findings showing a decrease in self-actualization and an increase in physical and security needs during late adulthood. Consideration is given to the lack of understanding of how needs emerge within Maslow’s hierarchy and their sequence that could be understood by considering the developmental theories of Erikson (1963, 1980), Piaget (1955), Kegan (1982), Kohlberg (1971), Loevinger (1976), and Gilligan (1993).
While Maslow is a significant figure for the development of humanist psychology, influencing contemporary thinkers such as Douglas McGregor and Elliot Aronson, his theory of needs has some limitations and critics. One issue with Maslow’s theory is that it was developed for white males within a business model and biased toward non-Western values. For example, Marxist’s have argued that his description of self-actualization as an independent activity is inherently elitist and does not emphasize socioeconomic factors that influence the development of self (Lethbridge, 1986; Shaw & Colimore, 1988).

Criticism of Maslow’s work has also been expressed by Feminists, such as Carol Gilligan (1993), who points out the significance of belonging and intimacy among girls throughout development. Poststructuralists have also rejected the notion of the autonomous self entirely (e.g., Foucault, 1995). However, in response to this form of criticism Maslow has also pointed out that culture and biology are only necessary causes for the development of self, not the sufficient cause (Maslow, 1971) and needs are not an exclusive determiner for behavior or personality (Maslow, 1970).

**Childhood**

Students with dyslexia often experience “deficiency needs” during education. For example, literacy difficulties during education can have emotional and social implications, affecting the sense of belonging and self-esteem. Interview studies with those who have dyslexia often focus on the psychosocial development that takes place in the classroom and the social environment and continues to affect children into adulthood. The social development of children seems to influence their emotional development, which is a salient theme for dyslexics learning to read in our society.

For example, self-awareness of a dyslexic condition could influence students’ overall educational experience. Marshall et al. (2006) conducted interviews with eight dyslexic New Zealanders between 9 and 14 years of age. A narrative analysis was used to find patterns of self-awareness from the participants’ own dyslexic condition, the effects
of further understanding of dyslexia, the self-perception of competency, as well as the role of supportive teachers, tutors, friends and a greater culture. Self-esteem issues were the most prominent for the dyslexic participants who struggled during their early education. What became important for those who have dyslexia was self-awareness of their condition, empathy from others, and ability to develop toward their strengths and what they enjoy doing (Marshall et al., 2006).

**Adolescents**

Issues with reading in school have also been shown to affect emotional development and lead toward delinquent behavior during adolescents. For example, Eissa’s (2010) study found that emotional and behavioral issues of adolescents might be linked to difficulties with reading, such as with dyslexia. Thirty-five poor readers and 21 typical reading adolescents were interviewed for success or failure in school, feelings of well-being, the impact of dyslexia on school achievements, self-esteem, and peer relations. A Youth Self-Report Inventory was given to measure withdrawal, semantic complaints, anxiety, depression, aggression, delinquency, as well as issues with socializing, reasoning, and attention. They were also given the Hamilton rating scale of depression and anxiety. Dyslexic adolescents showed higher levels than the control group for all measures of the Youth Self-Report Inventory. Dyslexics also scored higher on the Hamilton rating system for both depression and anxiety (Eissa, 2010).

There are showings that dyslexic children experience negative effects that influence their quality of life as they move toward adulthood. Interviews conducted by Ingresson (2007) included 75 dyslexic adolescents and young adults discussing their experience in school, concerning topics such as well-being, educational achievement, self-esteem, peer relations and optimism for the future. It was found that the majority had low feelings of well-being while in elementary school, which extended into middle
school with feelings of discomfort. However, the dyslexic group perceived high school in a more positive perspective.

Socializing and forming relationships with others had a positive effect on quality of life during these difficult periods. Yet, experiences of inferiority or difference were prevalent themes that affected self-esteem and the sense of well-being. Those who chose occupations that did not require reading and writing, but took into account their talents and capacities tended to do better in terms of well-being. It was found that early identification of dyslexia might be one way to deal with later issues concerning the sense of well-being. Other potential implications could include special education being implemented in the classroom during the early school years so students do not need to leave the classroom, as well as encouraging them in physical, social and special interest activities for building positive self-esteem (Ingresson, 2007).

**Adulthood**

It has been found that issues with self-esteem among dyslexic adults were a prevalent and emerged in their childhood. For example, McNulty (2003) studied the life story narratives of twelve dyslexic participants finding the prevalent theme of inferiority among peers. Difficulties in school and other important passages of life contributed to this sense of inferiority and gave them the sense that others felt there was something wrong with them. The implications of this study involve promoting functional and psychological compensation, reducing potential stigma and trauma, and bolstering self-esteem (McNulty, 2003).

These findings were also supported by Undheim (2003), who studied two groups of dyslexic adults in Norway. Group (A) comprised 21 dyslexic adults from a longitudinal study that were diagnosed at age 10, and group (B) 13, drawn from a child psychiatric clinic with dyslexic characteristics. Through tests, questionnaires, and interviews, it was shown that group (B) had lower satisfaction with health, friends and academic
achievement than group (A). However, both dyslexic groups had psychiatric issues (Undheim, 2003). Struggling with a negative self-concept was a common issue for both dyslexic groups. A significant number of the two dyslexic groups remember receiving little support or assistance because the instructors had insufficient knowledge of dyslexia. The most stressful situation for dyslexic students in the classroom was reading aloud. One of the major issues with the special assistance in school was the placing of dyslexic students in a heterogeneous environment with students with other learning issues where they would not get the assistance they needed. However, computer use on a regular basis had a significant positive effect that is described as life changing.

The professional lives of dyslexic adults have been studied through interviews. Fink (1995) studied twelve successful dyslexics who were interviewed using a Gilliganian open-ended approach. They came from a variety of career paths, including an attorney, biochemist, businessman, graphic artist, gynecologist, immunologist, neurologist, physicist, special educator, and a theater set designer. They had also accomplished the ability to integrate knowledge, synthesize, and generate new knowledge. It was found that these successful dyslexics were avid readers and may have developed fluency later in life than their non-dyslexic peer group. They all shared the common struggle with letter identification, word recognition, and sound reconnection. Many of the participants would use context clues to determine meaning when reading. However, their passion for a topic was the driving force for their education. Dyslexics who got better at reading got better through practice (Fink, 1995).

**Identity Formation**

**Emergence of Self**

During the section above we explored how negative emotional and social experiences during childhood and adolescence can influence the development of self, but
what is this self? One way of approaching this question of emerging self is through observing children and their interactions with objects. For example, Margaret Mahler (1963) found that the relationship between self and environment was experienced as a state of wholeness and undifferentiated stimuli of inside-outside during early infancy. Through interactions with objects children gradually are able to differentiate themselves from their environment, which leads toward autonomy. Object-relations theory was further developed by Daniel Stern (1985), who emphasized the importance of the caregiver during child development in nurturing a healthy relationship between self and other, stressing the significance of social bonding rather than independence. Donald Winnicott (1971) was also a significant contributor toward object-relations theory and wrote about transitional objects that stand in between reality and imagination, allowing for an integration of self and world. Transitional objects are often toys, such as stuffed animals, that children play with and project their emotional and physical needs into. It is through these interactions with objects that a self emerges from the matrix of the body.

**Psychosocial Stages**

While children develop into social beings they develop a “social self” (James, 1890/1950) that is constructed through social interactions. Identity development is an example of the social self and identity formation models have their origins in the work of Erik Erikson who extended Sigmund Freud’s psychosexual stages. Erikson found that individuals are confronted with eight crises between childhood and the adult years that must be overcome to develop virtues (e.g., trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, ego integrity vs. despair).

According to Erik Erikson (1982), if a child between 5-12 years of age is unable to acquire a sense of competency in their abilities they can experience a state of inferiority. This is often the case for those with literacy difficulties during primary education.
Developing an inadequate sense of self during these early years can also have an influence on identity formation during adolescence. Erikson describes the period of adolescence as a time of conflict between identity and role confusion that occurs between 12-18 years of age (Erikson, 1980). This is a period of searching and re-examining oneself when youths are confronted with the sense that they are changing and could be a different person from one day to the next, but also wish to fit in socially. If one does not find a place in society, role confusion may develop. This is a crucial period for high school students who are often concerned with choosing a vocation and what they are going to study in college.

Early adulthood is often a time when students start college. According to Erikson, this is a time when young adults are confronted with the conflict of intimacy versus alienation and social relationships become salient. If intimate relationships are not cultivated during this time adults may experience the sense of social isolation (Erikson, 1980). As stage theories can be criticized, this inquiry into emotional and social development gives some grounding for understanding how high school and college students make meaning during different periods of their life.

Identity Status

James Marcia (1966, 1967) expands on Erikson’s work by considering adult identity status when deciding upon religious beliefs, political ideologies, or a field of study during college. Marcia defines four types of identity status: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Identity diffusion can be understood as a state where students are having difficulty making a commitment to a belief system, ideology, or a subject they wish to focus on during college. Individuals who are experiencing identity diffusion may or may not be undergoing an identity crisis. They are lacking in direction, motivation, avoiding any attempt to explore their possibilities, and may be unaware there is an issue. Frequently, they drift between positions and are confused about their own
goals. They are often characterized by stagnation, apathy, and distanced relationships (Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lester, 1973).

On the other hand, foreclosure is a state where students have made a commitment to a field of study, belief system, or ideology, but were unable or unwilling to spend any time considering their options. Often this status is associated with close family ties where they are following in their parents’ footsteps, in the process of becoming their parents’ alter ego (Marcia, 1966; Orlofsky et al., 1973). Those who foreclose also appear to have avoided an identity crisis, have a low state of autonomy, seem prone to authoritarian views (e.g., obedience and respect toward authority figures—similar to William Perry’s dualism phase of adult cognitive development, see subsection Post-formal operations, p. 54), prone toward anxiety, are dependent on external forms of validation for self-esteem, often set unobtainable goals, and have an unrealistic response toward failure (Marcia, 1966, 1967). Another issue is that those who foreclose early may find later that they are unhappy with their early decisions and may wonder what it may have been like if they had followed a different path.

In contrast, Moratorium is a state where students are actively exploring their interests without making a full commitment yet (Marcia, 1966). They are in the position of an identity crisis that has not been resolved. The state of Moratorium is often associated with ambivalent relationships and anxiety with indecision, but is also the most varied group ranging from extremely creative to static uncertainty (Orlofsky et al., 1973). However, this is considered an ideal status until they are able to reach identity achievement, when they had the opportunity to explore their options and came to a point of commitment in their academic pursuits. This is a state where one has experienced an identity crisis and has come to a resolution. Through this outcome, identity achieving individuals are associated with a sense of well-being, able to accomplish intimacy, have strong internal self-esteem, experience less anxiety and authoritarian views, and set realistic goals (Marcia, 1966, 1967) (Identity achievement is similar to William Perry’s
multiple commitments phase of adult cognitive development, see subsection, *Post-formal operations*, p. 54).

**Dyslexic Identity**

Marcia’s identity status model can be compared to studies considering college students with developmental dyslexia who have shown a significant interest in the visual arts, which may influence early academic foreclosure. For example, through semi-structured interviews, Alison M. Bacon and Samantha Bennett (2013) studied 13 participants with dyslexia that were currently visual art college students or had received their degree within 5 years. Considering participant educational experience, emerging themes showed patterns of negative experience in school, encouragement from family, the choice to study art, creativity and thinking differently, determination, art as a lifelong passion, and artistic identity. While many of the participants expressed passion for the arts, they also felt that the arts were the only choice they had when going to college. While most of the participants reported their difficulties with literacy as a primary influence of their identity formation during secondary education, the college environment and the study of visual art seemed to have had the most positive influence on identity formation.

Identity formation of students with disabilities can also be understood in relationship to the medical or social model of disability. For example, Tom Shakespeare (1996) mentions that the medical model allows for the construction of a negative self-identity as a result of placing blame on the impairment and attempting assimilation into society through developing coping mechanisms. However, the social model allows for the movement toward political organization while embracing an identity among others with differences of abilities to influence social change. This active move toward self-empowerment within a cohesive group has positive implications for identity formation in contrast to accepting social and institutional norms. However, the attempt to create a
positive disabled or abled identity is always in reaction toward being unable to ignore the socialized and internalized oppression that moved these individuals to organize in the first place.

**Identity Formation Summary**

This section considers the construction of self through object-relations, psychosocial development, and disability studies. Object-relation theory (Mahler, 1963; Stern, 1985; Winnicott, 1971) is considered for understanding the emergence of self out of a matrix of non-differentiated sensory-bodily phenomena during infancy. This embodied experience also gives insight into the self-other interactions that can be related to interactions with materials during artmaking, and lays a foundation for understanding Kegan’s (1982) subject-object balance theory (discussed further in subsection: *Self and Other*, p. 52). Erik Erikson’s (1982) psychosocial development theory is considered for understanding patterns of crisis during the life-cycle (e.g., industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, and intimacy vs. isolation) to understand patterns of identity construction. To further understand identity formation, James Marcia’s (1966) identity status theory is discussed (e.g., diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement) to understand how young adults decide upon ideologies or academic disciplines during their undergraduate years. The medical and social model for disabilities is also considered for understanding identity formation for those who have learning difficulties.

**Dyslexic Theory**

**Dyslexic Characteristics**

While this study focuses on a social model of disability, it is critical to understand the neurological basis for dyslexic phenomena. Neurological research has allowed for
greater insight into how language is processed in the brain and how this process differs from those who have literacy difficulties. Dyslexia is unique in that it is an inclusive term for a number of different characteristics. Some dyslexic attributes may include: speech and language difficulties, semantic errors, issues with memory (short-term and/or working), issues with coordination (e.g. clumsiness, sequencing, and rhythm), slower information processing abilities, poor concentration, inconsistent hand preference, issues with phonetics (e.g., verbal fluency and phonic skills), reversing letters (e.g., b’s and d’s), and difficulty in undertaking mental calculations without visual tools (Elliott & Gibbs, 2008). It may be possible that only a few characteristics are present in any given case. However, it is also possible that all these qualities may be present in a given case, but in varying degrees of strength. Each dyslexic case is unique and poses difficulties when attempting to define the neurological cause.

There are numerous theories for the neurological cause or causes for developmental dyslexia and it is difficult to pin down the exact regions because of the difficulties of studying the brain. With the variety of cognitive characteristics, typologies and subtypes between cases, developmental dyslexia proves to be an elusive neurological mystery. There are six major theories that attempt to describe the cause of developmental dyslexia: cerebellar, visual, attentional deficit, perceptual visual-noise exclusion, rapid auditory processing, and phonological deficit theory. Today some of these theories have been condensed into three primary hypotheses: phonological deficit, cerebellar, and magnocellular theory. One major characteristic of these theories is the difference in how visual-spatial and phonological information is processed.

**Phonological Theory**

Phonological processing has been a prevalent topic within dyslexia studies for over 30 years. The phonological deficit theory describes dyslexia as an issue with phonological awareness, which allows for the ability to make clear sound distinctions and
to manipulate speech. Those with developmental dyslexia often have an issue with phonological representations and processes that are evident through cognitive tasks (Adlard & Hazan, 1998; Snowling, 2000). There are three main phonological dimensions that are concerned with the access, encoding and retrieval of sound information: poor phonological awareness, poor verbal short-term memory, and slow lexicon retrieval (Ramus, 2003; Wagner & Torgesen, 1987). These three dimensions are associated with the memory process, which includes working, short-term and long-term memory systems. Any one or more dimensions could be involved in any case of developmental dyslexia so it is difficult to isolate the cause.

Poor phonological awareness involves the access, attention and manipulation of sound structures, such as the awareness of syllables, onsets, rimes and phonemes during speech. Phonological awareness could be seen as the central executor for accessing sub-lexicons. Working memory (cognitive-load) is associated with attention and acts as a kind of workspace for active thinking that can refer back to short and long-term memory (Miyake & Shah, 1999). Poor verbal short-term memory is the second dimension of phonological defect theory for dyslexia. Short-term memory is located in the cerebral cortex where it organizes sensory data (Baddeley, Hitch, & Allen, 2009). The phonological defect could occur either during the short process of copying into the phonological buffer or during the phonological loop process when it recycles the input and output of sub-lexical representations. The last dimension considers the possibility of an issue during the information retrieval process from short-term memory that can contribute to a phonological deficit of developmental dyslexia (Ramus & Szenkovits, 2008).

Cognitive deprivation of phonological representations, such as spoken language, is currently the most accepted hypothesis for the causes of dyslexia (Serniclaes, Heghe, Mousty, Carré, & Sprenger-Charolles, 2004; Snowling, 2000). Even if representations were encoded properly, the limitations with short-term memory alone may be the cause
for poor phonological performance (Ramus & Szenkovits, 2008). However, if there is an issue during sound representation processing, storage and/or retrieval, the ability to read an alphabetic system will be challenged (Brady, 1991; Snowling, 1981). The only major criticism for the phonological theory is that it lacks an explanation for sensory and motor issues that dyslexics often experience (Snowling, 2000). However, the phonological theory still stands as a leading hypothesis for understanding issues that may arise with attention and encoding speech sounds for developmental dyslexia.

**Simple View**

The most accepted theory for dyslexia is the simple view for reading. The simple view argues that both decoding and comprehension are necessary for reading to be possible (Gough & Tummer, 1986). For example, if one is able to decode textual language, but unable to comprehend (e.g., hyperlexia) than one would be unable to read. If one can comprehend through listening to verbal language, but cannot decode text (e.g., dyslexia) than one will also be unable to read. If one is unable to both decode and comprehend, this will also result in the inability to read and could represent a number of different literacy issues. Both decoding and comprehension abilities are essential during the reading process. While decoding is not the only issue that students with dyslexia are challenged by, there is evidence that decoding abilities are significantly lower in comparison to non-dyslexic students when reading non-words (Vellutino, 1979).

**Dyslexic Subtypes**

Part of the reason for the number of different theories concerning dyslexia stems from the variety of cases. Currently, there are two classes for dyslexic phenomena: peripheral and central (Valdois, 1995). Peripheral types describe dyslexia as an issue with visual analysis, such as neglect, attention, visual, and letter-by-letter reading forms. Central dyslexia includes issues with the representation of language, such as surface, phonological, non-semantic reading, and deep dyslexia.
Surface dyslexia was first reported by Bub, Cancelliere, and Kertesz (1985) when they found a patient who could read non-words (e.g., blick), but made errors over half of the time with irregular words (e.g., yacht). They hypothesized that grapheme-to-phoneme was impaired during visual analysis. It is possible that three different parts of the reading process are impaired for surface dyslexia: orthographic lexicon, the semantic system, and/or phonological lexicon (Bub et al., 1985). Phonological dyslexia has the opposite issue from the surface subtype. Funnell (1983) first reported a patient who could read whole words, but had issues with sounding out unfamiliar words or non-words (Table 1). It is hypothesized that this is due to issues with the grapheme-to-phoneme correspondence (Funnell, 1983).

Table 1: Differences Between Surface and Phonological Dyslexia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-word (e.g., blick)</th>
<th>Irregular word (e.g., yacht)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surface Dyslexia</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Impaired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonological Dyslexia</td>
<td>Impaired</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both nonsemantic reading and deep dyslexia are issues involving the semantic system. Nonsemantic reading dyslexia was first discussed by Saffran, Bogyo, Schwartz, and Marin (1980), while studying a patient who could read aloud, but was unable to comprehend what he was reading. It is hypothesized that this may be due to issues with the processing of the semantic system (Saffran et al., 1980). Deep dyslexia also involves an issue with semantic processing that may include semantic (e.g., Heart to Blood), visual (Mouth to Month), visual and semantic (e.g., Barn to Farm) and morphological errors (e.g., Sleep to Sleeping) (Buchanan et al., 2002). These cases also show issues with reading non-words and irregular words, sharing both surface and phonological characteristics.
There is a great deal to learn from these cases; however, all subtypes have been modeled through studies on acquired dyslexia. Developmental dyslexics lack signs of lesions on the brain, which makes it difficult to find clear disruptions in the brain, where cognitive studies can show weaknesses during tasks. Nonetheless, when it comes to developmental dyslexia there are serious issues with understanding how individuals compensate for their own unique set of difficulties and strengths.

More qualitative data need to be collected on developmental dyslexia to show the diversity of behavioral and environmental experiences among cases in order to develop new dynamic models. For example, Peterson, Pennington, and Olson (2013) point out the need for more accountability of the semantic networks involved in reading, which may give insight into the diversity of dyslexic cases. Research used for developing subtype models primarily originates out of acquired dyslexic cases and cannot illustrate the complexities of developmental dyslexia. Developmental cases may be difficult to subtype because of the numerous ways in which the brain may compensate for reading issues and may vary between different forms of orthographic scripts.

**Language and Embodiment**

**Language Theory**

Literacy skills are a priority in contemporary educational systems around the world because literacy is the fundamental way in which we are able to communicate with each other. If children are unable to acquire particular language and decoding abilities, such as in the case with dyslexia, they may experience emotional and social difficulties later on during adulthood. Considering the development of language and the significance of the body during the meaning-making process is helpful for understanding why those with literacy difficulties may orient themselves toward other modes of expression, such as the visual arts.
While there is no doubt of the significance of language development within modern cultures, there are continuous debates on how language is acquired. The salient debate within language development is whether language is acquired through nature or nurture. One school argues that language develops through interactions in a social environment. For example, behaviorists proposed that language is a learned skill that requires parental reinforcement, such as giving rewards for producing particular sounds (Skinner, 2014). The other school argues that language is part of an innate cognitive system. For example, Noam Chomsky’s (1959) universal grammar hypothesis considers cognition as a primary contributor to language, describing the brain as “hard wired” from birth with the necessary mechanisms to acquire language. It is difficult to determine which is the correct point of view because both cognition and culture seem to work simultaneously.

Both Jean Piaget (1954, 1955) and Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1980) understood language development as a process of interaction between self and environment. It is through the process of creating symbol systems that children are able to make sense of their world. However, they differ on their understanding of the relationship between language and thought. Piaget (1955) emphasized cognitive development in stages (e.g., sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operations, and formal operations) where internal thoughts lead to external language. On the other hand, Vygotsky emphasized external social factors involved in language development where thoughts develop out of language during social interaction. Thus, language develops through considering a child’s current language abilities and the readiness for further development (zone of proximity) through the proper guidance of parents or caregivers (scaffolding) (Vygotsky, 1978).

Continuous and discontinuous theories persist in defining the discussion of language development; however, there appear to be major milestones that each child must pass through. For example, children (birth to 2 years) phonologically pass through the three stages of vocal play, canonical babbling and first words. Before children start to make their first words they make sounds through crying and cooing. Later vocal play
usually appears between 4 and 8 months, when children start to make sounds similar to vowels and consonants (Stark, 1986). Once children start to make longer series of sounds they have reached the babbling stage. Canonical babbling usually starts between 6 and 9 months when children repeat syllables in a consonant-vowel relationship (e.g., dada) (Oller, 2000). Later they start to produce non-reduplicated babbling (jargon) with a greater range of consonant-vowel combinations. They start to combine different consonant-vowel-consonant relationships and intonation becomes emphasized (Dore, 1975). This form of babbling is much like sentences without recognizable words.

Children usually start to produce words around 13 months by creating invented proto-words for objects or people (e.g., yum yum for food). These first words are often used in relationship to gestures. Gestures precede verbal language as the first form of communication for children (Bates, Benigni, Bretherton, Camaioni, & Volterra, 1979) and children continue to use gestures while they adopt words, such as pointing toward a cup while saying “cup” (Greenfield & Smith, 1976). For example, Iverson and Meandow (2005) conducted a study to determine whether gestures toward objects are related to the emergence of words and the relationship between gestures in two-word utterances. They studied ten English-learning children (5 males, 5 females) every month between the ages of 10 and 24 months (a critical period for the first onset of one-word to two-words). It was shown that gestural repertoires appeared during the verbal lexicon as children acquired words. It was also hypothesized that communication may be easier to convey through bodily gestures than verbal speech for young children (Iverson & Meandow, 2005).

Embodiment

The relationship between language and the body is a central theme within philosophy; for example, the mind-body problem concerning consciousness. While the analytic school criticizes sensory perception as secondary to reason, the
phenomenological school emphasizes the importance of the body and sensation during the thinking process. For example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964a, 1964b, 1968, 2002) wrote significantly on embodiment and argued that the body is at the center of all knowledge. As Merleau-Ponty (1968) states, “We are the world that thinks itself … the world is at the heart of our flesh” (p. 136). Merleau-Ponty (2002) goes on to explain that the nature of experience is rooted in the non-discrete relationship between consciousness and the sensory body. Thus, knowledge of anything in the world comes through perception of sight, sound, taste, smell, and physical sensations that are always situated within the body.

In terms of language development, Merleau-Ponty does not believe that words can be separated from thoughts and thoughts can be separated from feelings. Language and the body are always interconnected. As Merleau-Ponty (1964b) states, “Language bears the meaning of thought as a footprint signifies the movement and effort of a body” (p. 44). The interconnection between sensation and thought is also supported by the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999, 2006), who argues that human thought would lack rationality if thinking was not situated within a feeling-sensing body. This notion is supported by biological grounding of emotions and feelings that ultimately give rise to rational thoughts. Damasio makes this argument by differentiating the self into four forms (e.g., proto-self, core consciousness, extended consciousness, and conscience) that illustrate the move from the biological processes of the body toward abstract reasoning. The proto-self is a pre-conscious state of the physical body from which core consciousness arises. Core consciousness is awareness of feelings in relation to body states, which eventually gives rise to emotions. Extended consciousness rises out of core consciousness as awareness of time through memory. Autobiographical memories allow for extended consciousness to develop toward conscience; however, without the sensory and emotional grounding one cannot reason or make decisions.
Merleau-Ponty (1964a) often referred to language as gestures and felt that understanding came through mimesis, which was a direct form of communication in contrast to abstract interpretation. Imitation has been observed as an early form of learning during childhood that is situated within the body, such as imitations of facial expressions during the first year of infancy (Gallagher, 2006; Piaget, 1962). Cultural theories have also mentioned the significance of mimesis during early development of communication. For example, Merlin Donald (1991) made connections between cognition and three phases of cultural development: mimetic, narrative, and theoretical. According to Donald, mimetic culture is a period of development that is rooted in the motor control skills that emerge out of the development of procedural memory, a type of long-term memory that stores information for how to walk and make repetitive sounds. This pre-linguistic period of communication is hypothesized as taking place during the Homo erectus period where information was primarily conveyed through bodily gestures and rituals. While humans developed more control over their abilities to produce speech sounds, oral cultures developed that allowed for the representation of mythic narratives (Donald, 1991).

**Language and Embodiment Summary**

While language theories attempt to explain cognitive and environmental influences for how children acquire language abilities, there are particular markers of development that are usually expressed during growth (e.g., vocal play, canonical babbling, and first words). This development of language can be compared to the ways meaning is made through embodied actions that appear to develop before and along side verbal language, such as when infants physically imitate facial expressions. The expression of feelings and emotions through language is also an expression of the relationship between language and the body. The significance of sensation, emotion, and the body will be further explored in the next section by considering the artistic development of children.
Artistic Development

The visual arts can also be understood within the context of embodied representations. Studies and observations of children’s artwork have shown phases of representation that express a move from the emotional and sensory body toward the symbolic. For example, children’s artwork can be divided into three primary stages: pre-symbolic, proto-symbolic and symbolic. These three stages are accompanied by differences in cognition that directly reflect the role of the body while making art and acquiring a visual repertoire. Children may move back and forth through these different stages; however, there is a trajectory where one usually first develops competency in the first stage before moving to the next. This move can be described as a shift from direct expressions of body sensation to an abstract understanding of self and world.

Pre-symbolic

Early stages in child development can be framed within the direct experience of body sensations. For example, Sigmund Freud (1957) describes the early stages of oral fixation (birth to 1 year), when children will put almost anything in their mouth and the anal stage (1-2 years) of pleasure or discomfort associated with retention and release of fecal matter. During this period of development children make meaning out of the moment-by-moment bodily experiences.

Piaget identifies this period between birth and 18 months as the sensory motor stage where toddlers react without thought, grasping and sucking. Repetitive behavior is common as children discover how their actions affect their environment, where direct physical experience of objects gives infants their sense of existence (Piaget, 1954; Singer & Revenson, 1996). Both Erikson and Piaget found this period to be critical for children in developing motor skills needed for language.

The immediacy of the sensory body and first representations in infancy are described in the writings of Viktor Lowenfeld as the scribble stage (2-4 years). The
engagement of materials in making gestures and during the act of mark-making comes from the bodily pleasure of these activities. The marks and lines they make are organized based on physical motor stimulation and limitations of eye coordination with the hand and wrist. Through these early visual acts children are fascinated with their effects on the world (Gardner & Winner, 1982; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982). These first embodied representations show a relationship within the meaning-making process as learning comes directly out of experiences in the world and through materials.

**Proto-symbolic**

Piaget observed that young children develop their repertoire of lines and marks between the ages of four and seven years, before they move into the stage of early symbolic development. Piaget defines this period as preoperational (18 months-7 years), during which time children start to acquire language through images and visual symbols. They are very curious, but egocentric in their perceptions and intuitions. They lack logical thinking ability, but they can represent the world from their personal point of view (Piaget, 1955; Singer & Revenson, 1996).

Lowenfeld and Brittain (1982) describes this period as first representational attempts (4-7 years) as children start to create divisions, boundaries and enclosures that distinguish between inside and outside spaces. Later, these enclosures are divided into further sections and made to represent the world, such as a drawing of a person with a circle for an abdomen and lines for legs and arms. These first steps toward the creation of visual symbols are emotionally salient for children as they draw from experiences of their world, fantasies and imagination when developing narratives. People and places that have emotional significance and give a sense of security become primary subjects of artistic interest, such as parents, home, school and church (Burton 1980b; Smith 1983). As observed by both Piaget and Lowenfeld, the proto-representational stage is a critical
period where children start to make meaning out of their experiences and represent through their own created embodied visual language.

**Symbolism**

Early symbol-making is a process that involves the interaction of both ideas and materials for young children. Often the content of a work of art comes out of the interaction with materials. Burton (1980b) describes three primary stages of early symbol making, when children first start to name their creations using words with which they are familiar. Then a naming process starts to evolve out of the creative process with materials and finally children start to develop goals and choose materials based on their ideas. This period illustrates a move toward a higher-ordered system of mental abstractions; however, their physical orientation during the act of making, subject interests, and final representations still embody the sensory mechanisms for understanding self and world. This is a critical period for visual language development as symbols start to reference other symbols and materials become secondary.

Between the ages of six and nine children are starting to make general representations of objects, which often appear as configurations of basic shapes. However, they are making plans, and hold to one idea when making art, often repeating symbols (Burton, 1980a). Eventually, general categories start to develop into subcategories. New perceptions of body, self and world start to affect the process of representation through an equally new understanding of materials and how to organize them. Children during this period are expressing a more nuanced understanding both through speech and their visual languages.

The pre-adolescent representational stage is a period of curiosity and imagination. Piaget associates this stage with *concrete operations* (7-11 years) in which children start to perform mental processes, such as the categorization of colors, shapes and sizes. Yet, their perception of time keeps them in the here and now (Piaget, 1954; Singer &
Revenson, 1996). Lowenfeld and Brittain (1982) divide this period of mental growth into two stages: the schematic (7-9 years) and the gang stage (9-12 years). The schematic stage is the period when children start to think symbolically. Shapes start to be used to create people and people are placed in environments, such as a policeman at a crime scene. This is a period of early narrative development as they search for patterns and structures in their relationships and environment. This is a critical period during child language development as they start to link symbolic representations into strings of meaningful sequences that bind time together.

**Realism**

Early adolescence is a period of rapid change, occurring between 9 and 12 years of age. They often experience intense emotional changes and physical hormonal influences as they are moving through puberty. Often they are starting to find that they are attracted toward the opposite or same sex. During these middle-school years early adolescents are also starting to become more independent, but bound to conformity by the need to fit in with their peer group while becoming increasingly more self-conscious of their social environment (Kroger, 2004, 2007).

During this time early teens become fascinated with representing the observable world and increasingly more critical of their artwork (Lowenfeld &Brittain, 1982). They are most pleased if their intentions match the results or if they have shown some improvements (Brittain, 1968). Representing the human figure and making cartoons is a common interest; however, self-portraits are often challenging. Often they will use repetitive methods for deciding the placement of facial features while striving toward accuracy (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982).

**Decision and Crisis**

High school marks a period of formal operations (Piaget, 1954) when teenagers acquire abstract reasoning abilities (e.g., deduction, when they are able to make
adolescence is also a period of identity formation (Erikson, 1980); while in a state of constant change, they could be a different person every day. It is during this time that students are able to reflect on their life as a chronological narrative while they are moving away from conformity toward becoming independent individuals (Kroger, 2007). Later during high school, the search for vocation often evokes some anxiety and most students are unsure of what they want to focus on during college. Often this is a time of testing boundaries and social norms, while asking existential questions. Artistically, high school students are often concerned with purpose, questioning why they are making (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982).

While there is little research on the artistic development of adults there are some findings that parallel post-formal operational research. For example, Elsa Bakkala (2002) conducted a longitudinal study with four visual art undergraduates enrolled at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). She used a model based on William Perry’s (1970, 1978, 1981) cognitive development theory of college students, involving the move from dualism, multiplicity, relativity, and multiple conflicting commitments. Bakkala (2002) found unique and non-linear patterns of artistic development in comparison to Perry’s linear model while considering student skill development, visual ideas, identity formation, influence of others, and perceptions of how personal artistic practice relates to the art world.

Mapping Model
Stage theories for the artistic development of children have gained criticism from post-structuralists (e.g., Cox, 2005; Kindler, 1997), while attempting to account for non-linear growth. Asynchronistic development can be found through interests in other forms of representation rather than realism, the ability to generalize artistic development into adulthood, and cultural/social artistic influences. According to Anna M. Kindler and Bernard Darras (1994), there are four other models that can account for non-linear artistic

These different perspectives on non-linear artistic development can be depicted as a map of five Iconicities (Darras & Kindler, 1994) that can be described at the level of semiotic activity (e.g., meaning-making), social interaction (e.g., environment and child), and multi-media (e.g., vocal, verbal, graphic production, gesture, and posture). For example, the first Iconicity (i.e., the relationship between the signified and signifier that can vary between resemblance and arbitrariness) is similar to the embodied state of the pre-symbolic stage of infancy. Child’s semiotic activity during this period can include either indexality (e.g., imprints of fingers in clay signifying fingers and footprints in the sand signifying foot) and/or replication (e.g., imitation of vocal sounds and/or babbling). Characteristics of child social interaction include either encouragement or inhibition, where the child may be either indifferent or responsive toward others. Verbal language during this first iconicity can consist of either random sounds and/or babbling, and graphic production may include traces and/or prints, while gestures are random and/or conscious (Kindler, 1997).

Artistic Development Summary

This section considers both continuous and discontinuous models for understanding artistic development. The sensory and emotional dimensions of artmaking that originate out of embodied experience are considered (discussed earlier in subsection: Embodiment, p. 43, as well as later in subsection: Self and Other, p. 57) and lie at the foundation of meaning-making through different periods of artistic development (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982) (e.g., scribble stage, proto-representational, schematic, gang stage, and realism) as well as cognitive development (Piaget, 1955) (e.g., sensory-
motor, preoperational, concrete operations, formal operations) and post-formal operations (Bekkala, 2002; Perry, 1981) (e.g., dualism, multiplicity, relativity, and multiple commitments). Kindler and Darras’s (1994) mapping model is considered for understanding non-linear development that occurs during artistic development of children, such as tracking development through semiotic activity, social interaction, and multi-media, that could be extended into understanding non-linear adult meaning-making through artistic expression.

**Meaning-Making**

**Cultural Narrative**

Within the field of psychology meaning-making refers to the process of how one makes sense of the self and environment. Finding its roots in semiotics, meaning-making is often associated with constructivist approaches toward educational research and counseling (Kegan, 1980; McGowan, Stone, & Kegan, 2007). Jerome Bruner (1990) made contributions to the study of meaning-making by considering both cultural anthropology and psychology. Bruner describes this interdisciplinary approach as discovery of “meanings that human beings created out of their encounters with the world, and then to propose hypotheses about what meaning-making processes were implicated. It focused upon the symbolic activities that human beings employed in constructing and in making sense not only of the world, but of themselves” (p. 2). Similar to the contributions of Vygotsky, Bruner (1996) made a shift away from the focus on biology as the primary factor of meaning construction toward the emphasis on cultural dynamics that influence behavior as “tools of mind” (p. 2).

Bruner’s most significant contribution was the notion that narrative construction lay at the foundation of making sense of the self and others. He argues that humans are predisposed to organizing life experiences through narratives. As culture is embedded
within symbolic systems, meanings are inherently shared within the community that allows for consistent patterns and negotiations of interpretation. Without these cultural, embedded systems of meaning one would be unable to understand the behaviors and actions of others. Bruner (1990) relates our orientation toward cultural narratives as entering a prearranged drama. “It is as if we walk on stage into a play whose enactment is already in progress—a play whose somewhat open plot determines what parts we may play and toward what denouements we may be heading” (p. 34). The sense of self, as well as the identification process, is in a constant dialogue with others as meaning is made through the tools of culturally embedded narratives.

**Self and Other**

However, the dynamic between self and other starts before language acquisition and cultural schemas. For example, Donald Winnicott (1965, 1971) makes note of the process of object relations as a fundamental way in which infants make meaning of their environment. This is demonstrated when children eventually develop object permanence and continue to look for an object when it is out of sight or eventually develop the understanding of container and contained (e.g., demonstrated by Uzgiris and Hunt in their 1967 film testing object relations in space).

Robert Kegan (1982) makes note of object relations in his subject-object balance developmental theory that describes a pivoting between self and other that lies at the foundation of meaning-making. As Kegan states, “Object relations, . . . have to do with our relations to that which some motion has made separate or distinct from us, our relations to that which had been thrown from us” (p. 76). It is through the pivoting of subject and object that one moves back and forth between states of inclusion (self) to independence (other). This process is driven by emotional states and is similar to the ways in which emotions have a dual qualitative dimension of at first “being an emotion”
(i.e., embedded within the experience of self) and later “having an emotion” (i.e., reflection upon emotional states as an object outside of the conception of self).

According to Kegan (1982), infancy begins during a state of embeddedness with one’s environment, when self and other is undistinguishable until there is a separation. As Kegan explains, “Emergence from embeddedness involves a kind of repudiation, an evolutionary re-cognition that what before was me is not-me” (p. 82). This pivoting from an embedded self moves toward the impulsive balance (stage 1) where sensory reflexes become externalized as the object. Kegan theorizes six stages of subject-object (self-other) pivoting during development between independence and inclusion:

1. Incorporative (independence),
2. Impulsive (inclusion),
3. Imperial (independence),
4. Interpersonal (inclusion),
5. Institutional (independence), and
6. Interindividual (inclusion).

The period of concrete operations (5-12 years of age) (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) or industry versus inferiority (7-11 years of age) (Erikson, 1982), Kegan (1982) defines as the Imperial balance (stage 2). This is a stage when desires are embedded within the self and impulses become externalized. As Kegan describes, “With the capacity to take command of one’s impulses (to have them, rather than be them) can come a new sense of freedom, power, independence—agency” (p. 89). While children start to develop formal operations their desires pivot away from the self toward the world. Kegan defines this as the Interpersonal balance (stage 3), when children are embedded within their social group and community. Their needs and desires, that were once undistinguishable from self, become the externalized objects and they are able to mediate between different cravings while their sense of belonging becomes central.

The externalization of interpersonal relationships during adolescence that leads to identity formation is characteristic of Kegan’s (1982) Institutional balance (stage 4). It is during this time that personal narratives become the foundation for how one understands self, as stories are organized into an identity. This is also the period when teens find the
significance of esteem (Maslow, 1943, 1968) in how they feel about this new self in relationship to their peers.

Kegan’s (1982) final stage is characterized as a pivoting back toward social integration within the network of society, inter-individual (stage 5). This is the shift from embedded individuality toward a self that is interpenetrable; from “being one’s career” to “having a career.” One is also actively attempting to better oneself without taking new information personally, but rather seeking criticism in order to improve. As Kegan explains, “The self seems available to ‘hear’ negative reports about its activities; before, it was those activities and therefore literally ‘irritable’ in the face of those reports” (p. 105). Within this Keganian model one is able to share intimacy with another, reflect upon oneself, begin the process of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943), and enter the dialectic of post-formal operations.

**Post-formal Operations**

Post-formal operational research (i.e., an extension of Piaget’s stage theory into adulthood beyond formal operations) has attempted to find patterns for adult cognitive development that include dialectical models (Basseches, 1984; Kramer, 1983; Riegel, 1973), relativistic models (Chandler, Boyes, & Ball, 1990; King, Kitchener, Davison, Parker, & Wood 1981; Kramer, 1983; Labouvie-Vief, 1984), and the integration and acceptance of contradiction (Arlin, 1984; Basseches, 1984; Kramer, 1983; Labouvie-Vief, 1980; Riegel, 1973; Sinnott, 1984). This trajectory of post-formal operations during adulthood is similar to the findings of William Perry (1981), who studied how college students often move through periods of dualism, multiplicity, relativity, and multiple conflicting commitments before graduating.

Perry (1978, 1970, 1981) conducted interviews with undergraduates at Harvard University, which led to his stage theory of nine positions in reasoning. These nine stages are as follows: (1) basic dualism, (2) pre- legitimate multiplicity, (3) legitimate, but
subordinate multiplicity, (4a) diversity and uncertainty in multiplicity, (4b) subordinate relativism, (5) recognition of relativism, (6) commitment to relativism foreseen, (7) first commitment to relativism, (8) multiple commitments to relativism, and (9) full commitment to relativism (Perry, 1981). Perry found that students would first move from dualism toward multiplicity during the first three stages. The first stage of basic dualism (1) is described as a period when individuals follow an authority figure that they believe knows what is right or wrong. This can be found in many fundamentalist religious traditions where believers strictly adhere to a leader for deciphering between good and evil. The second stage of pre-legitimate multiplicity (2) is when one starts to recognize that authority figures are not always right. At this stage individuals come to terms with this new understanding by rejecting their first authority figure for another. This may be the case for individuals who switch religious organizations because the original religious leader was unable to answer their questions or they found something wrong with the teaching. The third stage of legitimate, but subordinate multiplicity (3) is the recognition that there is uncertainty in truth (Perry, 1981). Someone at this stage may understand that an authority figure may not have all the answers, but they are in the process of being figured out by someone else.

Perry’s (1981) fourth stage is a transition from multiplicity to relativism. The first part of stage four is marked by diversity and uncertainty in multiplicity (4a) where individuals come to the understanding that everyone has a different opinion and no one is right or wrong. This form of reasoning can lead toward subordinate relativism (4b), which is the understanding that authority figures are attempting to motivate them to support their position by evidence. Relativistic thinking (5) is the next stage where context is relative for taking a position and is an important component in finding an appropriate solution. However, there is a hierarchy in solutions where some answers are better than others. This form of reasoning can later lead toward making independent
decisions (6) as one recognizes the validity of his own thoughts, but has not made a commitment yet.

The first commitment stage (7) is when students start to take positions on their own. For example, after a long time of consulting others about which college acceptance letter they should consider they may finally make a decision and commit based on their own evaluation. The next step is making numerous commitments at one time (8), such as determining which college course one should take and sticking to their decisions without dropping out. When making multiple decisions one may be confronted with the complexity of these different positions that may contradict or be inconsistent with other views. The final stage (9) is the realization that all decision making will be difficult but one should stand by one’s values while also respecting other positions (Perry, 1981). This is also a stage when someone has made the commitment to continue learning and reconsiders his position as knowledge deepens into finer detail and intricacy.

**Meaning-Making Summary**

This section considers the social constructivist approach to understanding meaning-making: for example, Bruner’s (1990) work that describes cultural narratives as a primary way in which community members are able to make sense of behaviors and actions of others. Object-relations theory is considered for understanding the emergence of self out of interactions with the environment and objects during infancy, laying a foundation for understanding embodiment (discussed earlier in subsections: *Emergence of Self*, p. 31, and *Embodiment*, p. 43) and Kegan’s (1982) subject-object balance. Kegan’s work considers the pivoting between independence and inclusion throughout the life cycle to illuminate the relationship between self and other that is influenced by emotions. Perry’s (1981) schema for adult development gives further insight into how adults make meaning during college from dualism, multiplicity, relativity, and multiple commitments, and can be related to artistic development (Bekkala, 2002).


Relevance for Art Education

This research is valuable for the field of art education because it gives insight into how students with dyslexia make meaning of their artistic practice. However, this research may also contribute to other disciplines in the humanities, such as disability studies, psychology, social psychology, and embodied cognition. This research may also contribute to educational inquiry in special education, curriculum design, developmental psychology, and counseling psychology. Further research in literacy studies, multimodal research, semiotics, and disability studies may contribute to ways of thinking about education, art-making, and learning disabilities.

There are numerous studies on the psychosocial issues students with dyslexia experience as a result of mainstream classroom environments and curriculum design (e.g., Eissa, 2010; Ingresson, 2007; Marshall et. al., 2006; McNulty, 2003). However, there are few studies that discuss the artistic development and identity formation of students with dyslexia. Research concerning dyslexic meaning-making through artmaking will contribute to knowledge about the importance of art education and curriculum design for those who struggle with literacy within standard mainstream education. This study will give insights into possible benefits of artmaking in curriculum design that will contribute to making the classroom a more emotionally and socially healthy environment for dyslexic students.

This research gives insight into the dyslexic college art student experience and how artmaking is an important mode of emotional and social meaning-making. Artmaking has an emotional dimension that is important for development and the ability to make meaning out of experiences. This research gives examples of how adult college students continue to make meaning through visual-spatial representations that are emotionally salient.
This study contributes to our understanding of the experiential dimensions of literacy among dyslexic students. Meaning-making is a primary way in which one learns through taking new information and applying it to already understood paradigms. This process is most effective when applying to the emotionally significant topics of personally lived experience. If the interest in reading and writing partially originates from the affective dimensions of the representational modes they are applying, then artmaking may have a pivotal role in developing such abilities. This research will give further understanding to how artmaking can influence literacy among those who have dyslexia, which is insightful for educators, mentors, counselors, and administrators.

**Literature Review Summary**

This literature review considers disability studies in understanding the medical and social models, such as expressed in the work of Michel Foucault (1961/1973, 1963/1993, 1975/1995, 1979, 1982). An emotional and psychological dimension of disability experience is also considered in the creation of a new psychosocial model for disability. The contribution of art education and disabilities studies is also considered in framing the significance of the arts for those who struggle fitting into the mainstream, as shown in the work of Alice Wexler (2011) and John Derby (2011, 2012).

Abraham Maslow (1943) is considered in understanding psychological needs and motivations of students with dyslexia; followed by interview studies concerning the emotional and social development of dyslexic students. Narrative studies concerning life stories are considered as the foundation of understanding identity development. Erik Erikson’s (1980) stages of the life-span and James Marcia’s (1966, 1967) identity status are considered in understanding psychosocial dimensions of identity formation, while disability identity literature illustrates issues between the medical and social model during the identification process.
Major dyslexic theories for the neurological cause for developmental dyslexia are discussed, such as the Phonological Defect theory. Dyslexic subtypes are discussed, such as surface, phonological, non-semantic reading and deep dyslexia, to show the complexities of the all-inclusive dyslexic category. The debate of language development continues with the intent to discuss the relationship between language and the body. Both Piaget (1954, 1958) and Vygotsky’s (1978, 1980) theories of language development are considered in understanding cognitive and social context. Merleau-Ponty’s (1968, 2002) embodiment and Donald Winnicott’s (1971) object-relations theory are applied to framing the relationship between language and the body while considering the thinking process (Damasio, 1999, 2006) and cultural representation (Donald, 1991).

Theories of Artistic Development extend the conversation on language development to understand how representational forms change during different periods of growth. Jean Piaget’s (1954, 1958) cognitive theory of child development and Victor Lowenfeld’s (1949/1982) artistic developmental theory are discussed in how they relate to emotional and social development, moving from embodied expressions toward postformal operations.


This research will benefit the field of art education through considering the artistic development and identity formation of students with dyslexia. Findings will give insight into “best practices” for dealing with students with disabilities in the classroom, such as inclusion and curriculum design that includes the arts in all subjects. Understanding the
psychosocial development and artistic practices of dyslexic students will help mentors, counselors, educators, and administrators better understand students with literacy difficulties and help them reach their potentials.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This multiple-case study (Stake, 2013) gives in-depth life narratives for three visual art graduate students with developmental dyslexia in order to investigate their identity formation and artistic development. This study is framed within disability studies and art education. Theories considered in the literature review illustrate the phenomenological dimension of self-development, such as the cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of life experience. Embodiment (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Winnicott, 1971) and cognitive development (Perry, 1981; Piaget, 1954) was considered for understanding interactions with materials and ideas through artmaking. Cultural narratives (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978) was considered to understand meaning-making through social interactions. Self-other balance theory (Kegan, 1982) is also considered to understand how meaning is constructed through independent and inclusive pivoting during the life-cycle.

The methodology of this study is framed within the interpretative phenomenological approach that attempts to understand how participants make meaning of lived experience (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis originated in the work of Edmund Husserl (2001), who was interested in unveiling essential characteristics that were unique to individuals through in-depth studies that require “bracketing” of personal preconceptions. Thus, this method requires
the researcher to “go back to the things themselves” (Husserl, 2001, p. 168) in the attempt to investigate the experience of consciousness.

This phenomenological method was further developed by Martin Heidegger (1953/1996), who was interested in the interpretation of a person’s overall meaning-making system within time and how language mediates this process of experience and perception. The intention of this method is to access the participants’ meaning-making system in order to understand how they make sense of their world, which takes into account the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which the participant lives. This form of existential phenomenology was also adopted by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2002) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1956/1984), who argued that individuals are embedded in their social and cultural context; thus, studies of individual meaning construction must consider the individual’s environment as an inseparable component of the meaning-making system.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was introduced as a psychological research method by Jonathan Smith (1996), who drew upon approaches from hermeneutics and phenomenology in studying the health psychology of a patient’s conception of chronic illness. The interpretative dimension of this research is informed by hermeneutics, which holds that everyone is in a process of making sense of their lived experience. It is also acknowledged that there is a dual process of meaning-making: participants are in the process of making sense of their experiences while in the process of being interviewed, while the researcher is also in a process of making meaning of what is being communicated (Smith et al., 2009). Smith ultimately developed a research approach to meaning-making that includes a process of transforming interview transcripts into narrative accounts.

However, the use of narrative life experiences for constructing meaning is not a new approach to qualitative research. Jerome Bruner (1987/2004, 1990, 1991) introduced the idea that meaning is constructed during the process of telling stories of personal
narratives, which also contributes to a continuous sense of self and identity (McAdams, 1985; Singer, 2004). It is a method that embraces pluralist views, as individual perspectives are considered on their own terms and truth is only relative (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). However, the approach requires a close relationship between participants and the researcher during the process of storytelling (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Through storytelling participants give insights into their perceptions, which allows the researcher to understand their lived experiences (Lather, 1992; Robottom & Hart, 1993).

According to F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, narrative studies are a way of thinking about experience through stories that are personally meaningful, thus it is an appropriate method for studying the meaning-making process (Clandinin, 2006a, 2006b; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry is often used within a case study model to collect personal stories that elucidate how meaning is constructed (Clandinin et al., 2007). Case studies are often approached through a constructivist paradigm in which social meaning can be elucidated and critically evaluated (Searle, 1995). Through individual narratives within a case study model, stories can be compared among cases to show patterns and nuances that illustrate how participants make meaning of particular life experiences.

While meaning through narrative is primarily constructed through oral and written language, there are other ways of making meaning through pre-linguistic forms (e.g., gestures, performance, drawings, paintings, and sculptures) that lie at the foundation of the experiential knowledge within the body that informs symbolic meaning. Merleau-Ponty (1968, 2002) describes embodied knowledge as lived experience. According to this point of view, our bodies are at the center of experience and can never be fully shared through conversation or interview studies.

While experiential knowledge is always situated within the experience of the body, pre-linguistic forms give another mode of information that is often closer to the sensory source. Artmaking is also a way of making meaning that has a direct relation to sensation,
emotions, and the body. While there is no way of accessing the lived experience of another, images produced by participants give another access point of self-expression and insight into their meaning-making systems of embodied information that can be both conscious and/or unconscious. This embodied form of meaning-making is considered through descriptions of participant artwork and the meaning embedded through the creative process of making.

While there are studies on the psychosocial development and identity formation of students with dyslexia during secondary and post-secondary education, there are few studies that discuss their artistic development. There is no literature on how psychosocial factors influence the artistic trajectories of art students with dyslexia during higher education. This study will contribute to the gap in understanding of how meaning is made through visual-spatial forms (e.g., drawings and paintings) and how the arts influence identity formation for students with literacy difficulties due to dyslexia.

Data Collection

This multiple-case study (Stake, 2013) includes four forms of data collection: semi-structured interviews (Drever, 1995), artwork examples (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Margolis & Pauwels, 2011), artist statements (Bowen, 2009), and a cognitive survey (Creswell, 1994; Tourangeau, 1984). These different forms of data were compared for purposes of triangulation (Denzin, 1970; Patton, 2005). Participants are limited to three developmental dyslexic college art students, between 25 and 35 years old, to facilitate comparisons of educational experiences during roughly the same time period and eliminate other generational factors that can affect experience. All the participants were Caucasian or mixed, such as Deb who was both Italian and Brazilian. They were not chosen purposely in terms of gender, class, or race, but rather based on close proximity to the researcher so that individual interviews were not difficult to achieve. Participants
were considered based on particular characteristics, such as difficulties with reading and writing during their K-12 experience, learning to cope with their struggles, continuing their studies in college, and experiencing varying degrees of success academically.

Participants were found through conversations about my research (purposeful sampling), which led to locating more participants (snowballing) (Coyne, 1997). For example, I overheard Kara mention she had dyslexia to an instructor. After their discussion I approached her to discuss my dissertation research. Deb is the daughter of Nancy, a participant I interviewed during my pilot study. During my participant search I contacted Nancy who referred me to Deb. Ben was recommended to me by a colleague who informed me about one of her students who may be interested in participating in my study.

Interviews were conducted during two sessions. The first considered educational experience and the second included discussions of their artistic practice. During the second interview examples of artwork were collected through photos that were either taken during the interview at their studio space or sent from the participant’s collection.

**Semi-structured Interviews**

Interview data were collected through single 45- to 60-minute semi-structured, in-depth interviews with further probes into topics of interest. Interview protocol was adopted from a pilot study, which was based on answering questions about educational experience, dyslexia, artmaking practice, and meaning-making. Questions were also peer reviewed with colleagues to check for relevance and leading questions. Through conducting the pilot study it was evident that psychosocial development was critical for dyslexic students’ ability to grow toward their potential. I adjusted my interview protocol to allow for more probing into the emotional and social dimensions of experience in educational environments. I also included a second interview concerning their artistic
practice to understand the development of self and identity through embodied experiences of making with materials in contrast to textual representations.

The semi-structured format was adopted so that topics brought up during questioning could be probed during discussions to further understand the meaning of answers. Written notes were taken during and after interviews to record any significant details that occurred during my contact with the participants. The location for data collection varied depending on accessibility and convenience for each participant. Thus, interviews took place at participants’ homes or at a conference room. Participants ultimately made the decision on where they felt was most comfortable and appropriate for the interview to take place.

All interviews were recorded using an iPhone application, iTalk, and stored on an external hard drive in a locked safe. Transcriptions of the recorded interviews were generated through a second party (i.e., Rev, an online transcription company) in the form of a Word document. There were two interviews: the first concerning educational experience and the second concerning artistic practice. Follow-up interviews were scheduled with each participant for further probes and to clarify answers from the first interview session.

**First Interview**

First interviews were intended to elucidate personal narratives and how each subject makes meaning out of their life experiences, and included descriptions of their education, dyslexic experience, special education, artmaking, technology use, psychosocial development, and meaning-making process. Questions were constructed during a pilot study through considering ways of evoking memories concerning learning with dyslexia. Questions asked are listed in order:

1. Tell me a little about your educational experience from elementary, middle, and high school.
2. Describe what it was like for you first learning to read and write.

3. When did you learn that you had a learning issue or that you learned differently from most of your peers? What was that experience like?

4. Do you remember being labeled with a specific learning issue while you were in school? What effect did this labeling have on you? Was it a helpful, confirming, or negative experience?

5. What programs did your school provide for you and other students who struggled to learn? Were these programs helpful? On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest, 5 being high, and 3 neutral, how would you rate the impact of these programs?

6. Did you have a favorite subject in school?

7. Were you involved in any art related activities while in school? If so can you talk about that experience? Do you think they had an impact on your education?

8. How did technology, such as computers and recorders, affect your educational experience?

9. What was your experience like when you started college?

10. What is your college experience like now?

11. Looking back at your education experience is there anything you think your schools could have done differently that would have been helpful?

12. Reflecting back, is there anything you could have done on your own that would have made a difference?

Based on the preliminary interviews conducted during a pilot study, there was little change needed for data collection guides; the order of questions appeared to transition smoothly.
Second Interview

After the first interview, a second was initiated to collect data concerning participants’ personal artistic practice. This involved personal studio visits with some participants followed by written notes. When a studio visit was not possible, a location was picked where the participant felt comfortable being interviewed. When studio visits were possible, photo documentation and written notes were taken of these locations to give insight into the artmaking process and how they organize their creative space. Notes were written during and directly after the interviews to collect data concerning the environment where the interview took place, body language of the participant, other significant issues or situations that could have influenced the interview, and the overall experience of the meeting.

Second interview questions were primarily concerned with getting a description of how participants started making artwork, material use, artistic process, technology use, artistic influences, conversations they have with others about their artwork, future artistic visions, and meaning-making process. Questions asked are listed in order:

1. Can you tell me about your artwork?
2. How did you get started making your artwork?
3. What is meaningful about making your artwork and the finished piece?
4. How did you come to the ideas you have about your artwork?
5. Why do you make your artwork? Can you describe the process?
6. How and why do you choose your materials?
7. What type of tools do you use to make your artwork? Please describe the experience.
8. Do you use digital technology when making your artwork? In what ways do you use digital technology? Please describe the experience.
9. Do you keep a journal or notebook in relationship to your artistic practices?
10. How would you describe the conversation you have with others about your artwork? What is the context? Quality and subject of the conversation?

11. What artists have influenced your artwork?

12. How would you describe the artwork you envision making in the future?

**Artwork Sample**

The collection of artwork examples was intended to reveal the participants’ creative practice through observation of art objects and images. Participants shared artwork that they were interested in discussing. Digital images were collected from each participant for reference. Artwork examples were discussed in terms of composition, formal elements, process, materials, representational modes, intentions, art historical context, and layers of meaning within the artwork. Digital reproductions were not included in the dissertation manuscript to protect participants from being identified.

**Artist Statement**

Participants were asked to write a minimum one-page statement. They were also asked to send current statements that they may have written within the last few months to reflect on how each participant made meaning of their artistic practice at the present moment during the study. Topics of interest concerning the artist statement include formal elements, process, materials, representation, intentions, art historical context, and meaning-making.

Artist statements were acquired from each participant as an example of their writing process and how they make meaning of their creative practice through words. However, the sample was not substantial enough in terms of length and number of samples to conduct a textual analysis that could be comparable to their artwork. Thus, the artist statement acted as a supplemental document that was compared to the interviews for triangulation. Artist statements for each participant are located in Appendix C.
Cognitive Survey

An informal survey was given and collected from each participant so as to understand personal cognitive abilities. The survey was a way of evaluating dyslexic symptoms to be compared to verbal accounts from the interviews and also a way of comparing their condition to other participants without access to formal tests results used during their diagnosis. While cognitive surveys strive toward reliability and unbiased data, errors still occur through administering the questions (Collins, 2003). In an attempt to eliminate errors, questions were designed to be concrete and participants were given the survey to take home so they would not be under time restraints when answering questions.

Participants are asked if they have been diagnosed with any learning issues in the past (e.g., dyslexia and/or ADHD). Questions also concerned early childhood development, such as when they started walking and talking, memory, flipping left from right, tracking time of events, difficulties with reading, writing, spelling, and math. The intention of the survey was to understand participants’ perceptions of their cognitive abilities and was not a formal cognitive test. This survey stands as a document that specifies if participants have been diagnosed with a particular learning issue because original examinations are confidential and cannot be used in this study. Ultimately, the survey was compared among participants and to the interview data to determine patterns of dyslexic characteristics for triangulation. The participant cognitive survey is located in Appendix E.

Data Collection Overview

Participant interviews, artwork samples, artist statements, and cognitive surveys illustrate how participants reflect upon how they construct meaning through their educational experiences and artmaking. Interviews offer an oral representation of personal narratives that will show how the participants make sense out of their education, learning to read and write, artmaking, special education, technology use, and meaningful
experiences. Artwork or textual samples give examples of how meaning is made through creative visual-spatial forms of representation. Artist statements give examples of how meaning is made through written forms concerning their creative practice. Surveys allow for an understanding of participant cognitive abilities and limitations to determine patterns of dyslexic characteristics. All of these forms of data were used during a triangulation process of analysis to determine patterns between modes of representation.

**Informed Consent**

The Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved this study on January 3, 2017, finding no serious ethical implications for conducting this research with my participants. Participants were presented with the Informed Consent and Participants’ Rights form before the first interview. During that time the form was reviewed, discussed, and signed. After participants signed the Informed Consent and Participants’ Rights form they were reminded of the intention of the study and their confidentiality. They were reminded that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and for whatever reason. Participants were also offered a copy of the consent form as a record of the agreement.

**Data Protection Methods**

All participants assumed a pseudonym during this study to protect their identity and privacy. Names of institutions, employers, teachers, professors, administrative members and any other data that could be used to directly identify those who are being studied or identify others involved with the participants was also left out of interview transcripts and the discussion of findings of the study to protect those involved. Only
detailed descriptions of experience and narrative construction are important for the analysis of this research.

**Method of Data Analysis**

All data were personally coded (manually and with qualitative software) within broad categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) (e.g., educational experience, psychosocial development, and artistic practice) and emerging themes (Strauss, 1987) (e.g., realizing difference from peers, sense of otherness, misunderstanding by teachers, labeling, harassment, exclusion). Categories were developed during a pilot study to organize topics of interests that would answer the research question. Emerging themes developed out of a series of processes that included using coding software (e.g., Annotations), drawing diagrams, color coding sections of text in Microsoft Word, the development of lists of themes for each participant, and comparing lists of themes among all participants. Art projects were developed during the process of this dissertation research as a way of thinking through the content and literature review.

Each stage of the coding process was saved, dated, and archived in a system to document development over time. Reviews of literature were made through both hard and digital copies, such as printouts of articles and PDFs that were read through a computer application, Voice Dream. Notes and highlighting of books, printed articles, and digital files were made during the process of reading. Articles printed out were organized into files. Digital documents were saved in folders in Mendeley, Voice Dream, and Dropbox. Drafts of the findings, discussion, and implication chapters were saved, dated, and archived systematically in Dropbox to create a record of changes during the process of analyzing and writing. Findings are presented in the form of portraits, thematic analysis, and cross-case analysis.
Interview Analysis

An interpretive phenomenological (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009) process of analysis was used to compare interview data with three methods of analysis: (1) overall description of interview experience through notes (Yin, 2014); (2) comparison of patterns in the interview data based on categories that were determined before data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984); and (3) comparison of patterns in interview data based on emerging themes (Strauss, 1987). This process began by defining assumptions (i.e., bracketing) (Husserl, 1962) before data collection and analysis to make note of preconceptions that can affect the research process. Assumptions were revised after redefining the research question. While it is not possible for the researcher to detach oneself from his or her embodied lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2002), it is possible to become aware of one’s own assumptions before and during the research process.

Audio recordings of interviews and transcripts were reviewed numerous times to find patterns and experience the interviews as a whole. The attempt to come to a gestalt (i.e., understanding of life experience that contributes toward a whole person, rather than a self separated into discrete parts) through the interview data allowed for the interpretive process to begin (Giorgi, 1975). Both interviews were analyzed using predetermined categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984) based on the interview questions. The first interviews concerning educational experience were analyzed based on five categories: (1) experience of learning to read and write in school; (2) special needs programs; (3) art-making; (4) digital technology; and (5) social-emotional factors. The second interviews concerning artistic practices were analyzed based on seven categories: (1) artwork descriptions; (2) representational modes; (3) art materials; (4) tools; (5) artistic process; (6) artistic inspiration; and (7) visual languages (i.e., the meaning(s) found within visual representation).

The interview data were coded a second time by the researcher for emerging themes that appeared significant in finding patterns among participants. This second
coding process was later collapsed into a list of emerging themes during cross-analysis. During this process summaries were made of all interview transcripts and the text was carefully analyzed for general units of meaning (Hycner, 1985), staying as close as possible to the words used by the participants. Categories used during the first coding process were considered in structuring the portrait summaries in a linear fashion and quotes were taken through the coding process. Any points of ambiguity in the transcriptions that needed clarification or elaboration were noted and followed-up on in subsequent interviews. Lists of units of meaning were developed and later condensed for each participant into themes (Hycner, 1985). Themes were then categorized into emerging categories and cross-analyzed with all participants.

After cross-analysis, interview data underwent a hermeneutic interpretation process where participants were considered within their social and educational environment. Heidegger describes this interpretative process of human existence as being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1996). Educational experience is described in terms of what was meaningful for the subjects, such as what was socially and emotionally salient. Statements made toward questions during the interview may cover multiple topics of interest, thus there is some overlapping of content.

**Artwork Analysis**

Artworks were considered in relationship to formal elements, process, materials, representation, intentions, art historical context, and layers of meaning found within the artworks. Descriptions of artworks were discussed in the analysis in relation to participant interviews and artist statements. However, the artworks do not undergo a further analysis other than to support the interview data through triangulation.

**Artist Statement Analysis**

The original proposed method of data evaluation for the written artist statements was to conduct a textual analysis to determine meaning-making through the textual
representational form. Artist statements were also a way for participants to consider their most significant artistic influences with time for reflection and contemplation through a form of representation that was a challenge to express through. As the study progressed, it was determined that the statements were not substantial enough in terms of length and number of samples for conducting a textual analysis and they were used as a supplemental document along with the transcribed interviews for triangulation. Ultimately, the statements were analyzed along with the interviews while constructing narrative portraits for each participant and considered in relationship to the emerging themes coded from the transcripts.

Cognitive Survey Analysis

Because dyslexic diagnostic exams and forms are confidential, the cognitive survey gave specific information about what skills participants struggled with during their education. Surveys were compared with participant descriptions of dyslexic characteristics for triangulations and for a consistent measure of cognitive abilities.

Presentation of Analysis

Portraiture

Three individual case studies were developed in the form of portraits in the findings chapter. The intention for developing individual portraits is to understand each participant’s developmental trajectory during education and how they make meaning of their artistic practice. During the process of developing individual portraiture, interview transcripts and artist statements were rearranged to fit within a chronology of life events and categories (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This reorganization of narrative data into portraits aides in the clarification of participant life-stories rather than a distortion of content.
Through creating portraits of participants, the researcher’s voice is always present while framing narratives and distinguishing themes. The researcher is unable to detach him or herself from their own experience, assumptions, research background, perspectives, interests, and what is considered relevant. Yet, through the process of portraiture the researcher strives toward an examination of their own biased presuppositions and is open to examples that fall outside expectation. The intention is not to overshadow the voice of the participant with one’s own personality or idiosyncratic views, but to be a silent mediator that supports in articulation, giving insight, clarity, and expression to their unique form of meaning-making (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

**Thematic Analysis**

The findings chapter is organized under two primary topics: educational experience and artwork analysis. These topics were decided on before interviews were conducted in order to answer the research question (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984). Educational experience is divided into subtopics to organize experience chronologically and to construct a narrative: elementary school, middle school, high school, college, and graduate school. Artwork analysis is divided into subtopics to organize data: artwork description, art materials, tools, artistic process, and artistic inspiration. Emerging themes during the findings are discussed in subsections during the discussion chapter.

The discussion chapter is organized under three primary topics: Learning and Instruction, Psychosocial Development, and Artistic Identity Formation. These topics were developed before collecting data (McMillan & Schumacher, 1984), with later modifications and consolidation during the coding and writing process (Miles et al., 2014). Within these primary topics, emerging themes and subthemes are compared among participants and discussed in relation to relevant literature.

Learning and Instruction is divided into subthemes: specific learning difficulties, self-developed learning strategies, special education/tutoring, different classroom
environments, interests in school subjects, and identity development during education. Psychosocial Development is divided into subthemes: realizing difference from peers, sense of otherness among peers, being misunderstood and socially embarrassed by teachers, labeling experience, harassment and exclusion, desire to avoid stigmatization, anxiety based on otherness, coping mechanisms for self-esteem, sense of belonging in school, and influence of family. Artistic Identity Formation is divided into subthemes: being exceptional by being an artist, art as an emotional outlet, figuration versus conceptualization, dualism, multiplicity, relativity, multiple commitments, and social development through artmaking. These themes developed out of numerous coding sessions that allowed for the data to be rearranged into categories (Strauss, 1987). Artistic Identity Formation subthemes: dualism, multiplicity, relativity, and multiple commitments, were the only themes based on a model (i.e., Perry’s cognitive developmental theory). This introduction of Perry’s model was to find patterns and difference in artistic development among participants during adulthood.

**Cross-case Analysis**

Through the implementation of a multiple-case study, participants are compared to each other in terms of emerging themes, presenting patterns of similarity and difference. Participants were also compared sequentially (Yin, 2014) among different periods during their education, such as elementary school, high school, and college. While the portraits in the findings chapter present patterns of development and meaning-making for each participant individually, the cross-analysis in the discussion chapter shows relationships in learning and instructional experiences, psychosocial development, and artistic identity formation to reveal a spectrum of phenomena.
Issues of Validity

One of the major issues with the validity of this study is determining whether the subjects are dyslexic or are experiencing attributes of another cognitive issue that is causing similar dyslexic characteristics. However, because dyslexic exams are confidential, this dissertation study will be unable to include this form of verification of participants’ cognitive abilities. All participants were given an informal cognitive survey with questions concerning difficulties with speaking, reading and writing.

The interviews were limited to a single 45- to 60-minute meeting, which was influenced by the subjects’ psychological state and/or other idiosyncrasies during that time. The interviews give a sense of what it is like to be dyslexic from an observer’s point of view, but were limited to a single short period and do not show the fluctuations of perceptions that occur over time.

Another issue with validity includes the size of the sample group. The interviews only include three participants and cannot be generalized to a greater population. While the original study included a non-dyslexic visual art and non-dyslexic creative writing group, this data was not admitted into the study so as to focus on significant patterns found within the target sample group.

Just as the subjects may be fallible, the interviewer can also influence the quality of the study through tone, body language, framing of questions and the general issue of how meaning emerges out of the social interaction that can affect interview answers (Widick et al., 1975). My prior relationship with the subjects may have made them relaxed during the interview; however, it may have also affected the answers they gave. This issue could have been resolved by scheduling subjects asking a different interviewer with similar questions (Hycner, 1985).

Because the interview analysis portion of this study is phenomenological in nature, there are philosophical issues that are unavoidable, such as the question of when the
researcher’s insight will be introduced into the analysis. Personal bias during data analysis may contribute to distortions of findings. In any study that attempts to describe the underlying phenomenon in human experience there is the chance that the researcher may project their own experiences onto their subjects. This is unavoidable in most human interaction because no one has direct access to the memories and experiences of another (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 2002). It is impossible for the researcher to detach them self from their own presuppositions and should not pretend that it is possible (Hammersley, 2000). Only through relating one’s own experience to another’s can anyone come to meaning. However, there is value in personal reflections when the researcher has had direct experience with the phenomenon observed (Creswell, 2007).

Husserl (1962) describes a way of dealing with biased attitudes or interpretations during a phenomenological study as a process of bracketing (also called epoché), a way to suspend any attachment to facts with the attempt to elucidate the essential phenomenon and principles of the observed experience. Until the process of uncovering data has been finished, all causal explanations must be suspended. This is always an issue, as the researcher must attempt to withhold interjections while interviewing their participants (Dukes, 1984).
Chapter IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This findings chapter presents portraits of the three participants: Kara, Ben and Deb. The portraits were developed to give order and sequence to the data so that participants could be compared among periods of their education and different dimensions of their artistic practice. Each portrait is divided into two sections: Educational Experience and Artwork Analysis. Educational Experience is subdivided into different periods, such as Elementary School, Middle School (Ben’s elementary and middle school sections are combined because he remained at the same institution and there was no distinguishing boundary between these two periods of education), High School, College, and Graduate School. Artwork Analysis is subdivided into different topics, such as Artwork Description, Art Materials, Tools, Artistic Process, and Artistic Inspiration.

Portrait of Kara

Kara is a 29-year-old graduate student in art education in a school in the New York City area. I met Kara while she was working on her master’s degree in art education with teacher certification. I learned that she has dyslexia during a conversation she was having

1Kara, Ben, and Deb are pseudonyms given to the participants to conceal their identity.
with someone else. Later on I engaged her in a conversation about my dissertation study and asked if she would be interested in participating. Kara agreed to meet me for an interview in a private conference room during January of 2016. She seemed eager to participate in my study because she wanted to help others who have also struggled with dyslexia.

A second interview concerning her artistic practice was conducted in February of 2016 in an empty art studio. A follow-up interview concerning her transition between high school and college was conducted in May 2016 in the same art studio. A final follow-up interview took place in January 2018 over the phone to clarify some questions that came up during data analysis.

During the time I was in contact with Kara, I attended an exhibition of one of her collaborative art projects about food memories. After conducting the first two interviews, I was assigned to be her student teacher supervisor and observed her teaching on three different occasions. During the student teachers’ exhibition, I had the opportunity to briefly meet her family and husband.

Kara: Educational Experience

Elementary school. During the first interview, Kara explained that she was raised in a family of educators in an upper-middle class community in Connecticut and went to the same private school from kindergarten to 12th grade. Both of her parents were teachers at this private school. Her mother taught 5th-grade science and her father taught 6th-grade history and was head of the middle school.

Her family was not wealthy, but because her parents taught at this private school, she could attend for free. She has a sister who is two and a half years older and attended the same school. Kara and her sister would get involved in the same sports, go to the same parties, and other events together. The only complaint Kara had about going to the
same school that her parents taught at was the need to get up early in the morning and be at school before her peers.

During Kara’s early education, she started to realize that she was not picking up literacy skills at the same pace as her peers. In the first grade, she was getting pulled out of her regular class and was held back in slower reading groups because she was struggling. As Kara reflects, “I knew that something was wrong in first grade when I kept getting pulled out and being taught English by my kindergarten teacher. Then slowly but surely I got tutored or whatever and then tested.” Later on Kara reflects on the experience of feeling different from her peers:

I don’t like this feeling of not being like everybody else, why is this happening to me, I wish that I was smart, I’m not smart? I didn’t know what dyslexia was but I knew that I was in these slower reading groups and from there I really tried because I really liked learning.

Starting in 1st grade, Kara remembers receiving extra assistance, but it was not until the 4th grade that she was diagnosed with dyslexia. As Kara remembers:

Then when my parents were like, “You’re still not reading,” and then when I was tested I was like, “Something must be really wrong with me.” Everybody was reading and I didn’t. It was probably I couldn’t read very well until maybe 4th grade and that’s when I was tested and they figured out that I was dyslexic.

Kara was embarrassed when labeled with dyslexia and remembers a stigma attached to being taken out of class by the special education teacher. As Kara remembers:

I got [tutoring] in elementary school during recess or after school and then middle school it was during study hall or a free [time]. Her name was Mrs. [A] and everybody knew who she was. If you were pulled out because of her or whatever everybody was like, “You’re slow or something is wrong with you.”

The resource room was near a pathway that led students from class to the playground; thus, she would often see her peers as they made their way off to have fun without her. Kara also describes some of the idiosyncratic characteristics of the special education teacher.
I remember being in that office and she like smelled of coffee and would usually have her eyes closed while she was asking me questions…. She usually had her eyes closed. Well she was just one of those crazy teachers.

Later on, she continues:

She was brusque and her office was really small and it always stunk. She always closed her eyes, she always had lipstick on her teeth and her nail polish was always like brown, she wore colors that were always neutral or brown and her voice was like hehehe.

Kara reflects on what would have made her special assistance more helpful:

They probably could have a better special education teacher, they probably could have had the room in a different place…. I literally was sitting in this room and [would] watch everybody run by to go to recess. She didn’t have to come and get me and then walk me down the hallway in the whole school back to her room in the elementary school.

She was not a poor special educator, but her appearance and attached stigma were off-putting.

Kara developed some learning strategies to deal with issues with reading comprehension while in elementary school, such as receiving assistance from her peers, skipping around in a paragraph, and avoiding taking classes that were heavy in reading and writing. As Kara reflects:

Well, there are definitely classes that I was very glad that some [of] my friends were in it so I would be, “what was reading about?” They would tell me what the reading was about and then I would read it and be like, “Oh okay I’m catching up on that.” Otherwise the way that I would go read quickly for books or textbooks or something I would read the first line, the first few lines and then go to the middle of the paragraph, read a little bit of that and then the last. I would just skip through, I remember doing that but my comprehension was not very good when that happened. I tried to take classes where I didn’t need to do that much reading and writing.

Kara remembers perceiving letters as figures with particular characteristics as a way of remembering words. She would memorize each figure, which allowed her to read. As Kara recalls:

I remember just seeing the letters as like people or animals that were like figures, they were more like they had personalities than anything else. People would say, … “What sound is that or whatever.” It would just be like
a memorization thing … it would just be like this shape is like this. Then reading, I hated that. I just memorized what the word looked like, it had nothing to do with sounding it out. I would just fake it.

Spelling was a real struggle and reading comprehension was the most challenging. As Kara reflects:

I remember going over my letters and crossing it out and then trying it again and crossing it out and doing it again. Writing to me I don’t really remember that as much, I remember not being able to spell anything…. I feel reading and reading comprehension was always the hardest for me…. I would have to concentrate on the actual words that I was saying than what I was reading [during] like the whole sentence….

Kara hated reading aloud, which brought on immense social anxiety. As Kara recalls, “I hated reading aloud, that was total anxiety…. I hated that. I tried to get out of it as much as I could but … [the teacher] would just [pick on students by] going round the circle.”

Kara remembers that other students could easily write stories. However, writing was only possible through dictation if someone was able to help Kara write down her ideas while she spoke, which contributed to her experience of otherness. As Kara reflects:

I … remember people were writing stories or whatever and I just didn’t know how to do that. I would come up with stories but I didn’t know how to read them or write them. I would say my story to somebody else who would type it out and then we had these read aloud for our stories and I remember one time reading. I had to have one of my peers help me read my own story, this was humiliating.

However, she was given extra time on exams and access to books on tape during elementary school, which she continues to listen to and benefit from in college. As Kara reflects, “Having extra time was also crucial. In my tutoring I learned how to study that is really what helped me forever, pseudonyms and a lot of stuff.” Kara continues, “Listening to my books on tape was probably [the most helpful]. I don’t know what I would do without that….”

Even though Kara was struggling with reading and writing this did not stop her from being interested in other subjects. She enjoyed science classes that involved hands-on problem solving, but did not like math. However, she always had art classes during
her early education. She always enjoyed the social atmosphere in the art studio, which 
boosted her self-confidence. As Kara remembers, “I’ve always done [art]. I can’t 
remember not. I remember just sitting at my dining room table, just drawing for hours 
and hours and hours with colored pencils or crayons or pencils…. It was always people.”
Kara continues to describe how her father inspired her artistic development.

I remember the first time where I was sitting in the kitchen, and I was 
drawing a face. My dad was like, “You know what? I might want to show 
you. I think you’re at the stage where I could teach you how to shade.” I was 
like, “What? That’s unbelievable.” Then he showed me and then after that, I 
was like, “Oh my gosh, I have to make this look three-dimensional.” How do 
I do that?

Kara remembers struggling socially while in elementary school, which contributed 
to a sense of otherness. There was a group of four girls she admired, wanted to befriend, 
and become a part of their group. However, she was unable to establish a relationship 
with these girls at this time. As Kara remembers, “Everybody tried to get in with that 
group but that didn’t really happen. I just remember being like, ‘Okay I want to hang out 
with you guys and be a part of your group,’ but I was only outside….,” Kara’s mother, 
who was also a teacher at the school, would help her out socially with this group of girls. 
As Kara remembers:

[My mom] knew the back-story of why these people were being mean or 
not. Whenever we had a fight or something she would be able to facilitate, 
that was probably just a teacher thing to do but it was always nice so I could 
be like, “That’s my mum,” she was helping us all out.

Kara believes that the reasoning for why these girls may have treated her differently was 
mixed. As Kara continues:

It was just like they would not include me in things … since I was way 
more mature than they were … emotionally and physically. I was taller and 
bigger than they were and they were these cute little things. They would say 
I was a big fat one or whatever and I was in the slower reading group and 
they were never in the slower reading group.
This caused her to feel socially left out and associate the experience as a form of discrimination (bullying). As Kara explains, “I was bullied probably all the way through elementary school and then slowly in the end of 6th grade I was in the cool.”

**Middle school.** In middle school, Kara started to like math more because she discovered its relationship to science and her hands-on experiences. She felt that science was more tactile and visual than English or history and started to see the relationship between art and science. As Kara recalls:

> I didn’t like math in elementary school but I liked it in middle school and I loved science throughout the whole thing. I think it was because using my hands and also it’s a problems solving thing. I was really good at math and science and not good at reading and writing and history so that’s why I liked them.

Kara continues to discuss the difference between science and more language-based subjects.

> [M]y specialty is drawing and painting … my brain can understand science and reasoning in that way than reading a bunch of words. It was like a bunch of squiggles and I’m trying to translate that into [my] brain but science is a way more visual and tactile and you could just see how the parts fit together versus English or history.

Kara continued to struggle with reading and writing and was tutored through middle school. Middle school was also a time that Kara remembers physically maturing faster than her peers and starting to become insecure about the changes. As Kara reflects:

> Then 8th grade, that was when I totally went through my adolescence I was way ahead of everybody else. I had matured very quickly and I was taller than everybody and I was pretty insecure at that point…. I had a really bad year in 8th grade, I had a little bit of an eating issue and I had a boyfriend and then we broke up and … lost all of my friends because I was so insecure.

During this difficult social and emotional time Kara became immersed in the arts, often did extra art projects, and was encouraged by an art teacher. As Kara recalls:

> That’s when I found art, my art teacher was really nice and she saw that I really liked it. She would encourage me and gave me extra work to do or
whatever. That was really nice to find something that I was passionate about in that way.

Kara remembers that her art-making experience had an influence on her self-esteem and gave her a sense of belonging. As she continues, “I felt people were like, ‘[Kara] is good at Art,’ so it would just boost my confidence and it’s just one of those places that you just relax and I just liked the atmosphere in all my art classes.”

**High school.** Kara entered high school with more confidence than she had in middle school. The contributing reason for this change includes her special education classes ending during middle school, taking on a leadership position, and making new friendships. As Kara remembers:

The summer between 8th and 9th grade I got a job, became counselor, and became really good friends with these two other girls. One was actually in my class at [school] and then the other one was a childhood friend from growing up outside of [school]. Their friendship gave me confidence so in 9th grade I felt I was totally okay with who I was....

During high school, Kara remembers other contributing factors that influenced her self-confidence, sense of belonging, and overall well-being. She had a boyfriend her sophomore year, and studied abroad where she significantly developed as a person during her junior year. Kara remembers coming to a sense of identity on her own terms during this time. As Kara reflects:

In 11th grade I went to this travel abroad program.... That’s where I blossomed you would say. I found out that I could be a leader, I could figure out who I was without my family around because my family was everywhere at [school] … it was just a really great experience.

High school was also a time to develop artistically. During her senior year, Kara was only interested in art-making. As Kara remembers, “It was all about art. My senior year I was like, I’m just in the arts … [that was] all I loved.”

However, she continued to receive negative reinforcement about her writing abilities between her freshmen and sophomore years. As Kara remembers:

One time in 9th or 10th grade where I would write and re-write a paper for my English teacher and I would give a draft after draft. There’s one time
I wrote a paper four times and then I got it back, I got a 70 on it and I was like, “Can you just give me a little bit of slack here?” I felt my teachers in high school really pushed me really hard to be a good writer but I was always told I’m not a good writer….

Her composition teacher was rude and would sometimes publicly embarrass her about her writing. As Kara continues:

My English teachers it just was obvious, I would always get the worst grade than everybody else and they would always put me aside and be like, “Do you understand this”…. There was this one time where this teacher asked me to … write tactfully or something and I was like, “What does that mean?” He was like, “You don’t know what that means?” who can tell [Kara] what that means. Really?

Kara would make written notes as best she could during class, but writing was a challenge. She also mentions struggling with following directions and listening for long periods of time. Notes were the most helpful for remembering course content. As Kara recalls:

I would just write my notes as I could…, but I definitely had a hard time following directions…. It was because I couldn’t follow, I couldn’t listen that long, I couldn’t figure out what they were trying to ask me. I remembered being tested for dyslexia and she gave me a list of things to do and I forget. If it was written out it would be fine.

However, digital technology was helpful when writing during this time. Kara had a computer in high school and remembers learning how to type through using AIM and Internet chat rooms. The most helpful form of technology was spell-check and thesaurus on the computer. As Kara remembers:

I don’t know what I would do without spell-check. Literally…. When people said, “Just look up how to spell a word in the dictionary,” I’d be like, “well first of all I don’t know what the first letter is so where do I go from there.” Once spell-check and thesaurus came a long it was alright I know what’s up.

When making her artwork, Kara excelled at representational drawing, particularly enjoying portraiture. Her teachers during this time noticed her strengths and tried to
continue working with her talents, which may have limited her exploration in other fields.

As Kara reflects:

I don’t know if I really got the exploration as much as I wanted. There were some classes that I was able to explore and use my head and exploring ideas but I felt since I was good at the technical part of it I focused on that and teachers kept me going on that department. We would come up with an idea and then see how this media can do that or whatever. I felt each art teacher that I had saw my strengths and knew how to push me.

During high school, she had an art teacher that tried to expose her to more conceptual ideas in art making, but she was not interested. As Kara explains:

I think that there might have been an art teacher that I had that his artwork was really conceptual and I just didn’t really understand it and I think that I didn’t respect it as much as I should have or could have. I was like, “Well, you don’t know what you’re talking of.”

Kara continues to talk about her difficulties when trying to make artwork in a different way. As Kara remembers:

“I know that I’m good at [technical figurative drawing] so I’ll just stick with it,” because when I tried different things all my paintings or drawings just came out badly. “Why do I need to change?” If I tried to draw something from my mind or memory or whatever nothing would have come out the way that I wanted it and I would be like, “Why am I doing this?”

Kara was getting great results through representational drawing and painting and did not feel she needed to explore anything outside of what she was excelling in during her high school years.

**College.** Kara worked rigorously in high school and remembers college was less challenging. Her college system was based on trimesters, where she would have three classes each term. Kara did not stress out about grades and took whatever courses she was interested in. As Kara remembers:

It was intense because it was really short and the classes were pretty long, I worked a lot but I also knew how to relax. I worked so hard in high school that college was a time where I felt I’ll relax a little bit and not stress out too much about all the grades and all that stuff and try and take classes
that I want to learn about instead of classes that I have to take. If I do have to take a class try and make it so that I know it’s not going to be too hard.

While in college, Kara accepted commissions for her artwork, took some art classes where technical skills were given importance, and started to explore different kinds of art-making. As Kara recalls:

Then going to college I was exposed to a bunch of different kinds of artwork, more digital and sculpture and photography. More things that I wasn’t necessarily always getting in high school I couldn’t sign up for my classes I wanted and do things that I wanted to do in high school. Then in college I had to take all these different classes. However, she was still interested in representational technical skills and portraiture and less interested in making conceptually based work. As Kara continues:

When my thesis came along senior year, it’s actually so interesting going back and reading what I wrote about how I came up with my process because all I wanted to do was representational things. Usually my [drawings of] reflection[s] on something else … was cool, like a distorted view of myself, but … I’m like you weren’t educated in that way of coming up with an idea … the conceptual aspect of art was like, “You don’t need that.”

Kara remembers how important developing social relationships through art-making was during college. These relationships helped to inspire her artistically. As Kara remembers:

I talked a lot about art my senior year of college with some of my closest friends in college. When I was working with them, our studios were right next to each other and we’d talk about cool things that we’ve done or that we’ve seen and how we might be able to go off of that article and create something new…. We call each other the “art guild,” my friends in college…. Yeah. We still email each other and say, “Oh, this is a cool article. You should check this out. This is a cool artist. Look at this artwork. Isn’t that cool?” Or, “Oh, this reminds me of your artwork,” or, “I thought this was cool…."

Kara gave an example of an experience she had working on an art project with a group of her female friends. As Kara continues, “It’s so fun to talk with them about their artwork and try and help them problem solve. If I have this issue and I want to say this, how do I do that?” During this art project, Kara started to move away from working in a
representational figurative mode to deal with social issues that she feels strongly about.

As Kara continues:

I feel like it’s more socially acceptable to talk poorly about women and the way that guys can talk about girls sexually is more acceptable than the other way around. Double standard kind of thing. For my project, it was just another inequality of women. I asked girls to put a label on their forehead, like “bitch”, ... I had “whore” on my face. We had one common lunch hour, so there were probably 20 of us all standing in the same ... Where everybody would get lunch. Some people would stop and ask. Other people would just look around and be like, “This is so weird. Somebody with cunt on their forehead.” [One of my friends] took a picture of the whole happening and then I did a video based on the photographs and the experience.

Kara’s frustration with negative labels that are used against women by men was turned into a political performance that moved Kara outside of her usual art-making practice to talk about issues that she thinks are socially important. This project was a way for Kara to work together with a group of her friends, which had positive social implications; it also allowed Kara to engage in conceptual art-making, a practice that she was previously resistant to.

Toward the end of college Kara debated about applying to M.A. and M.F.A. programs. She did apply to art schools but did not get in. She feels she was not accepted because she had submitted a statement of artistic inspiration concerning having dyslexia⁴, which was discouraging. Kara grew up in a family of educators and eventually decided to go back to school after working six years in art galleries. As Kara reflects:

   My parents are both teachers, my grandparents are teachers and uncles on both sides. I have a lot of teach[ers] in my family…. I fell upon working in art galleries for four and half years before I came to [graduate school] and I hated [working in galleries]…. I just wanted to get back into the school setting because I felt the most comfortable there. Whenever I would go to a school I would be, this is where I feel comfortable.

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⁴There was no evidence that Kara was rejected from graduate school because she stated she had dyslexia in an artist statement; however, she felt it could have been a factor in the graduate search committee’s decision.
Kara was eventually accepted into a prestigious art education M.A. with teaching certification program and feels this is the place where she belongs.

**Graduate school.** Kara is appreciating graduate school and feels she made the right decision in terms of the program. However, she is working much harder than she did in college. She compares the rigor of grad school to her experience in high school. Yet, spending time with her cohort is the most rewarding experience. She knows she made the right decision to become an art teacher. As Kara states:

I’m not going to get my doctorate because I know that I want to be an art teacher so I just know that this is only a short period of time but it’s intense and I’m spending so much time with these people in my cohort and we’re going to be really great comrades and the career and art education world but also friends.

In graduate school, Kara has been exploring more materials and media in art-making. At this point in her artistic development, she feels she is proficient in representational drawing and oil painting, but is currently exploring more abstract forms. She is more relaxed about the technical skills and emphasizes her interests in process and exploring ideas. She sees more value in conceptual art and understands that it is a way of thinking that can be used in lesson plans to foster child development. As Kara continues:

Working through my thesis in college, where I was like bashing conceptual art because I was like, “This just doesn’t make any sense to me,” because I wasn’t there. I didn’t understand it until ... I think I understand it more now, of why people do it and why it’s important. Now I want to try and incorporate that to my kids. To be like, “You’ve got to think about your artwork before you do it, instead of just drawing that.” Unless you want to practice drawing.

Kara goes on to explain how her new interests in mark-making and abstraction has changed the way she thinks about education. As Kara reflects:

I try to not talk about with the students if it’s good or not or if it looks like something. I try and focus more on the technical, the marks that they make. Whether it’s, “Oh, that’s a really interesting mark here and here, and I like how they come together here,” instead of them being like, “Well, this doesn’t look good,” or, “This doesn’t look like this,” or, “This should look like that.” I’m like, “It shouldn’t look like anything unless you want it to.”
It’s all about how you like it or don’t like it and then try and explain why you like it or don’t like it. Then I try and help them like some aspects of it, if they don’t.

Kara has also been exploring other ways of making. For example, she has done a video project about food memories with a member of her cohort in graduate school, also incorporating mixed-media into the project.

**Kara: Artwork**

**Artwork description.** My first introduction to Kara’s artwork was of a video project about food memories she made in collaboration with a member of her cohort. It was only during the interview that I learned about her interest in portraiture. Kara feels she has gone through many artistic phases, starting with people, and then faces. She feels the most accomplished in her portraiture work. As Kara states:

> I have loved doing portraiture my whole life. I started just doing people and then started getting into doing faces and then I really just kept doing that. When I went to college, I kept doing faces and then ended up doing more distorted faces, like me in a reflection of different things that distorted my face....

During college, Kara started to explore performance, video, and feminist art projects.

During graduate school, she has become more open to conceptual art-making, exploration of materials, mark-making, and mixed-media. As Kara mentions:

> It was only until I got to [graduate school] where I started working on different materials and appreciating different media for what it is. I got really good at drawing and oil painting, but I really started liking collage and more abstract and understanding that it’s not about being totally technical with your work, but it’s more about the process of how you come up with your idea, if that’s what you want to do.

In Kara’s artist statement, she discusses the process of illustrating a book for children. Because this was her first time constructing a book, she ran into issues that she was not anticipating, but she was able to find ways to solve her issues, such as researching alternative ways that an illustrated book is designed, finding the appropriate form for its audience, developing a process for storyboarding and creating pictures, transitioning from
traditional art making to illustration, getting pushed out of her comfort zone, being happy with the outcome, and learning about herself.

**Art materials.** Kara enjoys using traditional art-making materials, such as watercolors, sharp pencils, oil paint, and linocut. During her graduate school experience, Kara started to experiment with different materials and collage. At this point in her artistic development, she feels she is proficient in representational drawing and oil painting, but is currently exploring different materials.

Kara talks about the sensory experience of making with different types of materials and how that affects her material choices. For example, Kara reflects on her use of chalk and oil pastels.

I like the look of the chalk pastel better than the oil…. But I don’t like the feeling of the chalk pastel. I think it’s too scratchy. But the oil pastel, I don’t like the way that that looks…. But it’s really fun to just like…. You can also get so many different lines and marks from the chalk pastel versus the oil pastel.

Even though she prefers the visual experience of one, she would prefer the physical sensation of another material.

Today, Kara is more interested in material exploration and has found pleasure in discussing different types of mark-making. Kara reflects on her current art-making and teaching experiences with kids:

The last painting that I did was just all about the materials, which I loved. It was so fun to just experiment and see what the material is capable of. I never appreciated that as much and I think that ... [another educator] definitely inspired me with the way that she talked to kids about their artwork. When we talked about the students’ artwork and analyzing it and seeing the good marks that students made….

**Tools.** Kara mentions the gratifying experience of drawing with sharp pencils and hearing them scratch on the surface of the paper, enjoying the experience of mark-making. Currently, Kara has done a video project about food memories with her cohort in
graduate school. She enjoys making videos because she does not have to worry about storing the work and she likes to tell stories with pictures through iMovie. As Kara states,

> I like editing a video. You’re listening to the music and you’re watching something and then you can tell a story through the way you edit it, right to the beat of something ... I mean, being able to tell a story just through pictures is pretty awesome.

However, Kara mentions the reduced experience of enjoyment when working with digital technology. As Kara reflects, “I feel like the computer is not as rewarding. It doesn’t feel as rewarding as ... I mean, the printmaking is sort of a long process but I love the feeling.... Do you know that feeling?” She feels that fine art is concerned with enjoying the process of making, while digital art is more related to design and more concerned with sales and marketing.

**Artistic process.** Kara describes fine art making as more contingent on the process. Her interest in process became more important during college. As Kara reflects:

> I got really good at drawing and oil painting, but I really started liking collage and more abstract and understanding that it’s not about being totally technical with your work, but it’s more about the process of how you come up with your idea.

She talks about the process of stepping back from her work and then looking at others’ artwork, and then coming back to her work with new ideas of how to approach it. As Kara continues:

> I usually don’t like my artwork after I’ve finished it.... I don’t know. I always think I really like it in the beginning.... No, I really like it during it. There are only a few that I’m really proud of. They’re all usually the technical ones that I like. Though more recently, I’m liking more of the abstract.... I took classes at [an art school] and that was so much fun.... But it was hard for me to step back and then see what everybody else was doing and then come back to mine and be like, “Oh okay. Well now I know what to change or how to change it. This needs to come here.” Maybe it’s just stepping back from your work and then coming back and seeing how to change it a new way....

Portraits were made through careful observations from looking in the mirror, with a model and/or through looking at photographs. Reflecting on her process, she looks back
and is surprised at what she has done in the past and wonders how she did it because it is so technically successful. As Kara mentions, “There are some drawings and paintings that I’m like, ‘Why did I think that was good?’ Then there are other paintings and drawings that I’m like, ‘How the heck did I do that? That’s so good.’”

Kara mentions the experience of getting lost and letting her mind wander during the process of making art. She feels that absorption is the most meaningful experience during the art making process. She enjoys the experience of how everything seems to disappear when she is making work. As Kara reflects, “I think the most important thing for me was just getting totally lost in what I was doing. Everything around me just disappeared. It was me and my paintings or my drawing.” Kara also compares the absorptive quality of art making with cooking; they are similar absorptive spaces but are also different. As Kara states, “I also like cooking and that’s another thing that I feel like I go into a different place while I’m cooking.” Kara continues to compare the absorptive quality of art-making and cooking.

Literally, the rest of the world is blurry. But then when I’m cooking, it’s like there’s so many other things that I have to be aware of.... I have the TV on, but it’s really hard for me to concentrate on that and when I’m cooking, I don’t think my mind can do that. I know some people can have the TV on while they’re working on homework or ... I don’t know. Researching something. I can’t do that. I need silence … I need total concentration.

During the process of art making, Kara is fine with creating a mess when working with materials if it is in her studio. However, Kara has a clear division between her studio and living space. As Kara explains:

I don’t like a lot of messy things. Though whenever I come up with lessons for my kids, I think about if I see some cardboard somewhere…. But I don’t want to keep that around my house because I don’t want to make anything with that, because it’s just ... I just think that what I would make with that would not be pretty. It would just take up space…. I had my own studio at [college] and I had paintings all on the walls and my palettes out. I tidied up before I left but there was definitely a lot of stuff around. But that was my studio. That’s where it goes. But in my house, if I don’t have a space for that, then ... No.
Kara would not describe her process as creative, except for a collaborative project she did with a friend. As Kara explains:

We went through this long process of trying to figure out the idea and going through different ideas together and what we wanted to create versus what we thought would be feasible. It was a sculpture class and we ended up creating this multi-media piece that was wood.

Kara does not enjoy the process of working with digital technology when making art. She is more interested in product rather than the process of making a video, but it is the other way around with other traditional materials. As Kara mentions:

I don’t know how I feel about the process of making [videos]. It’s not as fun. I think when I capture certain things at certain times, I’m like, “Oh yeah. Okay, I’ll go with that.” But it always takes longer than you think….

One of the issues that Kara has with the process of making videos is that she cannot easily move back and forth without messing up the editing. It is a linear time-based process; she has to start at the beginning and move toward the end. It is not that way when working with other materials in a spatial format. As Kara continues:

Sometimes I get too carried away. Going too far into the video and then I mess up the first part of it. You know when you’re editing and you really should start at the beginning and then if you start in the end, you’re like ... I had to learn that the hard way.

Kara also has an association with Photoshop and InDesign as a form of commercial art, which is not the same as fine art. As Kara reflects:

I’ve used Photoshop and InDesign.... When I use those, it’s mostly for jobs. For marketing, stuff like that. When I was working in galleries, I was using those tools more often than making art.... That’s a marketing tool. I guess it’s a type of artwork, but just selling ... I guess artwork is, you can sell it too…. I feel like commercial is just creating to sell, to make a profit off of. It’s product-based. Fine art is more [about] the process….

Kara then goes on to discuss how this may not be the case in some situations. As Kara continues:

Of course, I’m contradicting myself because when I make artwork, it’s always for somebody. But I’m not trying to sell it. It’s usually like a gift. I’m
not trying to sell my talent. I feel like with marketing, it’s selling their talent and maybe their product. I don’t know. It’s confusing.

The circumstances and the intentions in the making of art may influence the status of the artwork. Kara has worked on commissions before and enjoyed the process of painting someone’s portrait for money; however, marketing is considered more design-based and requires a different way of thinking. As Kara mentions:

I’ve done commission portraits before and that’s just talking to the person about what they want and then creating it just for them. It’s fun because I get paid for doing something that I love, but ... I guess it’s very similar. I feel like with the marketing, it’s more of design-based. You have to think about it in a different way. It’s more mathematical.

Making artwork with others is also an important element of the process. Kara describes the rewarding process of working on developing a feminist performance for a college assignment with a friend. As Kara remembers:

I did this thing on women and them being known for their reproductive parts, basically. Just labeling women, stuff like that. It was mainly my project, but I totally collaborated with [a friend] on it. She helped take the pictures. I did the happening. It’s probably one of the more profound things that I’ve done. I can’t believe I did it, looking back.

Kara has worked on a number of collaborative art projects during her graduate program, such as a collaborative video project with another friend about food memories that they had with their mothers who had both passed away. As Kara remembers:

We went through this long process of trying to figure out the idea and going through different ideas together and what we wanted to create versus what we thought would be feasible…. Then I created a video based on when we actually made that menu for our friends to share it because we think food is all about sharing.

Artistic inspiration. Kara draws inspiration from a number of figurative artists. For example, Kara is inspired by Mary Cassatt’s mother and daughter compositions, color choices, painting style, and that she was a successful female artist. As Kara reflects:

She was such a successful artist during her time and in a man’s world. It’s frustrating that she wasn’t able to have [children] ... she was so good at
capturing that love between the mother and daughter…. I also loved her style of painting.... I would always want to try to be more free in my artwork....

Kara also likes Lucian Freud’s technical skills and painting abilities. As Kara states, “I’m just in awe with the way that he paints and his skin tones and the colors that he can get. He’s just amazing. He’s a crazy person, but I liked how technical he was in that way.” Kara wishes she could paint figures like Thomas Hart Benton and is inspired by his works that guide one’s eye throughout the composition, but does not care for his dark palette. Currently, Kara is interested in combining figurative forms in abstraction and experimenting with different materials.

During a college assignment Kara remembers being inspired to organize a feminist performance concerning derogatory terms made toward women. Through a process of talking with other female friends, Kara was inspired to communicate about important social issues through her artwork. As Kara continues:

Whenever there is a piece that is a feminist piece, we always talk about it. Send an email or whatever and say, “Oh, flashback to when we did this together,” or something like that…. I feel definitely very passionate about it. It’s definitely a part of me. I feel like my mom really ingrained in me the quality and all that stuff. I’m pretty vocal about it. My friends and family. These feminist conversations also inspired her portraiture practice through adding props in the composition and sexist jokes as titles. As Kara continues:

I could do my reflection on a urinal. I could do my reflection on an iron. I could do my reflection on a teakettle, and all the titles of them became political. I did one of me reflecting on a spoon and the title was “How May I Serve You.” Or I did my reflection on just a woman in a Hub Cap and it said, “There’s no road between the bedroom and the kitchen.” It’s like why can’t women drive? It’s like a joke…. Then the iron was, “Would you like this starched?”… That was another political piece.

Kara is often inspired to make artwork for others, which she feels has a practical purpose in her life. As Kara reflects:

I like to make cards for people, or when I’m saying thank-yous or birthday or whatever. I think that’s a lot of the time where I do most of my artwork. Just coming up with a creative way to say “happy birthday” or “thank you.”
She does not like making artwork for herself, so making a card for another person is meaningful and practical. As Kara continues:

Some of it, I would like to share with people. I like to do it for other people, but then I don’t do artwork just for myself because I feel like I don’t have the time to do that. I’m a practical person, that creating something just to create is like, “What am I going to do with that now? I don’t have any space for it?”

Because of this attitude, Kara does not feel the need to keep her work after it is made. Currently, Kara does not feel like much of an artist because she has not maintained her practice. However, cooking has taken over as her practice because it has a purpose in her life. As Kara states:

I’m like, “An artist is somebody that continues to do their art a lot.” Like on the weekends and in their free time. I feel like when I have my free time what I do is cook. That’s what I do right now because going back to that, it’s a practical thing. I can be creative in the way that I cook, but if I’m creative doing my artwork, that’s not a thing. When do I have time to go to a studio to do that? I’d rather ... It’s so embarrassing. I have other things. I need to clean my apartment…. What am I going to do with the artwork that I make? If I make something that I’m cooking, that’ll be eaten.

Kara’s mother, who died three years ago, told her to keep making artwork before she passed away. She told her mother she would, but knew in her heart that she would rather be teaching than making artwork in a studio. Kara describes how she made the transition from art-making to teaching.

I hadn’t done any artwork before she passed away for a really long time. She just said, … “You really need to get back into it. You’re really good and it makes you so happy.” I think she re-inspired me to start taking classes at [an art school]. From there, when I was talking to my teachers at [this art school], she was like, “You’re really good and I think that you should apply.”… Then I got in, so that was awesome…. But I knew that I didn’t want to get into doing artwork. I wanted to get into the classroom to teach. That’s where that transition came.

Kara is more relaxed about her technical skills and emphasizes her interests in process, materials, and exploring ideas. She sees more value in conceptual art and understands that it is a way of thinking that can be used in a lesson plan to foster child development.
Today, Kara would like to combine figuration and abstraction in her artwork. As Kara reflects on her art making practice,

I feel like my artwork will probably be a little bit more abstract now. I would love to combine the two. I would love to do the technical and then maybe do some collage and put the technical with the abstract maybe, and be more into the materials and being inspired by the materials than the technical aspect of it. Try and just let go. It seems like I’m a bit of a control freak.

Kara feels it is less necessary to rely on her technical portraiture skills when making her own work today. This attitude has come during the point in her life when finishing her graduate degree and moving into a teaching position.

**Kara: Portrait Summary**

Kara went to the same private school throughout elementary, middle, and high school. Both of her parents taught at this school so they were always present during her education. During the first grade, Kara remembers being pulled out of class by her kindergarten teacher to continue her studies in a separate room and was held back in slower reading groups. In the fourth grade, she started to receive tutoring after being diagnosed with dyslexia. During Kara’s early education, she enjoyed hands-on activities, especially art classes, and felt artmaking contributed toward building self-confidence during this time.

During elementary school, Kara remembers being embarrassed when labeled with dyslexia and felt there was a stigma attached with spending time with the special education teacher, not finding the resource room particularly helpful. While she struggled with reading and writing, Kara found books on tape and extra time on exams helpful. Kara also developed other learning strategies, such as associating words with human or animal characteristics. However, some of these strategies often reduced comprehension. She would often avoid taking courses that required a lot of reading and hated reading aloud in public. Writing was a serious challenge and was only possible through orally dictating to someone who could write her ideas down.
During middle school, Kara enjoyed subjects if she saw their relationship to hands-on experience. However, she continued to struggle with reading and writing and needed a tutor. While middle school posed a number of social challenges, her family was always around and could help her out in difficult social situations. During these difficult years, Kara became immersed in the arts.

During high school, Kara was able to develop some self-confidence. She no longer spent time in the resource room and was developing significant relationships with her peers. Kara was also becoming more socially independent and came to an identity on her own terms during an abroad program her junior year. While she still struggled with literacy, Kara found computers helpful for developing her writing abilities, with the spell-check and thesaurus. During her senior year, Kara was focused on artmaking and excelled in figurative drawing, such as portraiture.

Kara remembers college was less difficult than high school and was an enjoyable learning experience. She continued studying art in college while being exposed to different forms of artmaking, such as digital, sculpture, and photography. She started to collaborate on art projects with other female classmates and remembers developing some significant relationships with friends from art class during these college years.

After college, Kara applied for graduate school but was not accepted right away. She spent a number of years working in galleries, but did not enjoy the business side of the art world. She eventually applied and attended an art education program to get her master’s with teacher certification. Even though she is working harder than she did while in college, Kara feels that she made the right decision in becoming an art teacher. Developing friendships within her graduate school cohort has been her most rewarding experience during graduate school.

During Kara’s time in graduate school, she has been exploring more materials and media when making art. While she developed her technical drawing and painting skills during college, she felt more open to exploration in abstraction and mark-making in
graduate school. Kara still enjoys traditional artmaking and working with materials, but now she sees the value in conceptual artmaking, especially when developing lesson plans. Kara has also been exploring video and enjoying telling stories through moving images, but she also finds the process less gratifying than working with materials.

Kara feels that the fine arts are contingent on the making process and described periods of getting lost and absorbed during artmaking, similar to what she experiences when cooking. When considering artists who have inspired her, Kara mentions the figurative work of Mary Cassatt, Lucian Freud, and Thomas Hart Benton. Collaboration has become a meaningful dimension of her artistic practice and she mentions the important social bonding experiences of working together with other women. Feminist activism is also a significant dimension of her life, which has come through in her artwork, such as in a feminist happening she organized during college.

Today Kara would rather make artwork for others than spend her time in an art studio alone making work for herself. Making work for others serves a practical purpose in her life, similar to cooking a meal. However, she does not feel like an artist anymore because she does not spend enough time making work. Before she passed away, Kara’s mother told her that she should keep making artwork, but she knew in her heart that she would be happier teaching and working with children. At this point in Kara’s artistic development, she has become more relaxed about her technical drawing and painting abilities. She is also more interested in exploration of process and ideas. At the time of the last interview, Kara was working on an illustration book for children and finishing up her teacher certification program.

**Portrait of Ben**

Ben is a 25-year-old master’s degree student in art education at a school in the metropolitan New York area. I met Ben through a fellow doctoral student who was
teaching at a university and had Ben as a graduate student in an art education course. After having a conversation with my colleague about my dissertation research and need for one more participant for my dyslexic group, she mentioned that one of her students had just recently disclosed that he was struggling with writing because of dyslexia. She put me in contact with Ben via email in late September 2016. After some back and forth, we made plans to meet.

Ben agreed to meet me at the campus dining hall on Tuesday, October 25 at 5:00 p.m. I arrived early for lunch and checked out the space for options for doing an interview, looking for somewhere quiet and comfortable. He was a little late for the interview, but when he arrived I knew it was Ben because of his body language, the appearance of looking for someone in the room. He had an athletic, slim build, wore a sports cap, and was casually dressed. Ben explained that he had class in about an hour, so there were time restrictions to our meeting.

I thanked him for participating in my study and suggested we find a better place to do an interview, possibly a room to ourselves. We were able to find a vacant conference room with comfortable chairs and felt quite lucky. We went over signing IRB forms and the interview started. Ben seemed relaxed and comfortable in my presence, understanding that his story may be able to help others who have struggled with dyslexia during their education. After the interview, I scheduled a second meeting for a week later at the same location to discuss his artistic practice. After the second meeting, I scheduled a follow-up interview a month later at his house so that I could see his studio space and other art pieces.

**Ben: Educational Experience**

**Elementary and middle school.** During the first interview, Ben explained that both of his parents are educators and they work with children on a daily basis. Ben was also the second son, so his parents had some experience with raising a typical developing
child. Because of this experience Ben felt his father could spot dyslexia early on. As Ben states:

My dad knew that I was dyslexic since I was probably like three or so. Three or four when he started teaching me the alphabet and he knew I just wasn’t picking it up … both my parents are also teachers. They obviously know kids very well because they’re around them all day. My dad knew that I had some type of learning disability and I was tested….

Ben continues:

My dad knew what dyslexia was. Not every parent knows what dyslexia is. They’re just like, “oh my kid just doesn’t get it.” Whereas my dad knows learning disabilities, so he was able to catch it and be like, “all right, there is something up.”

Ben was tested in the first or second grade and diagnosed with dyslexia.

Ben’s parents were strong advocates for him during his education and wanted the best, which meant his parents would have to have meetings with school administrators and search for other schools that could help with dyslexia. As Ben remembers:

I guess I was in a resource room [in public school], but my dad I guess wanted more for me…. I guess [he wanted] me to get more help. My dad felt … pretty strong about that…. He wanted me to be held back and the school wouldn’t let my dad hold me back. They said, “No, he’s fine. He’s got to be two years behind on reading before he can….” Because I guess I wasn’t two years behind yet. My dad just was like, “Well forget it then. I’m going to put my kid in private school.”

Ben was then placed in a private Catholic school, repeated second grade, and stayed there until eighth grade.

Ben mentions the importance of his parents working together to help him with his issues reading and writing during his early childhood. As Ben remembers, “My parents worked as a team. My dad would do most of the reading with me and my mom would handle more of like administrative stuff, like dealing with making sure my paperwork, where it was.” Later on, Ben continues:

[My mother] was more of the person who was on the phone dealing with administrators … because it’s when you have a disability, sometimes it’s not easy to get the accommodations that you want, because a lot of times maybe
they don’t want to give it to you because it is expensive or for whatever reason it may be.

There was a difference between the helpful assistance that Ben received in the resource room versus at home with his parents. During elementary and middle school, the resource room never stood out as an accommodation that really helped. Instead, whenever he ran into an issue, he would see his father and would work it out. Ben’s father was trying everything he could to help with Ben’s dyslexia. He even considered binocular coordination therapy, an approach that focuses on getting the eyes to work together. As Ben remembers:

My dad brought me there thinking like, oh if we can improve his binocular coordination it could help with his reading. Because obviously people who are dyslexic don’t have the best binocular coordination so their eye [would have] trouble I guess fixating…. I went there for maybe a year or two, twice a week.

However, Ben is not sure this testing was helpful.

Ben’s father would work with him at home to improve his reading abilities, sometimes giving incentives. For example, his father would make Ben sit in a room until he would read a page aloud. Ben remembers it as being a negative experience:

I would cry. I would get in fights with my dad. It was miserable. I absolutely hated it. My dad would be like, “You’re sitting in this room until you read this page.” I remember he had a system with me that I had to read. He would buy me a new bike, and I think the bike was like $300…. I didn’t get the bike until I read 300 pages…. When you’re six, seven years old and you can’t read, trying to read one page is agonizing, like actually awful…. It wasn’t like, “Oh read the page and tell me what you read.” It was like, “No, read this page out loud.” He would force me to practice my reading.

During elementary school, Ben’s father would make him do extra readings, and he would get annoyed that he would have to do more than his older brother.

Later, in the 6th and 7th grade, Ben would see a reading and speech therapist to practice sound pronunciation. During this time, he would mostly go over how to make

3 There is no direct evidence that binocular coordination therapy helps with issues typically found in dyslexia.
sounds. However, getting this extra assistance on the weekends had social implications. As Ben remembers:

> When I was younger imagine spending your Saturdays going to see some woman to teach you how to try to read, it sucks. When all your friends are going out and doing other things and you’re trying to read when it’s the weekend, you know what I mean? It was just a burden constantly, being dragged from place to place, seeing all these people to try to improve your reading is like after a while you’re just over it.

Getting this extra assistance on the weekends may have been helpful for developing phonological awareness, but it’s clear that Ben also missed out on social opportunities. Ben did not feel that the resource room helped much with his struggles with reading and writing while in elementary and middle school. Ben remembers his father was more helpful:

> It never stood out to me as being something that like, “Oh my God, I need to go to the resource room because they’re going to help me so much to get me through this.” It was never like that. If anything it was, “Let me go to dad and work with him.”

As working with Ben’s father was sometimes oppressive, he also preferred his assistance in comparison to going to the resource room. While Ben’s family understood his difficulties, this was not always the case among others outside his family. Lack of awareness about dyslexia from both his peers and teachers while in school was a recurring issue. Some could not understand why he could not read. It was not something that one would realize right away unless he had to read aloud. As Ben recalls:

> I pretty much can hide it now, but when I was younger it was always like, you would never know because I would always do fine on tests. My writing wasn’t the strongest, but I could still squeeze by without anyone knowing. You would only see it when I would read out loud…. I could a lot of times, comprehend the material slower than others, but I just wasn’t able to read words out loud as fast.

Sometimes his teachers would call on students to read a paragraph from a story in order of how they were arranged in the room. He remembers finding the paragraph that he
anticipated having to read aloud and discovering that he could not read half of the words.

Ben remembers a typical classroom scenario:

Teacher calls your name, you have to read and then you look at the paragraph and you’re like oh no, I can’t read half like these words or I can read it, but I can’t say it fast enough for the words to come out of my mouth, and now kids in the classroom are like, “What’s going on?” … I remember I would sweat in class and get nervous, especially when you go around the room, the teacher would start with a person in the front of the room one, and maybe I’m fourth, and each kid reads a paragraph. I wouldn’t be paying attention in class, I would just go to paragraph four and read over before I had to read. I wasn’t even paying attention. I would just plan out what I had to say in front of the class. Check to make sure that there was a word that maybe I needed to try to pronounce or something like that.

Ben distinguishes between a fear of speaking in front of others and reading aloud in class.

As Ben reflects:

When it comes to just standing in front of a room and speaking, I could care less. I could just stand up there and talk all day, and there’s no nerves. It’s only when you put like, “Read this piece of paper” then it gets more nerve-wracking.

Often Ben would experience a lack of choice and loss of power in the classroom. When a teacher would call on him to read in front of the class, he did not feel he had a choice in the matter. Sometimes he had teachers who were ignorant of his reading difficulties and would ask him to read in the front of the class. He remembers these instructors were very unhelpful because they embarrassed him in front of his peers. However, teachers who did know about his dyslexia could be a problem as well. As Ben remembers:

I was in the 7th grade, and I remember reading in class in front of the whole class, the teacher was like “… I’m not trying to put you down, but you should probably do more reading at home and practice.” In my head I’m like … Now reflecting back, “Are you kidding me?” You never do that to a kid…. I remember that just making me so angry, like, “Who’s this lady saying this in front of everyone?” Especially considering IEPs are classified, not that she disclosed, “Oh, he’s dyslexic”, but it’s like saying that in front of the whole class, I’m just, “Yeah. Thanks lady. It’s pretty obvious.”
However, for the most part Ben fit in socially during his early educational experiences. He remembers having good social skills and a healthy social life during school. As Ben remembers:

My social skills are perfectly fine. It’s like one of those things that people are almost like, what the? … they’re like, what’s wrong with him? You know what I mean? Because it’s not one of those things that you notice right away…. Because I know there’s also people with learning disabilities when it comes to math.

On occasions Ben would have to deal with harassment from others about his struggles with reading during elementary and middle school. During school there was one kid that tried to bully Ben, but it never affected him socially. As Ben remembers:

I remember there were times where you’d have that one kid who would try to bully you, but I didn’t not have friends because of it. Obviously it affected me, but it wasn’t like other disabilities where it affects you socially or something like that. It never affected my social skills, so it really didn’t affect that aspect….

There were two kids in class that would make fun of Ben often; however, looking back they may have had a “chip on their shoulder” because they were being made fun of as well. As Ben recalls:

I remember the two kids who would make fun of me were overweight. I’m sure their chip on their shoulders was that they were overweight and they were the heavy-set funny kids … and they were smart. The chip on my shoulder was that I couldn’t read that well. I remember they would pick on me … and I would never pick on them, but they would pick on me because I had a reading disability.

Ben feels that kids can be really cruel toward each other because of their association with a label. However, he did not feel labeled during his early education, which may have been because he was doing well in other aspects of his life. As Ben remembers:

For the most part, people didn’t label me because I would still do good on tests. We would get our tests back and other kids are like, “Oh, what did you get? What did you get?”… I was doing just as good or better than a lot of kids in math.
Although he did not feel perceived as academically inferior and labeled by other students, Ben did feel noticed due to his apprehension about reading aloud in class. As he recalls:

I remember when I would read, my voice used to change, because I’d be so nervous. People would be like, “[Ben], your voice sounds much different when you read. Why?” That was just me being so … nervous, but kids never labeled me.

In contrast to Ben’s difficulties with reading and writing, the arts did not pose the same cognitive challenge. Art was Ben’s favorite subject, but he also liked other subjects, such as history and science. As Ben mentions:

Art was everything. I also really liked history … I really … like science, but dyslexia and science for say maybe don’t go together well. It can be really hard … there’s concepts, there’s a lot of big words in science…. I’d say my favorite science was probably earth science, because I surf and I’m really into how the moon affects the ocean, how wind affects waves and stuff like that. I loved that class.

Like this example of surfing, Ben found that his interests in other subjects would come out of having a direct experience with the phenomenon rather than through reading books on the topic.

**High school.** Elementary and middle school were combined, thus Ben attended class with the same group of students throughout. As Ben got older, moving from eighth to ninth grade, he was able to compensate better for his dyslexia and improved in subjects that he was once discouraged to take. The move from middle school to high school was a big jump and it took time for him to transition. As Ben remembers:

I guess you could say it really changed when I went to 9th grade when I went to a different school and then no one really knew I was dyslexic, whereas like when you go to school with the same kids since I was in second grade, obviously they know you go to the resource room.

Ben remembers getting in arguments with his father about going to the resource room during high school. As Ben recalls:

I specifically told my dad…, “I’m not going to the resource room.” I would get angry too, I was like, “Why am I going to the resource room to
High school was Ben’s first opportunity to decide for himself whether or not to fit in and not be identified with a disability.

For the most part, Ben was able to hide his difficulties with reading and writing. He blended in socially and was very vocal during discussions. As Ben recalls, “I [would] talk the whole class. I think that’s another thing, my participation rate in every class [was] probably always a 100, maybe not English, but social studies, science, even English.”

Ben further describes how he blended in:

I wasn’t failing everything…. I wasn’t in a contained room where I was only with other kids with learning disabilities. I was just amongst everyone else. For the most part, I blended in … for the most part I was able to hide it, and not be labeled, especially in high school.

However, when writing a paper in high school, Ben would need to find someone to proofread.

Ben was able to hide his literacy difficulties most of the time while in high school. The only time he would leave the main class was when he would get time and a half during state exams. As Ben reflects, “So I would take a Regents so I would go into a different room, and I would be in a room with kids who all had time and a half … or other accommodations of whatever that may be.” He would do well on tests, but his writing was weak.

Ben was out of the resource room and on the brink of being able to hide his learning difficulties during his high school years. Ben attributes being able to do this to his father who would constantly push him to read. As Ben remembers:

Whereas for me, my dad was at me every day, forcing me to read, which I’m thankful for because it’s allowed me to just not really think about it. Through high school I forgot … that I even had a disability, which is good.

Ben became grateful that his father pushed him to read during his early education because he got better at reading and was able to forget he had a disability in high school.
One place where dyslexia was irrelevant was in art class. During this time in high school, art was the most important activity, and he would spend extra time making work if he could. As Ben mentions:

I took life drawing classes there and then I went to [another art school] and I took more extra art classes there. My senior year I took … every elective I had I filled with art classes and then they ran out of art classes … my senior year I remember I had a study hall every day during fifth period. I had all of them sign off and I went to the art room and worked. I was in the art room probably like three periods a day.

Ben continues:

I’m more of a painter, but senior year … that’s when you get to go do ceramics. I was really into that obviously. I would go and make and be in there a lot just having fun, but mostly my energy was on drawing and painting.

Ben describes his art-making experiences as an outlet and a disguise. As Ben recalls, “Art was something that I guess was an outlet to not have to think about that, or just to disguise what other issue I had....” Ben also remembers spending his time drawing in other classes when he was supposed to be paying attention and taking notes; however, he saw this as how he processed new information. As Ben reflects:

I remember in 11th grade my teacher was like, “[Ben], you’re not paying attention,” because I would draw all class, the entire class I’d always draw and [my teacher] didn’t really get it in the beginning. He was like, “you’re not paying attention.” … I would just draw pictures the whole time, but I’d also pay attention because right brain, left brain, and I would still be able to answer plenty of questions while just drawing....

Ben felt that art classes had an impact on his education during this time because he felt that he belonged there. As Ben recalls, “If art wasn’t in school, I think school would have been ten times worse. Just because that was my outlet you could say and a place where I didn’t have to stress out.” It was a place where he could show others that he was good at something in contrast to his struggles with reading and writing. As Ben reflects:

I could show other kids who might have judged me that … I’m better than you at something, because … it’s not like teachers make things a
competition, but kids compete against each other. You compete whether you
think it or not, you’re always comparing and critiquing.

At another point in the interview, Ben explains:

[B]eing dyslexic in school was definitely not fun, but then when I was in
the art room … that’s where I excelled ... I wouldn’t say that I was one of the
better kids or somebody who was at the top, whereas in every other class I
was mid-level for the most part.

In high school, Ben felt that whenever he saw someone do something good, he thought
about why he should not give it a try as well. In the art room, he knew he could be better
than most in making art. As Ben states:

I still do it today, not that I want to, but you look at somebody else who
maybe did something really good and you’re like, “Well, why didn’t I do
that?” I know not everyone thinks that way, but a lot of people do because
we are naturally competitive. Because you want to be the best or at least a lot
of people think that way. To go into the art room and know that I could…. Just
that I could be better than almost everyone in the room just doing what I
was doing was nice.

Ben was more concerned with his art portfolio in high school than his SAT scores
because he was focused on going to art school and becoming an artist. As Ben reflects:

I’ve got an art portfolio that could get me into colleges and I got into a
bunch of art schools not because of my grades, because I could draw and
paint. That’s what mattered. My portfolio meant so much more to me than
the SAT score that I got, because that was what was getting me to where I
wanted to go....

College. Ben wanted to study art in college because that was the one thing he was
good at from an early age. As Ben remembers: “Then I went to [art school] because …
Art was the one thing that I was good at from like a young age … it clicked and I didn’t
really have to think, whereas everything else I had to try really, really hard.” Ben was
accepted into an illustration program at an art school and had to take particular classes to
graduate. He did not get to choose what art classes to take, which was annoying because
he wanted to take painting. As Ben recalls:

There they put you on a block schedule. If you’re in the illustration
program there, you don’t get to choose. You take all the classes that they tell
you to take. You get to choose your liberals, so they’ll say like, you have to take four art history classes, which I did. I guess if I were to take one more, I would have had a minor, but I was just like, forget it…. Meanwhile I want to be taking painting classes….You didn’t really get to home in on your actual interest. That was the only thing that annoyed me….

He was stuck taking design classes and did not get to focus on his actual interests, but graduated with a B.F.A. in illustration.

Ben had to take core classes while in college because it was a state school, but they were not too intense. Most students were not there to study English, but rather art and design. As Ben remembers, “It was just all art, it was good. I never really even thought about being dyslexic or having my disability affect me ever, because there was never really a moment where it came out.” He felt that there were probably other students in art school who had a learning disability, but there was no judgment. At art school everyone was trying to stand out and express their unique selves through fashion. As Ben remembers:

It’s a school where people are judging a lot less. People are crazy here. Dude, these people are dressed up like it’s an art design school. I’m in that school and looked like your average Joe compared to those people who are dressing crazy costumes every day and stuff and whatnot.

Ben remembers that he did not think about having a learning disability while at art school. As Ben recalls:

I never really thought about it and then in college it wasn’t even a thought because now I was in my element of, I went to [art school] and it was all art…. I was never really thinking about dyslexia while I was there or being dyslexic.

Graduate school. Ben is currently enrolled in a graduate art education program and describes his experience as positive. While in graduate school, he is working as a substitute teacher. He feels there is nothing in his way to succeeding and has always considered himself an active learner. As Ben states:

I guess I was always an active learner. I was forced to be that way. I guess my parents are that and I’m … I guess it’s a mix of what you’re learning when you grow up, and what your genetics are. Usually the apple
doesn’t fall too far from the tree, whatever. I’m not saying, but you inherit mannerisms and stuff and the way thought processes and might be the way that your parents are, whether people think it or not, usually it happens.

Ben feels that his hardworking attitude and disposition are caused by both the interaction of nature and nurture. However, Ben feels it is difficult and unnatural to sit for three hours and read at one time. As Ben states:

I say that is when you’re dyslexic, and you have to read a booklet, it’s hard. It’s hard for your average student to sit down for three hours and read. It’s not natural. I still don’t think it’s natural to sit down and read for three or four hours, it’s insane.

Ben thinks more about dyslexia today because he is writing his master’s thesis on dyslexia and hierarchies in textual design. As Ben states:

I even read an article about teachers who are dyslexic and I pretty much do so many other things that the people who are dyslexic, who are teachers do, but I think about it more now because of just I guess my education here.

Also, sometimes in the classroom he will slip up or someone will ask him to spell a word, which will make it evident that he is dyslexic.

The better Ben got at art, the more accepting he became of his learning disability. All his friends know that he is dyslexic, and it does not bother him anymore. He has worked really hard to hide his dyslexia so that it does not affect him socially and he can continue living his life. As Ben states:

I think the better I got at art, the more accepting I was of my disability and I didn’t care as much. All my friends know I’m dyslexic, and anybody who knows me and everybody in my grad school class, like I don’t really care anymore, because I feel like I’ve worked so hard to hide it, but make sure that it’s not affecting me…. Maybe I have like a few spelling errors or grammatical errors, but there’s nothing in the art room that you can do that I can’t do, and that’s how I’ve not allowed it to affect me.

While in art school, Ben did not use his accommodations; however, he did need to pass state exams in graduate school to receive teacher certification, which meant that he needed time and a half on the written exams. When the state would not process his IEP from high school, Ben and his parents had to fight for his accommodations even though
he had been tested and he qualified for special assistance. Ben had to get involved with school administrators to receive these accommodations while in graduate school. As Ben remembers:

I had to get involved, when I had to [go to] the state, because I got in a big fight with them, because I said to them … if you look this disability up. I said, “it doesn’t go away … I got the accommodations that I needed”… I almost had to go and get reevaluated, which I didn’t want to do because it’s really expensive, and obviously I wouldn’t be able to get evaluated in a high school because I’m too old at this point.

This issue with the state was eventually figured out, but took some time and effort. Ben received the extra time that he needed on these state exams and passed. As Ben reflects:

I’d say time and a half … made the difference between me becoming a teacher and not you could say, because without it, I mean I took the test three times and failed and then I finally got an IEP in place and then I made the score … did better than what you needed by 10 points. That’s a huge difference in your scoring. To jump 20 points is a huge difference.

Ben continues to describe his ongoing fight for accommodations during his graduate school years.

I was calling the state. I had an email thread that was 40 interactions back and forth with the state, and it’s phone calls, driving in, going back to [my undergrad art school] because [my graduate school] refused to send the documentation for me, so I had to go to [my undergrad art school] for them to send it…. Just I went to the dean of whatever education, then I went to another person. Nobody would stamp my documentation….

Ben does not outwardly tell his professors he has dyslexia unless he needs to. Ben does not like using his accommodations as “an excuse or a crutch,” but would rather be measured among his peers as an equal. As Ben reflects:

I just won’t tell teachers, because I don’t feel like it’s necessary, unless they catch it, then I’ll be like, “Yeah.” I remember my ESL teacher that I had here was like, “You just need someone to proofread your work.” I was like, “Sorry. I’m dyslexic. I know I should have my dad read this over, but rather that I just didn’t get the time” to or whatever.

However, sometimes Ben feels that it is appropriate to tell his teachers, such as in the case of writing his thesis on dyslexia. As Ben reflects:
[My art education professor], she knows I’m dyslexic because this is what my thesis is on, but if you were to go up to the other 20 professors I’ve had in this school, none of them know that I’m dyslexic, because I haven’t told them.

Ben still struggles with writing while in graduate school and working as an instructor. For example, Ben needs to write lesson plans for his classes, but will often miss his writing errors. As Ben remembers:

I looked it over and it would seem fine, but I guess I had a few grammatical errors. The AP, she’s so nice, she was so helpful, was like, listen. She went over it with me and she made all the changes and was like, “Listen [Ben], just have someone read it over. It’s fine.”

Ben informed the school that he has dyslexia through his response to questions he had to write in response to why he wanted to become a teacher and how he could inspire his students.

Ben is currently a teacher leave replacement at a school on Long Island, but is not teaching art classes yet. As Ben states:

I’m thankful that I got the opportunity to prove that I can teach there, and hopefully when someone retires, I’ll be right there to get that, but I’d say 70% of the kids you get, who are in my program aren’t teaching right now. For me to be teaching, I only know two other people who are in schools.

Although Ben struggled to get his accommodations to pass the certification exam, he is currently ahead of most of his peers from graduate school in getting a teaching position.

As a leave replacement, Ben understands what it is like to struggle in the classroom with difficulties reading and writing. Ben is very cautious about not forcing his students to read aloud in class. As Ben recalls:

Even now I’m very conscious as a teacher, making sure I don’t forced kids to read, because I know that feeling of having to teach which you obviously need to encourage kids to read which I get, but calling on a kid to read a paragraph … that’s really overwhelming.

Today he feels he can hide his dyslexia pretty well. The only times that others may notice is when Ben reads aloud.
As an instructor, Ben has some strong views on being sure that students are classified so that they can receive help in school. As Ben reflects:

A lot of times a lot of people are in denial. I see so many kids who should have IEPs in class who just don’t, and a lot of times, it’s the parent doesn’t want them to have that IEP…. Why are you declassifying your kid in 6th grade? You should never do that. You should keep them classified all the way throughout, because it’s only something that’s helping them…. It’s not putting them down.

Ben recommends that all students should remain classified throughout school because it will allow instructors to be able to help their students better.

Difficulty with literacy has influenced Ben’s approach toward teaching in other ways. For example, while in school Ben was not the best note-taker; thus, he sees the value in giving his students his lecture notes. As Ben reflects:

I wasn’t the best note taker, because obviously spelling words out and stuff like that. In the school that I work in, they accommodate the kids really well, so for instance they would give the kid the notes just so he could pay attention all class, which is something I feel like I probably would have benefited from, because I was so fixated on just trying to get all the notes down because I wasn’t the fastest at writing.

Ben goes on to discuss his issues with note-taking:

I don’t even know where to begin writing notes so I don’t even bother. I don’t know. I am better at listening … I can’t do both. I can’t multitask like that…. I am trying to write everything down that I won’t even be paying attention.

Because of digital technology it is easier for educators to give their students their notes. As Ben confirms, “A teacher does everything on the computer now … the teachers usually just easily give them to the student now. Whereas back when I was in school, they didn’t have those accommodations.” However, Ben does not take advantage of his accommodations because of his resistance to receiving more help than his peers. As Ben reflects, “I don’t get notes from any teachers, just because I’ve always been very resistant to even use any of my accommodations always. Unless I’m in a dire need situation, where I’ve exhausted everything else and I can’t do it.”
Ben often uses a program to check his grammar, but still has to have his work looked over by someone. As Ben recalls:

We had to type them up, but yeah. For the most part someone [would] proofread it. One thing my dad actually found recently that I’ve been using is called Grammarly. You put it in there and it can check for grammatical errors, which is nice, but I’ll still have to look stuff over.

Often Ben thinks his writing is working until he has it proofread, and he has become more concerned about his writing during graduate school.

Ben is still learning how to spell simple words and other phonological skills that he was taught earlier, but did not pick up because he remembers being too overwhelmed during that time. As Ben reflects:

Do you know “there,” T-H-E-R-E and “their,” I only learned last year. I learned “too” which also means T-O-O which I guess also means “Me too,” which also meant also I guess. I learned that last week … it’s like, I’m starting to learn it more now because I’m less fixated…. I was just so overwhelmed just so many different things, that there was no way…. There was no way I was figuring it all out.

Today Ben knows that if it were not for his father who pushed him to work so hard with his reading he would not be finishing his master’s degree today. Looking back, Ben feels that extra time on tests was the most helpful form of assistance next to working with his father, because without it he would not have been able to pass the certification exams.

**Ben: Artwork**

**Artwork description.** Ben primarily makes representational figurative drawings and paintings that have embedded narratives that illustrate a dichotomy between good and evil, as well as the themes of the hero and death. Ben describes his artwork as hyper-realistic and is mostly interested in portraits; however, he remembers a shift in his interest in portraiture during college, such as to making compositions where the subject is confronting the viewer. As Ben explains:

My artwork is mostly … hyper-realistic…. Very photo-realistic … what I like to make art-wise has changed a lot since when I was younger like
when I was in college. I am still into portraits but I think then I was more into like reaction portraits like a lot of my work was confronting the viewer, which can be very uncomfortable depending on how you do it.

Ben also likes light, reflections, and shadows, enjoying observing the effects of light on different surfaces. As Ben continues:

I love light and shadow. I love looking at something and seeing how like, here’s the highlight and then there’s the shadow and then there’s the shadow it cast and so forth. I just love observing the way light bounces off things.

Ben also mentions the beauty of different qualities of light and figuring out how the light is falling on a surface, wanting to capture the moment.

Often Ben’s subject matter references scenes from the ocean, his primary inspiration. As Ben explains:

I get a lot of my inspiration from the ocean because it is such a big part of my life. It’s like probably my favorite place to be. I surf, I swim, I’m a lifeguard so I draw so much inspiration from there.

Ben’s interest in the ocean also comes up in his artist statement. In the first sentence Ben makes note of the many things that he can do, expressing a positive identity of competence in different activities. As Ben writes, “[Ben] is known for many things. Lifeguard; Teacher; Surfer; Swimmer.... As [Ben] Riis, he is an artist who transcends his adoration for learning, teaching and the water into surrealistic visual experiences.” This sentence also shows that Ben’s life experience and desire to develop has influenced his artwork, leading toward an integrated personality. Ben goes on to explain his use of materials when making his work: “Using paints, sable brushes, neo-megilp and pencils, [Ben] creates realistic and dream-like visuals in the form of oil paintings....”

Ben is also interested in other dimensions of content, such as elements that underlie the emotion of fear. Ben writes that his artwork “sometimes explores the depths of fear

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4Riis is the name of the beach Ben grew up swimming and surfing at and now lifeguards on.

5Neo-megilp is a medium added to oil paint, similar to galkyd.
while exposing its truth and reality.” For example, a painting of Ben giving someone CPR at the beach expresses the truth about the dangers of the ocean and the fears associated with drowning.

Ben thinks it is important that his work has a purpose and a message. According to Ben’s artist statement, “Although there is no cohesive theme to his work, every piece is created with the purpose of conveying a message.” Thus, all of Ben’s artwork has an embedded narrative. During the interview, Ben explained that his art has changed a lot between college and now, but he is still interested in portraiture.

**Art materials.** Ben enjoys the experience of working with traditional art making materials. For example, Ben only uses oils and does not like acrylic because of the plastic quality, fast dry time, finish, and consistency. Ben compares his experience with oil paint.

> I love the butteriness that you can make with oils. I like the way that they mix and I like the way that they hold while you are painting. If your painting is like four hours, I like the fact that I can go back and it would still be wet and I can work more paint into it. Like blending and fanning out....

The sensory experience is very important when choosing materials. Ben is always checking the texture of the materials he is going to use. As Ben remembers:

> When I go to the art store, I touch everything. I am like a surface person. I like this surface to paint on where it does have that eggshell look…. This would be like too smooth or … what not…. I am thinking about like how the paintbrushes will react to that surface....

Later on Ben describes himself as a surface person. As Ben explains, “I’ll start painting but I am very fixated on like gessoing the board and making sure that the surface is right.” This physical quality of making with materials stands in important contrast to his experiences with reading and writing.

**Tools.** Ben has a number of tools that he uses to create his paintings. His mole stick is the most important tool he has in the studio. As Ben explains:

> It’s like the stick that you hold and then your rest your hand on it…. It’s like you put the stick down like here, and then I rest my hand on it and paint
like this so that my hand doesn’t touch the wet painting…. Of all of them it’s the mole stick. I can’t paint without it; specially, with oils.

Ben is very particular about what types of brushes he likes to use, which further illustrates his sensitivity toward different qualities of sensation while making. He has preferences toward brushes influenced by his experience of painting with different types. As Ben recalls:

I always use like red sable brushes, which are like sables are like horse-hair stuff for the most part. I don’t like using synthetic brushes because I don’t like the way that they like hold the paint....

Ben does not like digital art, but does take photographs for source material for his paintings. He edits in Photoshop and enjoys making light and color adjustments. As Ben mentions:

I photograph and then I print it.... I don’t like digital.... No. I edit the lighting in Photoshop. I like to fix lighting and stuff like that and maybe do color adjustments to maybe the color scheme that I want but I don’t like digital at all. I have this huge disconnect with the art of like making it. I guess because I am like a very tactile person. I just feel like I’m here and the art is there and I just don’t get it....

The digital lacks everything he likes about the physical quality of painting. Ben continues to describe his disconnect with digital art forms:

I was very vocal. I remember like in school. I rejected it in high school, I remember I was brought up around it.... I used it but I like digital for design. I think it’s amazing. When you are designing something like a logo. It works really well but when it comes to like people who are doing like digital paintings? I’d rather just be painting than making a digital painting. That’s what I mean. I like it for design purposes. I don’t like it for making actual art.

Ben understands that design work is art too, but he would much rather draw and paint and had resistance toward this way of making while in high school and college. As Ben remembers:

I hated Photoshop so much…. I don’t think dyslexia got in the way of me. I think it was just [that I] hated, I still am resistant…. I know those programs really well now and I could teach them if I had to, but it was funny, when I was in high school, I think it was junior year, I remember I
was like, “This is so stupid. I could just draw this.” The teacher was like, “You’re going to need to know this one.” I was like, “I’m going to draw and paint. I don’t need this crap.”

**Artistic process.** Ben describes his process of art making as a series of steps. He starts with sketching his ideas out. He doodles and than lays out the composition, then he will pick the models and photograph them. He starts out by working from very thin tracing paper to lay things out. Then he moves to illustration board. Once again, Ben feels that he gets ideas or is inspired by what he sees, such as colors or light values, but sometimes he has a message that he wants to convey.

Ben always photographs his references and does not take images from the internet because that is someone else’s artwork. The background may be taken from other images, but his figures must be photographed himself. As Ben mentions:

I will always photograph my reference. I don’t like getting any reference online because that’s somebody else’s vision. Not mine. All of my references need to be taken by me. Unless if it is like a background. Then I can like handle it being like someone else but none of the models … in my paint will ever be someone that I didn’t photograph. I need the person to look at you and figure out what angle I want to photograph you at and what lighting and everything else.

Ben spoke about his desire to create a likeness with his subject that started at an early age. He started to create this likeness through tracing. As Ben remembers:

I would take books out from the library at school, different drawing books and I would copy pictures. I remember one of the first things I did. I remember, I did like a drawing of like a lion and then I remember I did this drawing of … I would like copy illustrations. It’s the best way to learn.

Ben feels that the art process is a form of learning in and of itself. Through working on an art project often problems are solved. As Ben states, “The more you practice, the better…. ” However, Ben feels that some teachers feel they need to teach their students something. According to Ben, this is not necessarily true. The real learning comes through in the process. As Ben states:

The more you practice the better you will get and they see that and they believe in it but educators sometimes think that you have to be teaching them
all sorts when you just have to be drawing from life itself sometimes. You are learning so much and when I look at my old work I have like flashbacks to like I remember like that experience that I had at that time.

Learning through the process will also change one’s perception. Ben describes the difference in looking between an amateur and someone who paints often. As Ben explains:

Like when I go to a museum and you can tell a lot of times who is an artist, who makes art and who doesn’t…. They like getting really close. I like sticking up my nose up to the painting and I like to look on the side I like to see how they move their hand for the brushstroke or like there’s no brushstrokes. Like you are trying to find imperfection.

Ben is not sure if the process or the final product is more important when making artwork. As Ben explains:

Sometimes the process of making can be torture…. The process is fun but I’ve worked on paintings that take 50, 60, 70 hours long and there is a love-hate relationship with those paintings where I mean the finesse of hiding brushstrokes can be like torturous and in some ways it’s so fun and in some ways it’s like you just hate it because oil painting is a huge process setting up and cleaning up.

Ben concludes that the final product is more rewarding than process. Sometimes when he is looking at the final work of art he feels it “sucks” so he will put it away. Later on, he may pull it out and think, “Wow, I did a pretty good job on that.” He thinks that he does this because he is so critical of everything that he makes. As Ben recalls:

I have a love-hate relationship with the process over product but it is really rewarding sometimes to see the product but as you are making the … final product, you will look at it and you will be like, “Oh, that sucks.” You will like hate it. You will like hate looking at it by the time … I finish.... Then I will like put it away and then I will pull it back out....

Ben continues to explain that this experience may be influenced by his critical attitude that developed out of competition with others. However, he feels this is an important process for improving as an artist. As Ben reflects:

I was constantly unsatisfied. I was probably my biggest critic in like knowing when something sucked and I feel like you need to know as an
I know that I sound very negative right now but you need to know that because if you don’t, then you won’t get better.

Ben stresses the importance of having a critical attitude toward his own artwork, going back and forth about what is working in the composition.

**Artistic inspiration.** As stated earlier, Ben describes his work as hyper-realistic, much like photographs. Usually Ben gets an idea or sees something that he really likes, such as colors or light values or he has a message he wants to communicate. Ben expresses disinterest in making artwork only when it concerns the historical context or any content outside of the painting. He finds those who fixate on content do not understand the importance of the experience of drawing and painting. As Ben reflects:

> There are all these people who are so hung up …[on], “Art should be about the content.”… Like, what time period are they learning about? Who is the person? What is the technique they are learning? When people are forgetting about how important it is [to just draw].

There are some people that say they can’t draw, but Ben feels otherwise. He has the attitude that the more someone draws the better they get. However, he notes the difficulty with drawing idealized beauty. Other illustrators have expressed the same experience. As Ben explains:

> I just find that it’s hard to draw them because they have idealized beauty. Like Leonardo da Vinci said, “Idealized beauty is a mix between masculine and feminine features.” It’s very strong but very subtle at the same time.…

Ben is always trying to capture likeness, but has to find a balance because if the features are too strong they will not have the appearance of the person.

As stated earlier, Ben makes some of this artwork to express a message. During the process of making, often Ben will look for models that he feels helps convey this message. As Ben states:

> There are certain people of certain looks for different paintings that have different messages. I will figure out what kind of model I want. Then I will photograph them and then I will go from there like working from my photo reference.
These narrative based images often have an emotional impact. As Ben explains:

"[I]t had a lot of emotion to it…. It was about kids in the Middle East who would blow themselves up for the Taliban and it was about a child and then in the background it is faded out and someone from the Taliban and fingers over the explosive. He’s really the one behind [this] not really like the child really wants to do it. That’s really the person behind the plan.

One example of Ben’s artwork conveying a message is by having the image confront the viewer with something difficult, such as in the painting of a woman receiving CPR or the child bomber who is about to blow himself up. Ben explains the importance of confronting the viewer in his work.

"[A] lot of portraits you maybe don’t want to be looking at the person. Sometimes when you look at a painting, you don’t really want to be confronted by the subject matter because then you would be like, do you really want to be looking at it? It is easier to look at it and not necessarily be confronted by [it]…. How does it make you feel? A lot of times, it makes you feel uncomfortable depending on what the subject matter is and so forth.

Confronting the viewer also means that there must be some form of narrative embedded in the image. All of Ben’s artwork has a narrative because he studied illustration. The narrative of a drawing or painting gives his work purpose. As Ben explains, “[There is] always a backstory. It wasn’t just like, ‘I painted this because it was pretty looking or something like that.’”

Ben makes a distinction between looking and being confronted when developing his compositions and subject content. Sometimes this confrontation is uncomfortable, but it depends on the subject matter. Ben feels that these images were made to grab one’s attention. As Ben continues:

Do you want to look at a girl who is pale and looks half dead on your wall? Probably not. That would be like a good illustration piece for an article or book that reacts. It’s for reaction value. You know, like it catches your eye, which is when I was making the illustration. It has its purpose….

Ben has made work on commission, so he knows that he can make artwork that would be more appreciated and appropriate to hang on the walls of someone’s home.
Along with his interest in portraiture, Ben is inspired by the ocean because it is his favorite place to visit. He would be in the water all day, even if the waves were poor and it was cold. Ben surfs, swims, and he is a lifeguard today. As Ben remembers:

[I] grew up at the beach. My dad used to be some chief in Riis Park in Rockaway. I grew up in a little playpen on the sand and then boogie boarded there from like the age of five. I started surfing when I was nine. I’ve just been obsessed with the ocean…. By the time that I was 17, when I have my car, I will surf like everyday at the beach and then my dad obviously worked five days a week as a lifeguard and I will go down everyday with him in the summer. I’d be in the water like all day long. No matter like how bad the waves were, how cold it was. I would just be at the water all day.

Ben draws his inspiration from his experiences at the ocean and the quality of light at the shore, his most significant influence. As Ben states:

Then just like the love of like looking at something and seeing how beautiful it is or like trying to figure out where the light falls. That inspires me too. Like a lot of times, I will just look at something and be like, “Wow, that’s amazing.” I want to capture that moment.

Ben has also drawn inspiration for his compositions through his experiences as a lifeguard for the past nine years. He is aware of the reality that he may need to perform CPR on someone one day. As Ben explains:

That was kind of a painting that was my experience and I did it in an angle of how I am looking at the victim. It is a piece where you are as the viewer has been brought into the painting and it’s at my angle. My hands are on the victim per se and you’re seeing like how you would be if you are giving CPR.

Later Ben explained that he had not actually preformed CPR while on duty as a lifeguard, but it is a common scene that lifeguards witness and he anticipates that one day he may be in the position of saving someone’s life.

As Ben pulls from his experiences at the ocean, he is also inspired by professional illustrators, such as Tim O’Brien, Steven Gartner, Drew Struzan, and Casey Bauagh. As Ben explains, “[I]n college it was [into] a … well-known illustrator Tim O’Brien. I love his work. He has painted the cover of Time Magazine like ten times.…” Ben claims that
Steven Gartner taught him how to paint. He liked Drew Struzan’s painting, such as his work with *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* posters. Struzan airbrushes and then goes over it with color pencils. Ben ponders that maybe if he tried this process he would like working with acrylics. Ben also likes Casey Bauagh’s artwork and when he sees his work on Instagram it looks like a photo, but when you see it in person they are quite large with a painterly quality. Ben mentions that he follows a lot of artists on Instagram, even photographers.

**Ben: Portrait Summary**

Ben’s father learned that Ben had dyslexia early on, between the ages of three and four when he was struggling to learn the alphabet. Learning the letters was frustrating and took him much longer than most kids. Both of Ben’s parents are educators so they were able to catch it early on and were able to find Ben extra assistance to compensate, when he got diagnosed in the 2nd grade.

Ben was enrolled at a public school from kindergarten through 2nd grade and was in the resource room. Yet, Ben’s father was not satisfied with the extra assistance he was receiving and wanted Ben to be held back a grade. When the school refused, he decided to enroll him in a private school where he repeated the 2nd grade, remaining at the same institution until the 8th grade.

For the most part Ben had a healthy social life during his early education. However, he did have to deal with teachers and peers who did not understand his difficulties with reading and writing. Reading aloud was the one activity that made it evident that he was struggling with literacy. Often when a teacher called on him to read aloud he did not feel he had a choice and it would cause him immense anxiety.

Of all the assistance he received for his difficulties his parents were the most helpful. His father did most of the one-on-one assistance while his mother helped with administrative matters. However, receiving assistance through the resource room never
seemed significant. During 6th and 7th grade, Ben would see a reading and speech therapist to practice sound pronunciation on the weekends. This assistance may have been helpful; however, he would miss out on social opportunities while his friends had the weekends free to do what they wanted. Often Ben’s father would push him to read pages aloud, which was difficult. His father would also use incentives, such as giving Ben a dollar for every page he would read. This assistance was difficult and sometimes oppressive, but Ben was grateful because he eventually was able to leave the resource room during high school.

Ben attended elementary and middle school with the same group of peers. However, he attended high school with a different group of students and did not want them to know he has dyslexia. At this point in his life, he was able to disguise his learning difficulties and no longer attended the special education class. He blended in socially and was active during class discussions. Yet, writing still posed some difficulties. He would still need to use spell check, and would need someone to proofread his work. He also needs time and a half on written exams.

Ben’s favorite subject throughout his education was art. He was also interested in history and science, such as oceanography because he is a surfer and a lifeguard. However, he felt that he would be unable to succeed because of his issues with math and the specialized language of these disciplines. Ben enjoyed art class because it was a place where he did not need to stress out, it was an outlet for his struggles, and a place where he could show his peers—who may have judged him for his struggles with reading and writing—that he was good at something. Ben does not think that everyone looks for weaknesses in others, but people are competitive by nature because everyone wants to become best at something. In the art room he knew he could be better than most in making art.

Ben was accepted into a B.F.A. illustration program after high school and was able to focus on his art-making. Art was something he excelled at and he knew he could
succeed in that field. There were other students who also had learning difficulties, but it was an environment where no one judged others in that way and Ben was able to forget he has dyslexia.

After receiving his B.F.A., Ben enrolled in a graduate art education program, describing the experience as positive, and feels there is little in his way of success. Today he considers himself an active learner, but still finds it difficult to read for long hours. During the time of the interview, Ben was writing his thesis on dyslexia and hierarchies in textual design, thus he was thinking more about his experiences with dyslexia at the time. At this moment of his life Ben has become more comfortable with his learning difference. All of his friends know he has dyslexia, and he does not feel the pressure to hide his difficulties now. Ben feels this shift in attitude of acceptance came as he improved in this artistic practice.

Ben can get by without his learning difficulties getting in the way for the most part; however, he did need time and a half to pass the state exam for teacher certification. Ben is currently a leave replacement and is grateful he has the opportunity to teach while in graduate school. As a teacher, Ben is sensitive toward other students who have learning difficulties. He attempts to create a space where they would feel comfortable and that helps to maximize their learning. Ben knows that if it were not for his father who pushed him to work so hard with his reading, he would not be finishing his master’s degree today.

Currently, Ben is interested in hyper-photographic realism, portraiture, illustration, qualities of light and shadow, the ocean, and confronting the viewer with something that may make them feel uncomfortable through his artwork. When making artwork, sensory experience is paramount and he prefers traditional art making materials over digital forms. However, photography is a part of his process and he will use photos that he takes as source material for paintings, always trying to capture likenesses of his subjects.
Ben prefers to create work through the process of making and is resistant toward investing in the art historical narrative and conceptualization process. He understands the art-making process as a form of learning in its own right. However, all of Ben’s work is story-based because he is an illustrator.

Portrait of Deb

Deb is a 25-year-old graduate student in studio art at a school in the New York City area. I met Deb through her mother (Nancy), who is a colleague of mine. I had many conversations with Nancy about dyslexia and had conducted an interview with her for a pilot study earlier. On one occasion when I was discussing my dissertation study with Nancy, she told me that her daughter also has dyslexia and would be willing to participate. I had met her daughter a few times before and knew her as a person who is quiet, attentive, and often apologetic for her mother’s overly expressive and emphatic behavior.

Deb invited me to her family’s house to conduct the interview and have lunch with her mother, sister, and father on May 30, 2016. When I arrived, Deb’s mother was still in the process of preparing lunch, so Deb and I went back to Deb’s room for the first interview. Her room appeared to be more of an art studio than a typical bedroom. We both sat down on a couch with cushions that were so soft I felt engulfed as I sank in. We started the interview as Deb apologized for how loud her father can be at times after she had an argument with him about needing a quiet space to conduct an interview. Midway through the first interview, we were interrupted by her father wanting to pour me a glass of wine. After the first interview, I had lunch with Deb, Nancy, and her younger sister. After lunch both Deb and I returned to her bedroom to conduct the second interview concerning her artwork.
Deb: Educational Experience

**Elementary school.** Deb explained that she went to the same elementary school until the fourth grade. She was held back in the first grade because she was having seizures. Because of the severity of the seizures and the time she missed because of them, Deb fell behind in school. She explains her understanding of her condition.

> It started when I was really young, and it was just like neurological problems, so it was just like a not fully formed neurological system or something like that, and so it slowed down my reading processing and my memorization of spelling....

Deb continues:

> The seizures and the tic. I had a couple of different like spastic tics or whatever. I couldn’t hold scissors. I was just really far behind, so they were like, “We’re going to hold her back.” That was a sign there.

Deb was put into a contained classroom with other students who had different types of disabilities and received extra help. During this time, Deb remembers being very shy and did not think much about being held back.

Deb’s difficulties in school eventually led to her being labeled dyslexic and being identified as having another neurological impairment. She does not remember when she was diagnosed, but she remembers taking the tests and then talking to her mother about the results. As Deb explains:

> I was … diagnosed as being dyslexic because my spelling was horrific and I didn’t really learn how to read until I was in fourth grade. I would have people read to me, like they would get other students and I remember in the fourth grade they would get other students to read the books that they were reading to me. I was always really slow in reading and writing and I guess math too, but they were more concerned about my reading and my writing comprehension because I think that was really important and it was really far behind.

Later on during the interview Deb continues, “They labeled me with a ton of things actually, and I have the sheet of paper. I know that they definitely labeled me with dyslexia, some neurological impairments or neurological stuff, and I think that’s basically the two things....”
Deb was usually taken out of her regular class for special assistance during most of her elementary and middle school years. There were other students in the contained classroom with different learning difficulties and there was one teacher that would work with her individually on what she was learning in the regular classroom. Learning to read was a slow process and she did not learn how to read until the fourth grade. One of the difficulties Deb had was memorizing words and what they looked like, even simple words. She had difficulty sounding them out because the visual representation had little relationship to the phonetic sound. As Deb remembers:

I was pretty slow, and I just remember having a really hard time memorizing what words looked like when I was reading.... Like really simple words, and I couldn’t sound them out because it didn’t make sense to me the way that the sounds were. I was like, “that doesn’t make sense. How is that word sound like.... How do those letters make that sound? That doesn’t make sense.”

In elementary school, the students would play spelling games in class, and her teachers would always give her the easiest words to spell, but she would still misspell them. As Deb recalls:

They’d have these spelling games, but I think two was actually pretty hard to be honest, because there’s two, too, and to, but I didn’t understand ... I remember I would never spell it right, and they would give me the smallest word and they’d give everybody else like a bigger word and I’d be like, “Uh” ... They’d be like, “What the fuck?”

While receiving extra assistance was helpful, being pulled out of class did have social implications. Usually she was taken out of her main class when the “fun stuff” would take place, such as birthday parties. As Deb explains:

I really liked cake because I was a little chubby kid, and I missed somebody’s birthday because they had to put us in the contained classroom and I was like really sad because I missed cake. I just remember holding a grudge for a week about missing cake, and I remember it until this day.... “Why do you always take us out during the fun stuff?” Because they would start playing games, and then it’d be like, “Oh, it’s time to take the special kids out to go over what we did in class,” or during the free times, the free periods.
Deb felt this was the ideal time to take the special education students out of class because they would not miss class content; however, she missed out on social events. However, looking back she is unsure what the school could have done differently to help her more, other than slow down the lessons. As Deb explains:

I’m not really sure what you would do in that situation besides give a lot of attention to … those kids … maybe they could have given more … because when I went to [a special education school] they slowed everything down. Maybe they could have slowed things down for the kids in the contained classroom a little bit more so they could keep up.

While Deb struggled with literacy and the sense of belonging, art-making had a central role in Deb’s life from an early age. Her mother inspired her artistically and would help her with art projects, such as getting supplies. As Deb remembers:

I first started pretty young because … of my mom. She was always making art. Unconsciously, I would help her or she would just be like, “Hey, [do you] want to help me draw a little?” I think I would draw on the walls and stuff and she would just be like, “Okay.” … I would say that I started out pretty young drawing.

Deb started tracing from books in the fourth grade and remembers being obsessed with this process. This process was helpful for learning how to draw facial features and proportions. As Deb remembers:

[My mother] bought me a tracing whiteboard. I would draw the comics and then, I would trace them over and over again so I can make many different variations of the same drawing. I was obsessed with that…. I would also trace comic book pages because she got me a light table. That’s great practice.

Deb continues:

I think tracing was something that I started out doing really young because of tracing paper too. Before I drew by hand without tracing, my [sketch] books would be tracings of other books that were already done but then, I would change them a little bit. I was really young. That was really great practice for me just learning how to draw a figure too even if it’s not realistic, just understanding some proportions and stuff.
Deb would also draw comic strips of her sister, friends, and herself and their combined adventures together during the fourth and fifth grade. As Deb recalls:

I love making books. I made books up until the end of middle school. Then, I moved into comics. Then, I started making comic books of my friends…. That was a great time in my drawing life because I really enjoyed…. I’d make up stories and then I would even have little bubbles for the people…. Maybe it was fourth grade. I’m not sure when I started but those books were about me and my sister. I did one about us jumping on a bed. Then, there was a book that I did about our babysitter. Then, there was a book about us fighting. Then, there was a book about witches…. Then, I started doing comic books in middle school about me, my sister and her friend…. We have this whole series about this story…. It was probably based off of manga or something like that. Then, I’d say that I did a lot of comic books about my middle school crushes….

Deb continues to talk about how her interest in art-making contributed to the development of a positive identity. As Deb remembers:

My sense of identity with art actually started at a really young age. I was always the person that they asked to do the art stuff. They were like, “Oh, [Deb], why don’t you do the drawing for this?” … Then I also did the yearbook illustration in … first grade or second grade or whatever it was…. That was all like identity in art.

Although she had difficulties with reading and writing and was identified as attending special classes because of this, she also felt accomplished as an artist and socially recognized for her artistic ability.

**Middle school.** Deb attended another school from fourth through seventh grade. During this time she felt strange, did not fit in socially, had social anxieties, and felt awkward most of the time. As Deb remembers:

I think up until high school I always felt a little strange, which makes sense. I mean everybody has their own social anxieties and stuff like that, but I always felt weird like I couldn’t really fit in because I was, from the beginning I was taken out of the regular classes, but that didn’t really bother me because I liked most of the kids that I had the contained classes with, except most of the kids that I had the contained classes with never finished high school.
When she was in middle school, she still got extra assistance but was pulled out of class more often and placed in a room with a small number of students, which became a part of her primary social group. As Deb recalls, “I still got extra help but I felt like I was being pulled out of classes a lot and socially I wasn’t integrating a lot because I was in other classes with only a handful of kids.”

In the regular class, her teachers would require her to read aloud, which was socially painful. Other students would get restless or they would laugh when she would read. As Deb remembers:

They would make us read out loud in class, and I remember this because people would laugh at us, which was awkward. I always felt like when I was reading out loud in class it was a drag for everybody else. I always felt kind of bad about that. It really was a drag for everybody else because it was so slow.

In the contained classroom, there was an aide who would give the students the answers to questions on tests, which would upset Deb because it was cheating. As Deb explains:

I went through like a really bratty phase because ... That was the time where the woman was giving us answers to our tests, and I really butted heads with her.... Maybe I felt like she was fake or something. I apologized to her later on, but, yeah, I went through a bratty phase.... Maybe I was resentful that I was being babied.... I remember I was really pushing the buttons of this one teacher because I felt like she was babying me too much and I didn’t like it.

On the other hand, Deb also remembers having a good middle-school teacher who had some helpful methods for memorizing words and spelling. Deb would sometimes read words the wrong way and be unable to make a connection between the sound of the word and its graphic quality. As Deb continues:

Then sometimes I would read words the wrong way. There were a couple of times when that was embarrassing where I’d read a word completely wrong and think it was right.... It’s the same with the spelling. Sometimes I spell things the way that they sound when you speak them. I still do that actually.
Deb got a full scholarship to a private special education school for 8th and 9th grade, which was a positive experience. She remembers working very hard at this school and became student of the month a number of times. She also remembers doing very well with math and science at this new school. When Deb first enrolled, she was very shy; however, this changed. She experienced a drastic social switch because everyone there had some form of learning disability or behavioral issue. As Deb remembers:

I was like a completely different person. I was really shy when I would go out into the normal classroom or when I would have to talk to other kids who were seemingly good at school and I was all nervous, so I was really shy and I didn’t talk to anybody. When I was in the contained classroom with a smaller group of kids I was kind of obnoxious and loud and really social, which is how I am with people that I feel comfortable with.

Deb continues:

Then I had a bunch of friends because it was a really small group of kids, and we all got along, I mean more or less. Everybody had some sort of, I guess, learning disability or whatever, or even behavioral disability or whatever.

It was a good experience for Deb because most of the classes were at a slower pace so it was easy to keep up. As Deb explains: “The classes went at a certain pace, which were really easy for me to keep up. Like I said, I did really well, so I was really proud of myself for two years.”

At the special education school Deb’s teachers would not let her use her reading disability as an excuse to get more time or get away with doing less work because everyone had a learning disability at the school. As Deb explains:

In [the special education school] they never let me use my reading problem as an excuse because everybody else had a similar thing, and I remember trying to use it as an excuse right away because they would let me do that in middle school back in [the public school], and even in high school I was always able to get away with it. It was a little bit of a … scapegoat…. I could use it to my benefit and be a little bit manipulative about it….

She feels she was lucky that she was in a good school, because her hard work there, and lack of falling back on excuses, led to academic success. As Deb recalls:
In [the special education school], they never let me do that, and then that’s when I did the best in my classes when I rose to the occasion and wasn’t able to fall back on that, which I thought was interesting because I don’t think they had the energy in the public school, even though it was a really good public school so I was really lucky…. I don’t think they had the energy to tell me not to use that as a scapegoat.... Maybe they just felt guilty….

At this new school, Deb continued with her art-making, such as making comic books about personal and imaginary adventures with her friends and sister, but here she also developed confidence that she could study and excel in subjects outside of the arts, like science. As Deb explains:

I started thinking that I could also study other things if I wanted to, not just art. I always loved art. I was always drawing … but I thought maybe I could do art and science, or something like that. I was still not sure. I was just experimenting in other areas that I enjoyed, because I loved biology.

During this time Deb was unsure what she wanted to do with her life, and she was experimenting while learning and developing more confidence in herself.

**High school.** Deb went back to the same public high school for her sophomore year, but her performance fell and she started to fail math. She was not at the same level as the other sophomore students in the regular class. Deb explains how this gap in mathematical skills and the experience of feeling overwhelmed affected her attitude toward education:

I’ve never been really good at math. I mean except for one year at [the special education school] where I actually understood some of the math that they were teaching.... I did pretty well. I think that if you try really hard at things you can improve and get better and understand, but once I get lost then I don’t want to try anymore. It’s like, “Uh. I’m so lost now. Where do I start?” I didn’t feel like that at [the special education school], but then when I got back to [public] High School I got lost so fast, and that’s it. I was like, “Oh, I don’t even know how to try.”

Getting lost and overwhelmed because of the change in educational environment affected her academic self-confidence.

Deb does not remember special education as an issue during high school because she was not taken out of class. Students had a different teacher for each subject in high
school, and Deb had a separate special education teacher for reading, writing, and math. As Deb explains:

> I was separated but I would go into classrooms with ... it got better I think. I was more separated up until high school, but then in high school you go into other classes and then they pull you out. It would be almost like its own separate classes, the contained classroom would be its own separate class.

During this time the resource room was more of an after school program to help students get their homework done, which she thought was a good idea.

Deb feels the most helpful technique for dealing with her learning difficulties was reading as much as she could. Reading was a struggle, but that is how she got better. As Deb reflects:

> I think the most helpful was just making me read, because I think that’s the only thing.... It was really a struggle but that’s how you get good at things, right? You just keep doing it over and over again. I think having somebody be with me while I was reading and helping me sound out the words, helping me understand what the words were, being patient, that was probably pretty helpful.

Repetition was beneficial, but having someone around who could help her sound out words and was patient was also useful.

As Deb continued to struggle with literacy and developing academic self-confidence her identity as an artist continued to mature. Once again, she fell into the role of class artist. As Deb explains, “I was always good at art, so I just really bee-lined for the art and got really into it, and that’s basically my whole high school experience was being the artist of my school.” She continues:

> I feel like in the public schools they didn’t really make you feel like you could do anything really besides me, the art. They were really glad that I had the art because then they were like, “Oh, there’s something really she can do.”

Having an identity as an artist was a positive experience and was helpful when Deb was struggling to read and write during this time in her education. While Deb benefitted from
this recognition, she feels that the other students in her contained classroom did not feel they could do anything at all. Being good at art gave Deb direction. As she explains:

There were a lot of the kids who were in our contained classroom, and I feel like they felt like they couldn’t really do anything. I felt that way in high school. I had this vibe where they were like, “Oh, well [Deb] has the art. That’s what she can do.” Then I feel like they kind of felt like the other kids couldn’t really do anything. I kind of have this feeling from an early age, like my friend [Ryan] and [John] who both dropped out of high school. I feel like there was this vibe that they weren’t really going to do anything major-wise or they didn’t have any direction. I think the school could have helped them a little bit more with that.

Most of the friends Deb made during her elementary years in the contained class had dropped out by the time they reached high school. As Deb remembers:

Like the first couple of years of high school they dropped out, or they went to other places and then they dropped out in other places. There’s actually not even one person I really stay in contact with. There’s one person. Yeah. One person…. He dropped out of high school … and he’s cool, but he doesn’t know what he wants to do like job-wise….

Later on Deb continues:

[Jerry], I don’t even know what he’s doing. Probably drugs. Definitely. Definitely. Then there was another girl, [Gaby], actually. Her too. She was actually pretty smart and she dropped out. She dropped out of college so that’s different. I’m not sure what she’s doing. She was also in the contained classrooms with us.

In contrast to the students who were in the regular classroom, most of Deb’s peer group during primary and secondary school in the contained class did not have any direction or went on to develop careers. The prevalent attitude by most students in this environment was of low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and few expectations for the future.

Even though the spirits of most of these students were low Deb made a couple of new friends in the resource room during high school. However, it was a different scene, in contrast to the students during elementary school. As Deb explains:

A lot of my friends weren’t really going to classes or going to school anymore. It was different. I made a couple of new friends who were in the resource room, which was different because … there was more diversity in
the resource room. There was some kids who just couldn’t sit still, so they would just put them in the resource room, which was just like an after school helping room to help you get your work done....

Because Deb spent most of her time in the resource room from an early age, most of her friends consequently came from this population of students. Most of these friends were interested in playing video games and she mentioned her own interests in playing computer games, such as Harry Potter and Peggle. Deb remembers having a competitive spirit when playing with these friends. She enjoyed beating them at these games and compared this process to painting. As Deb remembers:

I love beating them. I get really … even like when I graduated my undergrad, went through this computer game phase again, probably regressing or something. I have to have a game…. Mostly in middle school. In high school, it was really just painting. I was like, “I’m going to beat myself at painting over and over again. I’m going to get better with each painting that I do,” which was what I used to do with computer games.

As Deb became engrossed in the game of painting, she also gained a sense of social belonging. She felt that art helped her integrate into high school. Her peers wanted to talk to her because she was a good artist and it gave her a positive identity. As Deb reflects:

I think that it helped me integrate more especially in high school and people actually kind of wanted to talk to me more because of the art. I’m not sure if ... because it gave me an identity … which was good to hold on to.

Deb mentions her sense of identity as an artist during another point in the interview.

I was in the resource room and then, like I said, I made a beeline for art, so I just became really interested in art, and, yeah, I was failing math a little bit. I passed with a C, and then the science classes I kind of got through those, and I just really focused on art, art, art, and I became the artist of my grade or whatever. Everybody was like, “Oh, yeah. She’s really good at art.” Then I really held onto that because I felt like that was what I was really the best at, and I was like, “Okay. I’ll go for that. We’ll see what I can do with that.”

Later on Deb reflects, “I guess it was always my identity, but I really held onto it the most I think in high school because then I was like, ‘Oh, well there’s something I’m going to have to do with my life.’”
Reflecting further on the importance of art during high school, Deb remembers doodling a lot in class, but is not sure if that actually helped her with learning. She was interested in tracing, but soon identified with being a painter during high school. Deb remembers going through an artistic shift during this time. For example, one summer during high school Deb went to a painting program in New York City and had conversations with artists and had a great experience. She got more serious about art and started painting. As she remembers:

I would trace things for fun every now and then but I really went into painting in high school because I like getting serious, whatever. I was lucky enough to go one summer to this painting [program in New York] where I work there now…. It was a great experience for me. I met a bunch of artists. I met some really good painters. At that time, I really wasn’t painting that much. Then, I decided, “Oh, this is what I want to do. I want to become a really good painter.” I dedicated, I would say, three years of high school to really getting my painting up to par or better.

At that point Deb came to terms with wanting to become a painter and made a commitment to this practice.

**College.** Deb enrolled in a liberal arts college and received a scholarship for students with learning disabilities. She had access to tutors if she needed them. Deb was advised to enter the contained classroom, but she did not want to do that while in college. As Deb reflects, “They gave me these tutors and they told me that [they were] part of my scholarship…. They wanted to put me in this contained classroom again, but I didn’t want to do it.” As Deb continues:

I didn’t feel like going to them after class. I tried it a couple of times. I was like, “ah, I’m done with this.” I just did it without the contained classrooms and stuff, because I was studying art and I was doing really well in all my art classes, and I was always a hard worker when I needed to be.

In the state of New York, she had to take required courses, but she was doing well, only struggling with math. She got books on tape to help with the reading load. As Deb remembers, “We had to take … required courses …, but I actually did pretty okay with
them. I got by at least. I mean math was always a struggle still…. Math was kind of the worst one.” At another part of the interview, Deb explains:

Spelling and reading are like my worst…. I actually still hate reading…. I still hate it. Because it gives me a headache a little bit…. It’s kind of sad. My friends are like, “Reading is so great” … I’m like, “Yeah. I have nothing against it.” Reading books must be awesome, right? But I just don’t enjoy it, so I don’t read…. I enjoy listening to books on tapes sometimes…. If I have to read it’s usually for school, and then on my own I like reading self-help books…. You know my mom is into spiritual healing stuff, and so she’ll give me some of the books that she reads and they’re actually pretty good, so like spiritual development, like knowing yourself. Sometimes there’s books about the family and how to cope with certain family members. Just trying to be happy with yourself, that kind of stuff.

Before I left after the second interview, Deb showed me a catalog that included audio textbooks and expressed some excitement about all the subjects she wanted to learn about.

Deb enjoyed the social aspect of higher education, and she felt that her artwork improved between high school and college. She continued painting portraits similar to what she was doing in high school, and feels they were a way to master skills to create a likeness of those she was painting. In her senior year of college she started to make very large figurative paintings. There was a time during undergraduate school when Deb was only interested in self-portraits; however, this started to change as she became interested in other objects and spaces in her compositions. As Deb reflects:

My art, I think it improved a lot. In the beginning of college, I’m still doing the same thing…. I was really trying to get my skill base up. I was just doing repetitive kinds of paintings of people’s faces. I really like painting people. I want to get good. I want to get a likeness. I was painting portraits of people … when I got to my senior year of college, I started making some really big paintings of people. That’s where I really went. I really improved from my smaller portraits to these huge paintings that had backgrounds in them. They had more to them than just the person’s face. It was their whole body. It was a scenario and a time in place…. There was a point in my undergrad where I just did a bunch of self-portraits but I incorporated this couch, for example. I was moving away from just the face. I was trying to put in other objects and have space, which space has always been hard for me. Painting space like the floor and then that, in relationship to the
Deb felt confident about her artwork while in college. She applied to some prestigious graduate schools, but did not get in. She feels this was because these schools were more interested in conceptual work, while she was primarily making figurative paintings. As Deb recalls:

I’d done really, really well at my undergrad college so I was feeling really confident, almost too confident, confident enough to apply to Columbia. That didn’t go so well because a lot of the schools that I applied to weren’t really looking for figurative work…. Maybe it’s also figurative and then also that it was maybe so obviously from a photograph that a lot of the schools weren’t really interested. Then, when I applied to … a figurative based school, they accepted me right away…. I had no conceptual stuff in my work…. Deb took a year off after undergraduate school and worked at a fabric store, was an art gallery desk assistant, and worked as a teacher assistant at her undergraduate college during this year between college and graduate school.

Graduate school. Deb was accepted right away into an M.F.A. program that was primarily figurative based. At this school, she has been able to make a lot of friends who have similar interests. As Deb reflects:

It’s great. I’ve made a ton of friends, actually. This is another side of me where I really feel I do actually belong because this is the art side and everybody there is an artist. They’re kind of flaky. A lot of them, regardless of whether or not they have learning disabilities, they kind of didn’t fit in very well either way. Then the programs are all dedicated to art making so there’s no other classes really.

The first year of graduate school was focused on developing skills, and she learned a lot about anatomy and working from life, which is helpful for painting people. As Deb recalls:

The first year was actually trying to get our skills better, our ability to paint people, space and still lives better. In the beginning, I felt like I was just doing so many homework assignments. I was like, still lives, stuff that I’ve done before and I was like, “Eh.” It actually helped me improve my skills. Then, also, we were painting from life and I was always painting from
photographs. Painting from life really changed the way that I see things. That really helped benefit my paintings now even if I’m still painting some people from photographs. It helps me a little bit more take what I want from a photograph and then incorporate things the way things would look if you’re looking at them from life so it doesn’t necessarily look like it’s from a photograph. It helps your paintings look suddenly less flat…. I also learned a lot about the human anatomy, which was good because I like painting people. It was pretty helpful. Then, the second semester, they let you work a little bit more on your work, your own paintings which I liked a lot.

Deb did have some writing classes, but not very many. She now mostly takes art classes and has the freedom to develop her own projects. She looks forward to focusing on her own body of work during her final year.

However, she continues to use coping mechanisms that she developed during her early education. For example, Deb makes “stupid” jokes about herself on occasions. As Deb explains:

I always felt that I was weird and kind of stupid, so I always cling to the stupid jokes, and also the art, so I was like, “Oh, I’m just a spacey artist, but I’m really bad at school and I’m really stupid. Ha ha ha. Tee hee hee.” I still do that today. My friends have been like, “you have to stop saying you’re stupid.” Just recently I’ve been like, “Oh, maybe that does kind of come from the whole special ed thing?” Up until now I’ve just been like, “Oh, I’m stupid. Ha ha.” Maybe that does actually come from the whole being different….

Deb reflects on these jokes as a way of making her situation more tolerable, even though for the most part she is in the art studio during graduate school where her difficulties with literacy are not immediately evident.

Currently, Deb paints from both still-lifes and photographs so that, as she puts it, her artwork does not appear flat. She paints from photographs because it is difficult to get people to sit for a long time. However, while in graduate school she has been painting more from life and enjoying it, describing her art practice as “experimental.” Deb just finished her first year and enjoys the social dimension of graduate school; having a positive attitude toward everything she is experiencing. Deb has a lot of friends and feels she belongs in the program.
Deb: Artwork

Artwork description. Deb’s most recent artwork that she showed me at her home were compositions of dinner scenes with figures that had some animated characteristics. She was using bright colors and thick lines in the paint application. She started with portraits in high school because it was a natural form of expression that she had little difficulty making. She is interested in faces and expressions, yet less interested in painting the backgrounds in relation to the figure. Currently, Deb is trying to focus more on the environment, abstraction, and loosening up in certain ways. As Deb reflects:

What I really enjoy painting the most is what I put more work into which is faces and expressions. That’s what really I enjoy. The background sometimes can get a little bit lazy. I started painting people in high school. I was just doing portraits of people because that was easiest.

Deb gives an example of this by considering a recent painting where she is leaving some of the figures unfinished. As Deb explains:

I’ve been trying to get more abstract too, loosening up in certain areas. Sometimes, I leave some of the figures undone. Recently, I’ve been doing that. Sometimes, I use thick lines or bold colors that are not actually there in real life.

Deb focuses on her family as a subject matter in painting because she is familiar with them and they are always around. She knows that they like food and eat out regularly, which is often a subject of her paintings. There is a cultural dimension to her work because her father is Brazilian and her mother is Italian. Patterns are also incorporated as a way of referencing culture. Currently, she is working on a series of her family sitting at a dining table with emotional tensions.

Deb expresses her interests in art making through two artist statements. In the first statement she references the work of John Berger and his comments about the nude in traditional European art “as in being wholly oneself in the most absolute form.” Deb responds to this concept in relation to her own work: “I try to push myself to make portraits that reveal the inner traits of a person rather than just what they physically look
like.” She also mentions the desire to explore more abstract qualities rather than representational figuration and hopes to deal with issues of social inequality through her art. The second artist statement that she sent me was more concerned with her history as an artist from childhood, the influence of her family, and artistic influences.

**Art materials.** Deb has some preferences for what materials she uses when making work. She used to work with oil paints all of the time, but she started to get sick because of the fumes. This caused her to change her medium to acrylic paint. “I fell in love with acrylic. I was obsessed with acrylic. I used acrylic from high school all through my undergrad and I’m still obsessed with acrylic.” Recently, while in graduate school, Deb has started using oil paints again and is getting good feedback. Sometimes she paints oil on top of acrylic, leaving some parts unpainted by the oil and allowing parts of the acrylic to be seen. According to Deb, sometimes this process works out and sometimes it does not.

Deb’s interest in moving back to oil paints is coming from her instructors in graduate school who are trying to push her to do different things. As Deb reflects:

[My instructors] have been trying to push me out of using acrylics into more oil because they like my blending in oil more than they like my blending in acrylic, which makes sense. It also slows down my process of painting, which they like because I tend to go too fast because it starts becoming too easy for me. Then, I just paint too fast and I get lazy in certain points, which they’re right about.

Deb considers herself a fast painter, and acrylic dries faster than oil. She also likes the bright colors and plastic base of acrylic paint. Besides not getting sick anymore from fumes, the drying time, color, and texture are the primary reasons for preferring acrylic.

Sometimes Deb experiments with mixing different mediums together. For example:

With this painting … it was oil and then pastels and then the pastels, when I would use them…. They’re not oil pastels. They’re chalk pastels. The chalky bits would get all over the place and get into the rendered painting of the skin that I did and get it all muddy. I didn’t mind. It was just an
experimental process so I was like, “Oh, it’s okay.” I got it to work as I kept mushing things around. That’s what I do. If I’m using a different medium, I experiment and see how they work together.

Deb also experimented with materials through collage, such as introducing fabric into her work. As Deb remembers:

I went through this really big phase where I was just putting tons of fabric in my work…. Sometimes, I just collage into my paintings. That’s really how I use collage, is collaging different things from books or magazines on my paintings…. Then, I started putting it into my paintings and I liked it.

Deb continues:

[Collaging] was a hobby for me. That wasn’t a serious practice for me, I guess, because it was like a diary and that’s where I did most of my collaging and stuff and my writing. I didn’t take my writing seriously either but then I realized that I can incorporate that stuff into my paintings later on. It took me a while to even put that together. I was just doing it as a separate hobby…. It was like a diary.

**Tools.** Deb paints on canvas with brushes, but does not usually use a palette knife for mixing. When reflecting on tools, Deb mentions her experimentation with digital art making. Deb enjoys making artwork on Illustrator, such as digital portraits. Recently she has been exploring the 3-D program Maya,\(^6\) but does not feel like an experienced user.

Deb reflects on some of her difficulties with spatial relationships using 3-D digital applications and how her understanding will eventually “click” over time, which is similar to how she understands spatial relationships in painting. As Deb describes:

In the beginning, [3-D programs are] pretty frustrating, to be honest. There are certain times where it wasn’t clicking for me. I bet if I keep using it, there’s going to be more times where it’s not clicking for me…. Sometimes, you just have to stop and come back to it. Once again, it’s like the painting. It’s like something clicks and you’re like, “Oh, cool.” That’s always a good feeling but the frustration until you get there, and it’s usually more with these applications because there are so many things that can go wrong, that I feel like I get more frustrated in the beginning until it clicks a little bit more.

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\(^6\)Maya is a 3-D program designed to create 3-D models, animations, videos, and other visual effects.
When Deb first started using Maya, she was thinking about how 3-D models can affect her painting because she was making representational work. Her first project with Maya was to make a 3-D model of a box of chocolates, but when she turned the box from each angle, she found an issue with the dimension. This is one example of Deb’s frustration with digital technology, but also shows her attempt to move beyond painting the figure and the similarity between the process of painting and digital art-making.

**Artistic process.** Deb uses photographs as a source during the process of painting because models are difficult to find and they can only stay still for so long. But she prefers to paint from life:

> I paint from photographs and then also from life. I do a little bit of both…. I’ve been painting from life a lot more and I actually really enjoy it. I was surprised. Painting people from life is actually really fun but because people won’t sit that long, I usually paint the people from photographs.

Often she juxtaposes photos together in Photoshop to help develop her compositions. As Deb states, “Sometimes, I collage them just by thinking about it, painting from three different photos and then putting them together in my painting. Then, sometimes, I use Photoshop to see what it would look like together.” However, through this process of using photography Deb’s figures usually come out looking flat. For other objects in her composition she may use a still life.

When Deb is in the process of planning a painting, she feels that her decisions in placement of the subject and other objects in the composition are made intuitively. She is not sure how to describe intuitive decision making, but believes it is a natural process that happens through cultivating practice in painting. As Deb reflects:

> I know that sometimes, when I’m painting, I have these ideas of… putting certain objects in certain places. I feel like sometimes, I can be intuitive … you know, I really want an apple there or I really want this person’s hand to actually be over there. I just feel like that would make it work more, that kind of stuff. It just comes sometimes. That comes from just painting over and over and over again. What happens is I’ve made tons of really shitty work and I didn’t care because maybe I was out of it or I thought that I was good even when I was making really shitty work...
When artwork does not fulfill her expectations or is not “working” for her, she sets it over to the side. It is through the process of making lots of paintings that some become more successful while others allow her to process the composition in order for something more effective to emerge later on. Deb describes this intuitive state of making in how she has become interested in the subject matter that she is working with now. As Deb reflects:

I’m probably still making shitty work but I’m just making so much work that every now and then, there’s something that’s pretty okay … it’s like I just keep doing it over and over again. Then, somehow naturally, I just gravitated to painting people. I was tracing comic books over and over and over again. Then, I stopped tracing them. Then, I started drawing people. Then, the next step was maybe I’ll paint people. Then, I feel like that’s how I fell into it, painting people. Then, I’m like, “Well, who do I know? I know my family. I know they like to eat so I’m going to paint [them].” There’s also the cultural thing. There’s Brazil and Italy. Maybe I can incorporate that into my paintings. Sometimes, my paintings come out better when I don’t even think about that stuff and I just do it. Then, somehow, it just gets incorporated anyway.

Recently, Deb has found it difficult to make intuitive paintings because she feels pressure to make artwork that will sell in the market. This is a struggle because she does not know how to sell her work and feels that the tension of selling her work stifles her creativity. She tries not to think about this because if she dwells on it she will “get stuck” in the process of making and will be unable to finish.

As described above, Deb does not have an issue with making an unsuccessful work of art because she makes so many paintings and knows through the process of repetition she will become successful. She compares this to the experience of playing computer games where she would play them over and over again until she finally won. As Deb describes:

Sometimes, I get obsessed with computer games until things click. Then, I’d beat it finally. I feel like you can have that with painting. You just keep doing it over and over again. Then, somehow, you’re like, “Oh, this makes more sense to me now or this painting is more successful than my other paintings.”
**Artistic inspiration.** Deb paints out of enjoyment of the process of making; however, she feels guilty about this pleasure because she could be doing something better for others than just enjoying herself. She enjoys making artwork for others and would often create a painting of someone and then give it to them. This was a way that she felt she could push herself to be less narcissistic. As Deb states, “I’ve always really liked making things for people. In the beginning, I would paint people and then give them the paintings…” This desire to give others artwork fulfills Deb’s needs to connect with people, which is more meaningful than spending her time in a studio alone painting for herself. As Deb reflects,

Yeah. I felt bad because part of me wishes that I could be a doctor or something where I could save lives somehow or I don’t know. Recently, it’s more like I wish I was a doctor or something. I guess life is short and so you should do what you enjoy but I want to eventually give back to people. I am thinking of doing something in art education, which I think I would enjoy.

Although her difficulties with literacy caused her to take a direction in the arts, which has some limitations, she is finding her way within this trajectory to fulfill her needs as she continues to develop as a person.

During primary and secondary school, Deb had different needs in contrast to graduate school. During middle and high school, she had the desire to be perceived by others as a serious and capable artist. Deb remembers doing a lot of drawings and tracing during middle school to get the proportions correct, such as making sure the head was the right size in comparison to the body. However, this stopped in high school because she moved into painting, which she saw as a more serious practice. As Deb remembers, “Then, I decided, ‘Oh, this is what I want to do. I want to become a really good painter.’ I dedicated, I would say, three years of high school to really getting my painting up to par or better.” During this time, Deb felt that doing repetitive portraiture would help her build her skills as an artist.
Today, Deb feels conflicted about why she is making her artwork. In the past she remembers that painting would up lift her spirits if she was feeling depressed. It was something she could share with others, something that she could get better at, and was a part of her identity. In high school, other students would get to know her through the portraits she would make of them; now she feels she needs to make work to fit in the art market. However, she is unsure of how the market works. As Deb reflects:

I felt guilty because I think I really enjoy painting … because … I should be doing something more than just doing something that I enjoy…. I like when other people enjoy it…. I really like making things for people…. In the beginning, I would paint people and then give them the paintings I did of them … it’s just a way that I could push myself to get better at something… in high school, it was an identity, like I said. It was a way that people also got to know me, through my art … if I was ever really sad, I feel like I would just go and make a painting. Somehow, it can make me feel a little better. Now, it’s a little harder because I feel somehow I have to make art that’s going to make money, that’s more difficult for me because I don’t really know how. The more I think about it, I feel the more my artwork gets stifled because I’m like, “Oh, my God, is this going to sell? Probably not but I want to make this anyway.”

Deb is struggling with articulating her work and what it all means. She is unsure how to do this and feels that the meaning of her work can only be experienced through the making process. Deb does not want to think about the meaning of her work, but rather to make it and hope that she can figure it out later. Deb gives priority to the process of making with materials and forms, which she feels that her work is actually about. The conceptual process is something that happens afterwards and somehow inhibits the making of her artwork. As Deb reflects:

I’m really bad about talking about my work. I feel like I go in all different directions like I don’t know what I’m talking about. I have to get critiques. I get critiques. Sometimes, we have visiting artists to critique our work. To be honest, I never really want to sign up with them because I don’t like talking about my work because I don’t really know what it’s about yet. I feel like I keep trying to say that I’m just making it. If I make enough, maybe I can come up with something like what it’s about really.
Deb continues:

There’s that whole immigrant thing, to put that into my work but it’s not really about that. It’s really about people. I really like just people and I like how flawed they are. I feel like I just really enjoy painting people but if I have to make it about something, then I’d make it about … I just have been painting more about my family because they’re around more.

Deb does not try to talk about her work with her mother or her peers from art school because they are interested in having other conversations. It is mostly her professors who are pushing her to talk more about her work, but Deb finds it difficult to conceptualize her painting. As Deb continues:

My mom likes my work…. We talk about maybe how it looks aesthetically like what we could work on but what it’s actually about, we don’t care. We just don’t care. We just do it. It probably is about something if I think deeper but when I’m ready to actually articulate it, then I’m ready but I just want to make it and make it and make it until I make something that actually works and clicks. Then, I can think about what it’s actually about.

Deb continues:

My peers, we all like each other’s work but we don’t actually talk that much about our work with each other. We paint together. We talk about what’s working, what’s not working sometimes but not very often. We really go around and we’re like, “Hey, I like that. I like how that’s going.” Then, we leave the talking about the work for the teachers … the friends that I’ve made, we talk about other things when we go out and have fun. We go dancing or something.

However, there are some instructors who are trying to help her with writing about her artwork. As Deb reflects, “There are teachers who have helped me try to come up with some artist statement, which have really been about my family culture, food, that kind of stuff, pattern, which is also something incorporated into my artwork.” Deb feels that the ability to conceptualize her work is important if she wants to show in galleries, but, as stated earlier, she is unsure about how this system works. As Deb reflects:

I’ve never really been good at conceptual stuff. I guess I should practice it but I never, for what I’m making, I didn’t find it as pressing of an issue for
my work but it probably will be if I end up wanting to show work. I can always get there.

Deb continues:

I don’t really show in galleries. I don’t really understand. I haven’t really been in the art world but I’ve been told that you need to have some kind of concept behind your work to make it work. That’s what I’ve been told.

She also mentions the intimidating experience of reading statements written by professional artists who are showing in galleries. As Deb reflects:

[Their statements] are so conceptual and their writing is so dense and kind of hard for the average person to understand that I feel like that is a little bit alienating, it makes me feel like you have to be smart or like a professor-type person to understand those kinds of words.

Deb is unsure how to incorporate the feedback she receives from her professors. She admits that she is just not ready to do certain things until she figures it out on her own. As Deb reflects:

I don’t know how much I actually take their advice and put it into my work because sometimes, you can’t hear things unless you’re ready to hear them. Sometimes, I feel like maybe there are certain things that I’m not ready to do yet so I’m like, “Oh, I can’t do that yet.” I get all scared so I don’t incorporate it into my artwork yet. Maybe I can experiment a little bit more, which I’m trying to do now.

Deb is being challenged to move outside her comfort zone as an artist; however, there is still the qualitative aspect of making. Deb believes that one of the ways that she is engaged while painting is through the meditative property of making. She is distracted often and feels that art making is a form of meditation that can help her focus. As Deb states:

I think it’s meditative…. When I paint, I feel like it is a little bit like a form of meditating…. I’m so distracted by things. I’m still conscious of my body and the painting but I feel like I’m getting relaxed. I also feel like my attention is … in the painting. When I’m painting people, I know my attention is really in the painting but then, when I’m painting the background, I can feel myself wandering a little bit like, “This isn’t really the part that I like the most.” I’m trying to work on that right now. I’m trying to put my attention into both things.
Deb also mentions the experience when the parts of the painting fit together as a whole, after working on them for a period of time, as much like playing a video game. Deb describes her inspiration in portraiture as coming from her desire to capture a likeness, but this started to change with scale. Deb has always struggled with space in her paintings, but she does feel she is getting better the more she works.

Deb mentions a few artists that inspire her artwork, such as the African artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby. As Deb explains, “I have it saved on my internet browser, her website. She’s definitely influenced me. Her work is actually about family and patterns and stuff like that. I love it.” Deb also mentions Alice Neel, but was having issues remembering names. She has been inspired by many artists from flipping through books, but does not remember the names of all the artists she sees.

**Deb: Portrait Summary**

During the first grade, Deb suffered from severe seizures and remembers getting behind in school because of this issue. She was eventually placed in a contained classroom, where she received extra assistance. Sometime during her early education, Deb was also diagnosed with dyslexia. During elementary and middle school, Deb spent half of the time in the contained classroom and half in the regular class. She also remembers feeling socially awkward and was shy around others.

Deb struggled with writing and math and was unable to read until the fourth grade. She had difficulty memorizing words and what they looked like, and had difficulty sounding out words that were unfamiliar. However, she excelled in the arts and was inspired by her mother artistically from an early age. She would draw comic strips of her sister, friends, and herself taking adventures together during the fourth and fifth grade.

Deb attended another school from fourth through seventh grade and remembers feeling socially awkward and had anxiety around students who were not in her contained class. She also was pulled out of her regular classroom for special assistance more often
in middle school. For 8th and 9th grade, Deb got a full scholarship to a private special education school and remembers working hard and gained some academic self-confidence during this time.

When Deb first started going to this special education school, she was socially shy; however, she experienced a drastic social switch because everyone there had some form of learning disability or behavioral issue. It was a good experience for Deb because most of the classes were at a slower pace so it was easy to keep up. She became proud of herself during these two years and developed confidence that she could study other subjects outside of the arts. However, she continued to draw and making art played an important role in her life.

Deb went back to her public high school for her sophomore year, but her performance started to fall. Her academic self-confidence was challenged and she started to become more serious about her art practice, identifying as the class artist. As Deb was developing confidence that she could do art as a career, her peers in the contained classroom were at a loss for what they could do well and often dropped out. Toward the end of high school, she came to terms with wanting to become a painter and made a commitment to continue her studies in the arts.

Deb enrolled in a liberal arts B.F.A. program and was advised to enter the contained classroom. However, she did not want to do that while in college. She struggled in required classes, but passed. Most of her classes were art-related, and she enjoyed making friends with similar interests. Deb continued painting portraits similar to what she was doing in high school, and feels they were a way to master her skills.

Deb felt confident about her artwork while in college, and applied to some prestigious graduate schools but did not get in. She took a year off and simultaneously worked at a fabric store, was an art gallery desk assistant, and worked as a teacher assistant at her undergraduate college. The next year, Deb was accepted right away into an M.F.A. program that emphasized figurative representation.
Deb just finished her first year and enjoys the social dimension of graduate school. She has many friends and feels she belongs in the program. She mostly takes art classes and has the freedom to develop her own projects during her final year. Currently, Deb paints from both still-lifes and photographs. She paints from photographs because it is difficult to get people to sit for a long time. However, while in graduate school she has been painting more from life. She is also trying to move away from her fixation with figures and focus more on space. However, she has always struggled with space in her paintings, but she does feel she is getting better as she completes more work.

Deb is interested in painting people, focusing on faces and expressions. When painting Deb prefers using acrylic because she become sick from oil paint fumes, but also because of the fast drying time, color, and plastic quality. When reflecting on tools Deb mentions her experimentation with digital art making, which is both frustrating and engaging.

Currently, Deb is trying to focus more on the background of her compositions, create abstractions, and loosen up in certain ways. Deb focuses on her family as a subject in painting, creating compositions that include food and eating out. She also incorporates patterns in her artwork and feels that both food and patterns are ways of referencing culture. Her multicultural family inspires this interest. Her father is Brazilian and her mother is Italian. She is also interested in referencing family emotional tensions in her work.

Deb mentions the importance of the meditative quality of art making, which helps her focus. When Deb is in the process of planning a painting she feels the decisions about placement of the subject and other objects are made intuitively. Currently, Deb feels pressure to make artwork that will sell in the market, which inhibits her from being able to make intuitive paintings. This is a struggle because she does not know how to sell her work and feels this is affecting her creativity. However, when she is in an intuitive state
of making she has no issue with making work and feels that successful work will emerge through the repetitive process of making.

Deb paints out of enjoyment of the process of making; however, she feels guilty about this pleasure because she could be doing something better for others than just enjoying herself. She takes pleasure in making artwork for others and would often paint a painting of someone and then give it to them. Deb feels life is short and that people should do what they enjoy, but she still wants to give back to society. She is currently thinking about doing something in art education to fill this gap.

Today, Deb feels conflicted about why she is making her artwork. She remembers that, in the past, painting would uplift her spirits if she was feeling depressed, was something that she could get better at, and was a part of her identity. In high school, other students would get to know her through the portraits she would make of them. However, now she feels she needs to make work to fit into the art market and is unsure of how this market works.

Deb is struggling with talking about her work and what it all means. She is unsure about how to do this and feels that the meaning of her work can only be experienced through the making process. Deb does not want to think about the meaning of her work—she would rather make it and hope that she can figure it out later. She gives priority to the process, which she feels that her work is actually about. The conceptual process is something that happens afterwards and somehow inhibits her process of making.

**Findings Summary**

Through constructing portraits for each participant, themes emerged. These themes can be categorized into three categories: learning and instruction, psychosocial development, and artistic identity formation. In terms of learning and instruction, Kara, Ben, and Deb all shared similar dyslexic characteristics and had self-developed learning
strategies for dealing with their literacy difficulties. All the participants received special assistance during their education in varying degrees, which sometimes required classroom segregation. Participants expressed interests in class subjects, such as math and science, but felt they would not be successful in these disciplines because of their literacy difficulties. Thus, they all defaulted to studying the visual arts because it was something they enjoyed, excelled at, gave them self-esteem, confidence, an identity, a sense of belonging, and direction in life.

In terms of psychosocial development, all participants remember experiencing a sense of social otherness, such as learning that they were different from their peers, being misunderstood and socially embarrassed by teachers, labeling, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization. All the participants sought to avoid the sense of otherness through coping strategies, such as artmaking and the inclusiveness of the art classroom. The family remained a significant source of cognitive and emotional support during education, while the arts played a significant role in social integration during education.

In terms of artistic identity formation, being an exceptional artist during education played a significant role in self-esteem, confidence, and identity formation for Kara, Ben, and Deb. The visual arts also acted as an emotional outlet, and offered the emotional therapeutic experience of artmaking and social inclusion in the art classroom. All of the participants expressed interests in realistic figurative representation through traditional materials (e.g., drawing and painting) and were less interested in conceptual modes of artmaking. They also developed social relationships and empathy through the arts that came into full bloom during higher education. These emerging themes will be reviewed further in the discussion chapter.
Figure 1. Participant Educational Timeline
Chapter V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter presents the major analytical themes from the data and considers the relationship between the findings and how identity and artistic development contribute to the ways participants with dyslexia make meaning of their sense of self. Considering life narratives through interviews, the sense of otherness is explored during education, such as otherness experienced among peers and teachers, labeling, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization. Learning difficulties are discussed in relationship to special assistance and educational environments, as well as interests in school subjects, such as art and science.

Findings show that the development of artistic abilities, being exceptional at artmaking, and having art as an emotional outlet allowed for social inclusion during education. Academic foreclosure (i.e., the early commitment to a field of study without exploration of interests) in the arts during college led to the cultivation of well-being, self-esteem, self-confidence, belonging, relative multiplicity (i.e., the understanding that there are multiple points of view that are relative to a given context), the ability to make multiple conflicting commitments, social development, and self-actualization.

The primary narrative emerging from this study elucidates the struggle of the self against the sense of otherness within the dualistic educational environment that makes concrete the distinction between abled and disabled. For the participants of this study, the difficulty with reading and writing caused by dyslexia influenced a sense of social
otherness throughout early education. In the attempt to avoid the sense of otherness and social marginality, participants developed identities in which they excelled, such as drawing and painting. Artmaking (e.g., figurative drawing and painting) was a particular representational mode participants found to be a natural form of expression and a way of showing their competence and abilities.

A way of understanding this dynamic of development of self and sense of otherness is through object-relations theory. According to Donald Winnicott (1965, 1971), the sense of self gradually emerges from an embedded experience of undistinguishable wholeness with objects and people in the environment: for example, when an infant’s sense of self includes the mother’s breast or later during early childhood when playing with objects occupies a third space between self and other. Drawing upon the work of Winnicott, Robert Kegan (1982) theorized that there is a dynamic between independence and inclusion (subject-object balance) that pivots throughout development where what is originally the subject becomes integrated into the self, at which point a new subject emerges. Thus, what becomes the subject is integrated into the self, while the object is externalized as the other. Kegan (1980) describes the process of identity formation during adolescence (the Institutional stage) as, “In moving from ‘I am my relationships’ to ‘I have relationships,’ there is now somebody who is doing this having, the new I” (p. 100). According to Kegan, this pivoting between self and other also influences one’s orientation toward independent and inclusive behavior in six stages of development: Incorporative (independence), Impulsive (inclusion), Imperial (independence), Interpersonal (inclusion), Institutional (independence), and Interindividual (inclusion). Within this model, identity formation is a process that develops between these two poles of independence-inclusion where each point of contention is rooted in the emotional experience of the individual.

In this study, the need to develop a particular skill set to show abilities, described above, becomes important during middle and high school for each participant because of
their emotional needs to socially belong among their peers and to develop positive self-esteem. Later on, during college participants foreclosed on majoring in art without exploring other options (Marcia, 1966). As this foreclosure causes tensions while participants develop during their college years, they also find the visual arts as a holding environment (i.e., a supportive atmosphere that nurtures growth) (Winnicott, 1965, 1971) for interpersonal development, thus allowing participants to satisfy a sense of belonging, self-esteem, cognitive and social needs, as well as to develop meaningful lives.

Dualism in thought and cultural expression (e.g., the notion that there are two positions of right or wrong) can be compared to Kegan’s (1982) self-other evolution as one develops toward an integrated self. In understanding this dualistic relationship, Kegan references William Perry’s (1981) developmental theory that shows that young adults usually start education at a form of dualistic thinking, often in conjunction with subordination toward authority figures. However, during higher education they often experience a conflict that causes reflection and a transformation toward a multiplicity of viewpoints and relativity of context. Toward the end of their development they recognize the significance of their independent ability to make multiple commitments that may be contradictory, yet they persist in a state of relative multiplicity (Perry, 1981).

In this study, all three participants foreclosed on their educational commitment early on to study art. This foreclosure was also within a dualistic and concrete paradigm where figuration lacked ambiguity and was understood as separate from conceptual modes of making. However, the arts eventually allowed for a period of contained moratorium when they could explore their sense of self during a process of transformation toward caring for others (Gilligan, 1993; Kegan, 1982) and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). In the following section, themes concerning the process of identity formation and artistic development that contribute to participants’ overall meaning-making paradigm will be discussed.
This discussion chapter is organized in three sections: learning and instruction, psychosocial development, and artistic identity formation. The learning and instruction section will discuss participants, learning difficulties in relationship to educational environments, such as specific learning difficulties, self-developed learning strategies, special education and tutoring, different classroom environments, interests in school subjects, and identity development during education. The psychosocial development section considers participant experiences of otherness and belonging during their education, such as the realization that they were different from their peers, ways they were misunderstood and socially embarrassed by their teachers, labeling experience, harassment and exclusion, their desire to avoid stigmatization, anxiety based on otherness, coping mechanisms to protect self-esteem, sense of belonging in school, and the importance of their family. The final section outlines participant artistic identity formation, such as how being an exceptional artist gave participants a sense of belonging, how artmaking was an emotional outlet, their interests in figuration in contrast to conceptualization, as well as how they developed artistically through states of dualism, multiplicity, relativity, multiple commitments, and social development through artmaking.

**Learning and Instruction**

This section will discuss the learning and instructional characteristics participants experienced during their education. Emerging themes include a review of common and specific learning difficulties experienced by each participant, as well as self-developed strategies for compensating with difficulties with literacy. Special education and other forms of assistance will be considered for what participants attempted, practiced, and ultimately felt were the most helpful forms of support. Changes in education environment and special assistance are compared between K-12 and higher education. Finally, school
subjects, such as the arts and sciences, will be discussed as they relate to identity formation and status foreclosure (i.e., a term used by James Marcia (1966) to describe when students decide on a major before exploring all their options). Erik Erikson’s (1959/1980) and James Marcia’s (1966) theories of identity formation are considered in framing the academic and visual art experiences of Ben, Deb, and Kara.

**Specific Learning Difficulties**

Participants remember having difficulties learning to read and write during their early elementary years. The main issue for all three participants was making the connection between the phonetic pronunciation and the graphic representation of the word. Kara, Ben, and Deb also shared the following issues and challenges: difficulty with reading aloud in class, lack of reading comprehension, reversing letters, reduced memory, issues sounding out unfamiliar words, difficulty listening and taking notes at the same time, difficulty spelling, slower pace of reading and writing, and confusing words that sound alike, but are spelled differently. These findings are similar to Elliot and Gibbs’s (2008) research, which discusses the difficulties in defining dyslexia due to a diagnosis that encompasses a number of different characteristics. Nonetheless, the participants were tested and diagnosed during their early education.

Ben had issues remembering the letters of the alphabet, would reverse letters (e.g., b’s and d’s), and struggled learning the names of colors from an early age. He was falling behind in reading during the first grade and was diagnosed with dyslexia in the second grade. Ben had issues with sounding out unfamiliar words and had difficulties reading aloud. Ben also had issues taking notes during class. It was difficult for him to listen, understand what was being said, and write at the same time.

During early education, Deb started having seizures, which caused her to fall behind in class. Reflecting back, she believes these seizures slowed down her reading and spelling skills. It was also during this time that she was diagnosed with dyslexia because
of her difficulties with spelling. Deb did not learn how to read until the fourth grade, and throughout her education she struggled with reading, writing, and math.

Reading was a slow process for Deb and she did not like reading aloud. She had a difficult time memorizing words and their correct spelling, even simple words. Deb had difficulty sounding out words because of the relationship between the spelling and the phonetic sound (e.g., spelling a word the way that it is pronounced); she always spells words phonetically. She would sometimes read the wrong word in class and was embarrassed to read a word completely wrong while thinking she was right.

Deb recalls always having a lot of misspelled words when she writes. Her letters often end up in different places in the word and she still has to look the word up to be sure she has the letters in the right order. She will try spelling a word in different ways, but sometimes she is so far off she cannot find the word she is trying to spell in a search on the computer. She also remembers being confused when spelling the word “to,” because there were three different ways to spell “to”: such as “too,” “to,” and “two.” She also remembers struggling learning to type because she could not remember where the letters were located on the keyboard. If class material, such as discussing a book, was communicated too quickly she would get overwhelmed and give up.

Similar to Ben and Deb, Kara also had some literacy difficulties. In the first grade Kara started to get held back in slower reading groups because of her difficulties with literacy. Eventually she was diagnosed in the fourth grade with dyslexia and received tutoring. She remembers having difficulties making the connection between the word and how it was pronounced. Today, she is still a slow reader and continues to struggle with reading, writing, and comprehension. In terms of writing, Kara remembers that her peers could write stories with little effort while she was unable to write at all. Often she would need to dictate her thoughts while someone else wrote them down. She would try to take notes during class, but writing continued to be a difficult process. Following directions and paying attention for long periods were also a challenge.
Flipping letters, numbers, and directions (e.g., right and left) are stereotypical characteristics of dyslexia and were common among all the participants. This phenomenon is similar to findings among humans in general for automatic mirroring of shapes between left-right symmetry (Tarr & Pinker, 1989) and mirroring errors based on memories of images are also common (Biederman & Cooper, 1991; Fiser & Biederman, 2001). These findings have led Stanislas Dehaene (2009) to argue that mirroring phenomenon may have developed as a way of understanding visual-spatial experience that allowed for rapid mirroring of objects in three-dimensional space. However, this automatic visual-spatial advantage in nature proves unhelpful when reading letters and numbers, if the brain has difficulty mediating between three-dimensional and two-dimensional phenomena, which may be the case with dyslexia.

Memory, reading comprehension, and spelling difficulties were consistent among all participants. There are findings that difficulties with working memory among dyslexic children and adolescents is common (Jeffries & Everatt, 2004). If there are difficulties with working memory, the ability to keep a whole word or sentence active in the mind will be compromised and will ultimately influence spelling and reading comprehension. This difficulty may also be the result of the need for rote memory skills for encoding symbols that have little or no resemblance to words.

The most significant literacy difficulty mentioned was making a connection between words and how they are pronounced (i.e., grapheme-to-phoneme conversions). All participants stated difficulties with unfamiliar words and challenges with sounding them out based on phonics. This issue is characterized as surface dyslexia where subjects can read non-words (e.g., blick), but have difficulty with irregular words (e.g., yacht) (Bub et al., 1985). These issues are also influenced by languages where the spelling of words does not always relate to how the word is pronounced (e.g., semi-transparent orthographic scripts such as English). Thus, those who struggle with surface dyslexia mostly rely on rote memorization, such as repetitive rehearsal, to encode the relationships
between phonemes and graphemes. As this process becomes automatic for typical developing readers, this may never become an automatic process for dyslexic readers no matter how often they practice, often resulting in a more exhaustive effort during reading.

Self-developed Learning Strategies

As participants struggled with literacy, they found ways around their difficulties by developing personal strategies that helped them learn during primary and secondary education. Some of these strategies include receiving help from others, such as talking to peers about readings to gain a better comprehension and having others proofread their work. Ben remembers doodling during class as a way of processing content discussed by the teacher. They all mentioned the importance of computer programs and other digital media for learning, such as computer programs that help with spelling and grammar, listening to audiobooks, and watching documentaries on a subject. Yet, the most helpful strategy for dealing with their struggles included reading as much as possible and not giving up.

Today Ben, Deb, and Kara still struggle with reading and writing, but they have also come a long way since grade school. However, they all still need extra time to read and someone to proofread their writing before they turn it in. Computer programs that help with spelling and grammar are still essential. Both Deb and Kara mentioned that they continue to listen to audiobooks, and Ben would rather watch a documentary on a topic than read a book.

However, even though they shared some of the same strategies early on they all made use of different creative techniques that helped them learn to read and write. For example, Deb mentioned the importance of not quitting if she became overwhelmed or failed. Today Deb feels that through repetition she will eventually become successful and compares this process to playing a video game over and over again until she wins or painting again and again until something “clicked.”
Kara remembers perceiving words as having particular features, such as finding characteristics of people and animals in the shapes of the letters and how the letters are arranged in a word, which she found helpful for learning to read during her early education. She developed some strategies to deal with her reading comprehension, which included having conversations with friends and other students about books to get an idea of what the story was about. After these conversations, she found it easier to read because she understood the context of the narrative. Sometimes she would only read the first, middle and last sentence of a paragraph, often skipping around reading different sentences in a non-linear fashion. This would greatly reduce her comprehension, but was a way for her to get an idea of what the story was about.

Different strategies and techniques to increase performance are important for students with learning difficulties to navigate through the education system. There are findings that show that dyslexic college students tend to use time management, find the main idea, and use test-taking strategies more often than non-dyslexic students (Kirby, Silvestri, Allingham, Parrila, & La Fave, 2008). Some findings even show that students with learning disabilities often develop ways to manipulate the system so they will not be exposed (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992). This was true in the case of Ben reading ahead in class so that he could be sure he knew how to pronounce all the words or when Kara would rely on others to learn about a book through conversation. These different creative adaptations allowed the participants to avoid embarrassment and to succeed among their peers, but were not helpful for dealing with their literacy difficulties.

**Special Education/Tutoring**

Most participants received extra assistance during different periods of their education that came in the form of tutoring after or during school, parents helping outside of class, the resource room that was separate from the main classroom, and other accommodations. For example, in first grade Kara’s kindergarten teacher would pull her
out of her reading class to continue her studies in a separate classroom. She was tutored after being diagnosed with dyslexia in the fourth grade. Kara continued to struggle with reading and writing, but her special education classes ended during middle school because she was able to keep up with the other students in the mainstream classroom.

Ben was assigned to the resource room in second grade and was falling behind in his reading skills. His father wanted him to get more assistance so he enrolled Ben in a private school and he repeated second grade. As stated previously, both of Ben’s parents are educators and they worked as a team to help him with his issues with reading and writing. His father provided most of the help, reading with him, and his mother would do more with communicating with the school administration. While Ben was growing up, his father would force him to do extra readings and read aloud at home to practice.

Between the third and fifth grade Ben’s father would take him to a vision specialist after school in the hopes of improving his binocular coordination to help with his literacy difficulties; yet there is no evidence that this form of therapy was useful. Between the sixth and seventh grade, Ben saw a speech and reading specialist on Saturdays who would help him with phonic pronunciation of words. Ben is unsure how helpful this assistance was at the time, but feels he would benefit from this instruction if he received it now.

While at home, Ben’s father would give Ben incentives if he would read a page aloud, such as giving him a dollar for each page that would ultimately go toward buying him a bike. During this time Ben was unhappy with having to read aloud on a regular basis, but today he feels it helped contribute toward his independence from special education during high school. Yet, Ben still needs help with proofreading, often receiving help from his father and brother.

While in school, Ben remembers receiving his teacher’s notes during elementary and middle school as a form of assistance. He would also need extra time on exams and a computer to check grammar and spelling. Ben continued to receive time-and-a-half on
state exams through high school, but not during college until he needed to take the
teacher certification exam.

Similar to Ben, Deb was diagnosed with dyslexia and put into the contained
classroom. Within this separate learning environment Deb received extra assistance with
her literacy difficulties. In the resource room she would be given projects to help her with
reading and writing. Some of the teachers in Deb’s contained classroom were helpful and
she did not get tutoring after school. During most of Deb’s elementary and middle school
years she was taken out of her mainstream classroom for special assistance. Deb
remembers working with special educators in the resource room, reading books together
with these educators, sounding out words that were challenging, and doing projects
intended to help her learn new words. She remembers having a valuable middle school
teacher who had some effective methods to help Deb memorize words for reading and
spelling.

Deb was at public school until the eighth grade, when she transferred to a private
school for students with disabilities, receiving a full scholarship. She was in the program
for two years and received a great deal of extra help and support. Deb remembers
working hard and did very well in math and science during this time. While at this private
school Deb’s teachers would never let her use her reading disability as an excuse because
everyone had a learning disability at this institution, which meant she had to work hard
because she could not use her literacy difficulties as a scapegoat.

After high school, Deb received a learning disability scholarship to go to college.
She was advised to take advantage of the special assistance available through the college,
but was not interested in doing so during this period of her life. Reflecting back, she
thinks the contained classes in high school may have made her lazy. She did try the
special assistance a few times during college, but felt that she was done with getting this
form of assistance during her education.
All of the participants felt that while some forms of assistance had a positive effect on their education, other forms had less impact. Reflecting back, Ben felt his father’s assistance at home and getting time-and-a-half on exams were the most helpful. He is unsure about how helpful the resource room, vision specialist, and speech-reading specialist was. He does not remember this form of assistance making a significant difference at the time. Whenever he ran into difficulties with reading and writing, he would see his father and work with him. Today, Ben does not want to use his accommodations, such as time and a half on exams, like a crutch. He only wants to use his accommodations if he really needs them to pass an exam.

Deb mentioned the benefits of a slower pace in the contained classroom. However, she also recalled a teacher who would give her answers to test questions, which she felt was a form of cheating and was unhelpful in the long term. When Deb entered the private school for students with learning disabilities, she could no longer use her literacy difficulties as an excuse and had to work harder. This ultimately helped her improve, but she fell behind again when she went back to public school and went back to using her disability as an excuse. Reading as much as possible and spell check were the most helpful for improving.

For Kara, tutoring in school was helpful, but she also thinks that the personality of the tutor was off-putting. The most important skill she learned through receiving tutoring was how to study. For remembering course content, notes were the most helpful and spell-check and thesaurus were the most helpful forms of technology. Having extra time on exams was crucial.

The participants reported that they did better if they received assistance after school and were not pulled out of their mainstream class. If they were pulled out of their mainstream class, they would often miss course material and felt lost when returning from the resource room or contained classroom (further psychosocial implications for segregated education will be discussed in the next subsection).
However, in Deb’s case there were also benefits of classroom exclusion, such as a slower learning pace. For Deb, the most significant learning took place during time spent at a private school for disabled students (similar to findings made by Fitch, 2003). The benefits of remedial approaches for dyslexic students have been studied (Blachman 1997; D’Agostino & Murphy, 2004, Torgesen, 2005; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006); yet, the bulk of the challenging hurdles were worked through within the family for all participants, such as when the mother or father spent extended time helping them work through their difficulties (also see Hellendoorn & Ruijssenaars, 2000) (the importance of the family during struggles with literacy are discussed further in the next subsection under: Influence of Family, p. 199).

All of the participants mentioned the importance of technology (e.g., spell-check and audiobooks) as essential accommodations during secondary education. These findings are consistent with the benefits of assistant technology use for cognitive and psychological development for students with literacy difficulties (LoPresti, Mihailidis, & Kirsch, 2004; Milani, Lorusso, & Molteni, 2010). This use of technology continued during college and all participants recalled they were able to get by without too much difficulty. The only significant issue that came up was when Ben needed his IEP to get extra time to take the state exams to receive teacher certification. Time-and-a-half is the most common form of postsecondary accommodation during exams for students with literacy difficulties (Lindstrom, 2007), which findings show greatly improves reading comprehension (Lesaux, Pearson, & Siegel, 2006).

While there is no single approach that has proven to work for all dyslexic students (Shaywitz, Morris, & Shaywitz, 2008), all of the participants of this study mentioned that reading as often as possible on topics of interest was the most helpful way of working through their literacy difficulties. These findings are consistent with Fink (1995, 2002) who found that successful dyslexic adults were persistent in reading about their interests and got better as a result of continuous practice. This independent persistence, in contrast
to accommodations, shows the significance of personal efforts and motivations made toward overcoming learning difficulties (Ring & Reetz, 2000).

**Different Classroom Environments**

All of the participants remember experiencing different class(peer environments when receiving special assistance. Having to move between the mainstream class and the contained class or resource room had a psychosocial influence on their sense of self and experience of otherness (discussed further in the next section on psychosocial development). Though Ben and Kara were able to eventually leave the resource room and continue their education in the mainstream classroom during their high school years, Deb had to remain in the contained classroom throughout her primary and secondary education.

For example, Ben spent part of his time in the resource room and the mainstream class during most of his elementary and middle-school years. During this time, he was among the same group of peers who all knew he had difficulties with literacy. When entering high school, Ben experienced two changes in his environment: a different school and peer group. At this time he was able to hide his learning difficulties for the most part, only occasionally needing time and a half on written exams. During high school, Ben no longer spent time in the resource room.

In contrast to Ben, Kara remained in the same school environment through her primary and secondary years. However, she would be taken out of her main class for special assistance in elementary and middle school. Kara’s resource room visits ended during middle school and she was able to leave this part of her life behind during high school.

Deb had more difficulties in comparison to Ben and Kara when attempting to hide her learning disability and needed special assistance throughout high school. Deb spent most of her grade school experience in a contained classroom. However, Deb remembers
progressing academically while at a private special education school in eighth and ninth grade. Within this environment, she was unable to use her dyslexia as an excuse to get out of doing course work, progressed academically in subjects she was struggling in, and was able to gain academic self-confidence. Yet, when she returned to the same public school in the tenth grade she became overwhelmed while in the mainstream class. She started to fail subjects she had been progressing in while at the private school and started to lose self-confidence.

While in art school, all of the participants were able to forget they had a learning disability. For example, Ben remembers that his dyslexia was a non-issue while at art school because there were many students in this environment that also had learning difficulties. While in graduate school, Ben feels there is little holding him back from success and he has worked hard to achieve this position. Kara also remembers art school as a place where she could relax and that was easier than her high school experience. Kara had an equally positive experience while in graduate school studying art education even though it is academically more demanding than her undergraduate experience. Similarly, Deb struggled in some required classes in college, but enjoyed making art. While in graduate school, Deb continues to be challenged but is involved in the activity of artmaking that she continues to progress in.

This change in educational environment during art school and college gave all the participants a space where they could develop academic independence and self-confidence. It was a place where they could forget they had learning difficulties. Because this new environment gave them a place where they felt a sense of belonging among other art students, they were able to continue to develop academically.

Locating an appropriate learning environment is a critical issue for participants in reaching their highest potential. The significance of the educational environment can be understood through Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) developmental framework that points out the importance of knowledge construction and finding the appropriate zone of proximity of
cognitive readiness to learn new material. This framework is also supported by the social
model for disability that points out the importance of inclusive education for psychosocial
and cognitive development among dyslexic students (Riddick, 2001) (discussed further in
the next section on psychosocial development).

There is a need to develop appropriate guidance, also known as scaffolding in the
work of Vygotsky (1978), for dyslexic students so they do not become overwhelmed, but
challenged at the same time. Robert Kegan (1982) references Winnicott’s concept of a
“holding” environment for understanding supportive growth patterns for mentors, such as
confirmation, contradiction, and continuity (i.e., combination of both confirming and
contradictory environments) (Kegan, 1980; McGowan et al., 2007). It appears that both
Kara and Ben were in environments that could be considered at a state of continuity in
the sense that they were moving back in forth between confirming and contradictory
spaces throughout their education. Deb appeared to struggle with a split between
confirmation while in the contained classroom and contradiction while in the mainstream
class. The only time Deb appeared to be experiencing continuity was during private
school where she was receiving new material at a manageable rate, but also being
challenged by her inability to use her disability as a scapegoat. The one location that
appeared to cultivate the highest levels of cognitive development took place in the art
classroom during education. Thus, the continued development during college while
studying art is evidence of an appropriate holding environment for the dyslexic students
to develop toward their potentials.

**Interests in School Subjects**

In contrast to difficulties with reading and writing, all participants were interested
in developing their skills as artists, which seemed to stand as something they could have
pride in. They were all interested in and knowledgeable about artistic materials and
techniques, which played a role in the development of self-confidence during their
education. However, they also mentioned their interest in other subjects, such as math and science, while in middle and/or high school, but were concerned that they would be unsuccessful in those fields because of their learning difficulties.

For example, Deb’s interests in figurative drawing and painting took precedence after she lost confidence in her math and science abilities. As Deb remembers,

> When I went to [a school for students with learning disabilities] in middle school, I did a good job in school, so then I put the art on the back burner, but then when I got out of [the school for students with learning disabilities], which was the private school and I went back to public school, my grades had kind of gone down so I was oh, you know what? I’m gonna go back into art because I’m really good at that and I’m not good at science or math…. Deb wishes she could have done something that combined both art and science. She wishes that she could have become a doctor so she could help people rather than pursue the selfish pleasure of artmaking, but she felt challenged by the way other subjects were taught in school.

Ben liked earth science and was interested in how the ocean was affected by the wind and moon. However, he did not feel that dyslexia and science would make a good combination because of his struggles with the terminology that he would need to master if he were to move into the field. Similarly, in middle school Kara started to enjoy math when she discovered its relationship to science and hands-on experience, such as applying equations to experiments in a lab. She came to the understanding that science was more tactile and visual than other subjects she was struggling in, such as English and history. During this time, she also started to make a connection between art and science in terms of learning through physical activities. However, when the participants gained greater confidence in reading and writing they felt there was a greater probability of being able to do something outside of the arts as a career. These findings are similar to those of Fink (2002), who found that successful dyslexic adults felt discouraged from
career paths that required science, math, and technology due to difficulties with literacy, even when participants expressed interests and abilities in these subjects.

Often the participants wanted to learn in school, but felt challenged by the textual forms used in the classroom. Both Deb and Kara recall a preference for learning through doing rather than through reading text. Ben feels that drawing is a form of learning in and of itself, and states, “The experience of just drawing is learning.” Ben has this attitude because he learns through the process of making in contrast to through reading a book. These findings can be compared to research on motivation conducted by John Dewey (1913), who distinguishes between two forms of student interests: interest-oriented learning and interests that are forced upon students by institutions. Based on his observations, interest-oriented learning was the only form yielding results that were lasting and meaningful.

Dewey also made mention of the importance of experience and the arts during the learning process, which contributed to students’ interests and motivation (Dewey, 1934/2005, 1938/1997). This is evident among the participants that mentioned the importance of having physical experience with materials during the artmaking process, as well as in Kara’s interests in science and math inspired from her hands-on experiences in the lab and Ben’s interests in earth science that came out of his experiences while at the ocean.

**Identity Development During Education**

One way of understanding the identity formation of dyslexic students is through the work of Erik Erikson (1959/1980), who points out a number of periods of crisis during development that one must overcome to achieve a state of well-being. All the participants struggled with developing a sense of industry during their primary school years because of their dyslexia. However, they were saved from the experience of inferiority by developing artistic skills. This dynamic ultimately continued into early adolescence.
During the period of adolescence, the challenge of establishing a coherent identity is prominent. If this is not accomplished, adolescents are likely to experience confusion about their role in society (Erikson, 1980). This is a crucial period for those with dyslexia because they are being challenged by the experience of otherness for their lack of literacy abilities, which can be socially alienating and emotionally distressing during these years.

When the dyslexic participants discovered their skills in artmaking, they were able to show others that they had abilities. With an artist identity, they were able to develop self-confidence, academic direction, personal agency, and a cohesive self. Being recognized as an artist allowed participants to develop positive self-esteem and healthy social relationships (discussed further in the next section concerning psychosocial development). However, it was also a way to distinguish themselves from others by showing that they had abilities, contributing toward a developing ego during high school and into college.

James Marcia (1966) developed a model to extend Erikson’s theory by defining different identity states often experienced as adolescents move into higher education: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Identity diffusion is a state where students have not made a commitment to a field of study and are avoiding any exploration. Foreclosure is a state where students have already made a commitment to a subject without exploring their options. Moratorium is a state where students have not made any commitment yet, but are actively exploring their options while in college. Identity achievement is when students have had the opportunity to explore their options and finally made a commitment (Marcia, 1966).

All of the participants could be described in a state of identity foreclosure as they move from high school to college. They had mentioned their interests in other subjects, such as math and science, but did not feel they would be successful in these fields because of their struggles with reading and writing. Both Deb and Kara specifically mentioned that they wish they could have entered a field that gave them an opportunity to
help others, but made the decision to enter the arts because it was something they were good at and felt they could become successful in. Ben also mentioned his interest in science, but he did not feel that he could be successful in the field because of his dyslexia and described his artistic experience as a natural connection. Thus, the decision to foreclose in the visual arts was made by default because the participants did not think they would be successful in another field.

Kara, Ben, and Deb did not feel they had an opportunity to explore their options during college because of their foreclosure, in contrast to students experiencing a period of moratorium. They were also able to avoid diffusion by pursuing the arts, something Deb’s peers in the contained classroom struggled with. However, as they foreclosed in the arts they were able to explore their creative agency and artistic interests, thus allowing for a contained moratorium within the visual arts. Developing as artists during college allowed the participants enough freedom to avoid the negative qualities of making a decision early on and later finding themselves in a career where they are unsatisfied.

Similar to findings made by Alison M. Bacon and Samantha Bennett (2013), all of the participants mentioned the importance of having an identity as an artist in helping them develop in school, especially during the transition between high school and college. For example, Deb mentioned that students within her contained class lacked direction and may have been so discouraged that they lacked motivation as well. These students would be considered as having a diffused identity status because of their lack of direction and motivation. Deb was able to avoid diffusion status by identifying as an artist, which gave her confidence that she could make something of her life.

Deb foreclosed early on during high school on becoming a figurative painter, but now she is starting to think about becoming an art educator. By obtaining a college degree and pursuing her interests in graduate school she has developed some confidence that she can satisfy her needs to help others. Deb still has some uncertainty about her
abilities to make a living as an artist and is intimidated by talking about her work, yet she continues to work and has confidence that she will become successful if she continues along her path, on her way to identity achievement.

Kara’s high school environment was supportive and she developed confidence that she could be a leader while working at a summer camp, coming to an identity on her own terms without her family’s reinforcement and confirmation while being in constant contact with them. Kara had foreclosed on becoming an artist during high school because art was something she enjoyed and she had developed some abilities in figurative work. During college Kara was able to address other issues through her artmaking, such as feminist views. Thus, as she may have foreclosed on her artist identity early on she was also able to use this status to investigate and explore other interests, such as child development and education. For example, Kara is currently working on a graduate degree in art education, which allows her to help others. As Kara has foreclosed early on becoming an artist, she has also been able to satisfy her needs that she may have felt detoured from during high school because of her difficulties with reading and writing. At this point in Kara’s life, she could be described as at a state of identity achievement while she nears her goal in becoming an art educator.

Ben was able to develop an identity as a surfer and a lifeguard, which gave him a positive self-image from saving lives. However, because he still struggled with language and excelled in drawing and painting, he foreclosed on pursuing art in college from an early age and did not pursue his interests in oceanography. Ben decided to study illustration, but only wanted to paint, which was a conflict for him during that time. Similar to Kara, he is currently working on a graduate degree in art education, and he already has a teaching position. Though Ben foreclosed on becoming an artist early on during education, he has also developed self-confidence as an artist, lifeguard, and now as an educator, contributing toward his overall self-image. At this point in his life, Ben could be described as accomplishing a state of identity achievement because he is in the
process of integrating his independent interests while keeping a commitment to his art practice and to his other interests in the ocean and teaching. Ben could be said to be following in his father’s footsteps in becoming both a lifeguard and educator, becoming the mentor that his father was to him during his childhood.

**Summary**

This section describes characteristics that contributed to participants’ dyslexic diagnosis and the different types of self-developed strategies cultivated for dealing with their literacy struggles during education. Participants received special assistance at school, at home, and from other learning specialists. Yet, this extra assistance during school often meant having to leave the mainstream classroom. Attempts to find an appropriate cognitive holding environment for the participants often meant separating them from the mainstream class during primary and secondary school. If the participants were able to improve cognitively, such as in the case of Ben and Kara, they were able to fully integrate socially with their peers in the main classroom. However, Deb was unable to cognitively improve to fully integrate back in the mainstream class during primary and secondary school.

As participants were interested in subjects, such as math and science, they did not feel they would be successful in these fields because of their struggles with literacy. However, artmaking was the activity that gave participants confidence that they could do something, contributing toward self-esteem, and a positive identity. As Kara, Ben, and Deb all foreclosed on studying art from an early age they did not feel they had an opportunity to explore their interests in other fields during college, but were able to have a contained moratorium within their visual art studies that allowed for personal agency and exploration. Thus, the visual arts created a holding environment that cultivated identity development while they moved from high school to college.
Psychosocial Development

This section considers the emotional and social development of participants in relationship to Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, specifically through the different ways participants experienced the sense of otherness during their education—realizing their learning differences and sense of otherness from their peers, misunderstandings among teachers, labeling, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization. This sense of otherness eventually created social and emotional anxieties and participants developed coping mechanisms to protect their self-esteem. However, as these psychosocial difficulties persisted participants were also able to cultivate relationships in school and to develop a sense of belonging among particular individuals and/or peer groups. Family relationships were the most significant location for the sense of social belonging during these primary and secondary years.

Realizing Difference from Peers

In considering the psychosocial development of the participants, it is important to understand the motivations and needs of students. According to Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs theory, human development progresses through a linear sequence where “deficiency needs” need to be satisfied before higher orders of development can be achieved. For example, one must first satisfy (1) physiological needs (e.g., food and shelter) before satisfying a sense of (2) safety (e.g., well-being and health), (3) belonging (e.g., friendship, family, and intimacy), and (4) esteem needs (self-respect and confidence). Once these “deficiency needs” are met, one can accomplish self-actualization (e.g., cognitive, aesthetic, and moral development) toward their potentials (Maslow, 1943). However, within these findings it is difficult to distinguish a sequential order between different needs, such as the sense of well-being, belonging, and esteem because they appear to be interrelated during development.
Keeping Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in mind, there are findings showing that the primary way participants made meaning out of their early educational experience was through the development of their self-concept, which was defined by their abilities and limitations. Based on Denis Lawrence’s (2006) model of self-concept, self-esteem is the assessment of discrepancy between a student’s self-image (e.g., personal awareness of abilities based on feedback from others) and ideal self (e.g., the understanding of external standards on their abilities). Thus, feelings about self-concept ultimately define self-esteem.

When students who have dyslexia are unable to meet the academic standards in a class environment, this can in turn affect their self-esteem levels. Emergent themes within this study show influences upon participants’ self-esteem that include the feelings of being different from peers, failing to meet standards set by educators, social embarrassment, experience of being labeled, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization. All of these characteristics contribute to the experience of otherness and social marginalization, which is a central issue within disability studies (Goodley, 2016). This study informs the field of disability studies by showing alternative trajectories of cognitive and psychosocial development that are influenced by difficulties with literacy in a textual dominated culture, contributing to the social model of disability.

Because there are no evident physical or social indicators for dyslexia, most peers and educators would be unaware of a reading and writing difficulty until a student with dyslexia starts to learn the alphabet, read, or spell words, which usually starts to take place between 5 and 6 years of age. Thus, there is often an experience of confusion by both the individual with dyslexia and their peers concerning why they are struggling.

All of the participants, at some point during early education, realized that they were different from their peers. For example, Ben remembers that his father was able to catch his dyslexia early on before he started school because he was not picking up the alphabet
at a typical age. His father was also a teacher and knew about different learning disabilities. Ben was tested and diagnosed with dyslexia in the first or second grade.

Deb also remembers being labeled early on in the first grade with dyslexia and with some other neurological impairment. As she states, “They labeled me with a ton of things actually, and I have the sheet of paper. I know that they definitely labeled me with dyslexia.” Deb was four when she was diagnosed, but does not remember taking the tests. She only remembers having a conversation with her mother about the results during second grade.

On the other hand, Kara does not remember the experience of being diagnosed in the fourth grade but rather remembers being designated as a slow reader because she was in a different reading group, which was an uncomfortable experience. As Kara remembers, “I didn’t know what dyslexia was but I knew that I was in these slower reading groups….” Ultimately, this negative perception of self was projected on how she felt others perceived her during her early education.

Both Ben and Deb were diagnosed early during education, between first and second grade, and were able to avoid any confusion about their learning difficulties. However, Kara was not diagnosed until the fourth grade and she remembers the confusion and questioned why she was different from her peers, which had some emotional and social effects. This issue of discovery of learning difficulties was examined by Hellendoorn and Ruijsenaars (2000), who interviewed 27 Dutch adults between the ages of 20 and 39 years with dyslexia, asking them about how they coped with their experiences of learning about their reading disability, finding it was a mostly negative experience. However, Burden (2005) mentions the importance of diagnosing students with dyslexia as early as possible to avoid personal confusion, social embarrassment, and possible stigmatization. Without early identification students may experience emotional difficulties at both the personal and social level.
**Sense of Otherness among Peers**

Following the initial discovery of their literacy difficulties, all participants remember a continued sense of otherness among their peers while in school. For example, Kara had difficulties making friends at different points during her early education, but was ultimately able to develop a number of healthy relationships later on. During early education, Deb mistrusted other students outside of the contained class and felt that these students did not think she could do anything. Most of her closer friends were students in the contained class, but later several dropped out of school, developed unhealthy drug habits, would academically stagnate, and/or were at a loss for what they wanted to do with their life. Thus, Deb’s peer group she identified with provided little or no positive social influence during elementary and high school.

Ben remembers getting nervous when having to read aloud, which would cause his voice to change. His classmates would often approach him afterwards and ask him why his voice would fluctuate while reading, causing him to feel different from others. However, for the most part Ben was able to hide his dyslexia, had good social skills, did not allow labeling to affect him, and had a healthy social life among his peers in the mainstream classroom.

**Being Misunderstood and Socially Embarrassed by Teachers**

Lack of awareness about dyslexia by teachers while in school was a recurring issue among participants. Often Kara, Ben, and Deb would have to deal with teachers who did not understand their learning difficulties. For example, Ben had an English teacher his senior year who gave him the role of the main character in a lengthy play. This meant he would be reading most of the time during the performance of the play. His teacher did not read Ben’s IEP and just assumed that he would be perfect to take on this role because he was so social and active in class. Ben told the teacher in class that he was not going to read this part. The teacher got annoyed, asked another student to do it, and became angry at the whole class, causing Ben to feel uncomfortable about the situation.
However, even teachers who were aware of their students’ learning difficulties could embarrass them socially as well. For example, Ben’s teacher in seventh grade asked him to read aloud in class and after his struggles of getting through the reading the teacher told him, in front of the class, “I’m not trying to put you down, but you should probably do more reading at home and practice.” This teacher did not disclose to the other students that Ben had dyslexia, but she made this statement publicly when Ben’s struggles were already obvious. Ben found this situation to be socially humiliating and his teacher unhelpful.

Kara also had difficulties with teachers who were aware of her dyslexia and would still embarrass her publicly. For example, one of her high school composition teachers would sometimes publicly embarrass her about her writing. Once, she asked this teacher about the meaning of one of her comments that were written on Kara’s paper when it was returned. Instead of explaining the comment the teacher asked her peers to explain it for her, which she perceived as a way of embarrassing her about the issue.

Both teachers and peers, during education, are primary contributors to developing perceptions of standards for academic abilities that will influence a student’s ideal self-image. Thus, misunderstandings about dyslexia by both teachers and peers can be psychologically harmful in developing an academic self-image, which can influence self-esteem. For example, it has been shown that teachers with low expectations for students can have a negative influence on their motivation and performance (Flores, Salguero, & Márquez, 2008). Negative experiences students with learning disabilities have with teachers who do not understand their difficulties have been found to exert negative influences on students’ self-esteem and confidence concerning their abilities (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997). There are also findings that teachers and peers often pose more of a threat than a benefit to dyslexic students’ self-esteem during education (Singer, 2008). This is a significant issue within education because it has been shown that teachers often misunderstand students with learning disabilities and make judgments based on a
generalized understanding of their diagnoses rather than by evaluating the needs of the person (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006; Tournaki, 2003).

**Labeling Experience**

Labeling is a method used to understand a person, social group, or any given social phenomenon; however, if exploited, it can have negative psychosocial implications (Gove, 1980). For example, labeling is a way that individuals can experience a sense of social otherness. All of the participants remember being labeled with a disability while in school as a diagnostic tool. For example, Kara was embarrassed when labeled with dyslexia and remembers a stigma attached to being taken out of class by the special education teacher.

Both Deb and Ben were labeled with dyslexia early on during education, but did not report negative experiences based on labeling. Deb was labeled with dyslexia during elementary school; however, she did not report any labels that students would associate with her. She spent most of her time in the contained classroom where all the students had some learning difficulties. On the other hand, Ben was able to hide his dyslexia for the most part. In elementary school, he had to deal with labels, but he does not remember being labeled at all in high school. Ben feels that labeling is always a negative experience because people only think someone is one thing based on their ascribed label. He feels that labeling can put parameters on what people can do and he does not want to perpetuate this issue.

Today, Ben feels more open to talking about his dyslexia with others. He mentions that all of his friends know, but he also does not openly talk about this with his professors or employers unless he feels it is necessary. However, as a teacher he feels that it is important that parents do not declassify their students with a disability because he can better help these students if he knows beforehand.
Being labeled with a learning disability can have both negative and positive repercussions. Some feel that being diagnosed with dyslexia early on can deter later confusion about why they are struggling with literacy (Burden, 2005). This was the case for Deb who remembers the benefits of receiving extra assistance from being diagnosed early on during education. Those that had negative responses toward labeling are resistant to the social implications of stigmatization and do not wish to be perceived differently from their peers. For example, both Ben and Kara did not like being labeled with a disability in school. They both experienced embarrassment about being distinguished as different from their peers and wish they could have avoided labeling altogether. However, Ben and Kara also understood they needed the extra assistance that they received from their diagnoses.

**Harassment and Exclusion**

Experiences of harassment and exclusion are extreme examples of social otherness. All the participants remember experiencing some form of social harassment or exclusion that they attribute to their struggles with learning to read and write. Deb remembers students would get restless and laugh at her when she would read aloud, which was an awkward experience. Kara remembers being picked on by others for being a slow reader in middle school. She also recalls being excluded from some social circles during elementary school, which may have been caused by peers discriminating against her for being in the slower reading group. Ben remembers being bullied by a few students, but this did not affect his social life. However, he does remember there were two overweight students in class who would make fun of him on a regular basis; however, Ben understands that these students may have mocked him because they were made fun of for being overweight.

Bullying, harassment, and exclusion can certainly contribute toward a student’s sense of otherness. Such experiences can have psychologically harmful effects when
developing a self-concept, which can influence a student’s sense of industry and later identity formation (Erikson, 1980). Issues of harassment, exclusion, and bullying are common experiences for students with learning difficulties. For example, Faye Mishna (2003) and Barbara Riddick (1996) found that students with learning disabilities are at a greater risk for being bullied in contrast to their non-disabled peers. Long-term negative social experiences for learning disabled students, caused by peer relations, have also been found to have effects into adulthood (Hellendoorn & Ruijssenaars, 2000), such as memories from childhood continuing to have negative affect on self-esteem (Stamoulis & Polychronopoulou, 2009).

**Desire to Avoid Stigmatization**

Another evident sign of otherness is the experience of social stigmatization. Attitudes held by peers and teachers that dyslexic individuals are less intelligent or unable to do certain activities are common forms of association that can develop within the school setting. When these forms of negative social attitudes develop into patterns of exclusive social behavior one may feel stigmatized (Major & O’Brien, 2005). All the participants remember avoiding particular activities that would distinguish them with having a disability because they did not want to be perceived as different from their peers. Reading aloud was the most avoided experience that could cause a sense of social distinction and possible stigmatization.

Being separated from peers in the mainstream classroom to receive extra assistance from a special educator also had a stigmatizing effect. For example, Kara recalls a stigma attached to being seen with the special education teacher. Ben remembers getting into arguments with his father about not going to the resource room during high school because he wanted to leave this unwanted distinction from his peers behind him.

Deb remembers the experience of stigmatization that stemmed from her literacy difficulties, which contributed to her shyness and anxiousness around anyone outside of
the contained classroom. Deb wanted to stay in the contained class because that was the place she felt most comfortable socially. Outside the contained class, Deb was always on her guard and wanted to avoid being singled out publicly.

The avoidance of social embarrassment or disclosure of a learning disability is often the intention to avoid being treated differently by others and thus avoid stigmatization. Being labeled with dyslexia often holds some negative associations and can be the cause for stereotyping, discrimination, harassment, and/or exclusion; all of which can affect one’s overall self-concept and social identity. However, during college and graduate school all participants remember having healthy social relationships with their peers. They recalled that it was a time that they could forget they had a learning disability and were among friends who accepted them for who they were.

Both Kara and Ben mentioned that they have become more open to talking about dyslexia now that they are in graduate school. For example, I remember Kara openly discussing her dyslexia with an instructor before one of her classes. At one point during one of our meetings, she informed me that she was proud that she was a part of my research and that she was openly telling others that she was participating in a study concerning dyslexia.

Ben mentioned that the more accomplished he became as an artist the more accepting he became of his learning difficulties. However, he did not feel the need to tell his graduate school professors of his dyslexia unless he found it appropriate, such as in the case of writing his thesis on dyslexia and hierarchies in text. After taking a position as a substitute teacher, he eventually had to disclose his dyslexia to the vice principal because he made some writing errors on his syllabus. The school administration and vice principal were very understanding, but they also had to reinforce the importance of him having to have his work proofread beforehand.

Some of the effects of collective social discrimination include a negative influence on one’s self-concept, self-esteem, sense of well-being, social identity, motivation, and
optimism for the future (Crocker & Major, 1989; Steele, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). However, there are also findings showing no serious negative experiences with disclosure in particular environments (Gerber & Reiff, 1991). Those who have dyslexia and were disclosing this information to others were still cautious of when and with whom they disclosed this information. These findings are similar to the experience of both Kara and Ben who felt the need to tell some people in particular situations, such as Ben’s art education instructor, and they did not experience difficulties afterwards. However, they were cautious of disclosing this information to some of their classmates or professors while in college.

**Anxiety Based on Otherness**

All of the participants mentioned having anxiety during early education from being socially distinguished with a disability. The sense of otherness among peers and teachers, labeling, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization ultimately created a sense of self that was separate from society, which had emotional repercussions. For example, in the first grade, Kara’s kindergarten teacher would pull her out of English class to help her with reading and writing skills. This was the beginning of Kara being placed in slower reading groups because she was struggling. Kara reflects on the experience of anxiety and feeling different from her peers during this time: “I don’t like this feeling of not being like everybody else. Why is this happening to me? I wish that I was smart. I’m not smart?” During high school Kara continued to receive negative feedback about her writing abilities. As mentioned earlier, one of her composition teachers would embarrass her about her writing skills during class discussions which caused social anxiety.

Ben remembers having anxiety about the sense of otherness when he was entering high school. He no longer wanted to go to the resource room for further assistance because he wanted to leave this part of his life behind and did not want anyone to know that he struggled with literacy. He remembers getting in arguments with his father about
not wanting to go back because he did not want to be perceived as different by his peers in this new social environment. However, by the time Ben entered high school, he had developed his literacy skills to a level where he was mostly able to forget he had a learning disability.

Deb remembers the anxiety of otherness she would experience just being around students outside of the contained classroom. She remembers being very shy and anxious about being singled out for her struggles in class as well. For example, Deb would become anxious when her class would play spelling games, and she would be given simple words to spell aloud in front of the class but was unable to spell the words correctly.

Reading aloud gave all participants the greatest sense of anxiety based on otherness. For example, Ben remembers that teachers would call on students, in order of how they were arranged in the classroom to read a paragraph from a book. His strategy for dealing with this situation was to look ahead and find the paragraph that he anticipated having to read aloud. However, often he would discover he could not read most of the words in the paragraph. He would spend whatever time he had to figure out how to pronounce these words, but would be so anxious that he could not pay attention to the story being read. When he was finally picked to read, he would be so nervous that his voice would change, and other students were curious as to why. Ben was confident about public speaking as long as he did not have to read in front of others.

Deb would sometimes have to read aloud in the mainstream class, which was socially agonizing. She felt it was “a drag” for everyone else to suffer through listening to her read and felt bad about it. Students would also laugh at her when she would read aloud which contributed to her anxieties about reading publicly. Similarly, Kara also hated to read aloud and remembers that it would bring on immense social anxiety. Kara would do anything possible to get out of having to read in front of her peers. When
sharing their stories in class, other classmates would need to help her read her story aloud, which was socially humiliating.

Negative social experiences and anxiety during childhood for those who have dyslexia often include the experience of marginalization, inferiority, and otherness, having a negative influence on self-esteem and emotional development through adulthood (Hughes & Dawson, 1995; Ingresson, 2007; McNulty, 2003; Nalavany, Carawan, & Brown, 2011; Riddick, 2009). This experience of otherness is another contributing factor for the development of a self-concept, which can leave one with the sense of alienation within the classroom environment and can influence identity formation.

Findings about anxiety can be understood through theories about otherness. The social experience of otherness is contingent upon a binary paradigm. For example, Terry Eagleton (1983) discusses this binary issue in relationship to language and knowledge by pointing out that a sign can only be understood in contrast to two or more signs. One cannot exist without the other. Thus, there cannot be an abled person without a contrasting disabled person. Zygmunt Bauman (2004) also discusses how this form of binary thinking can mark or leave unmarked identities. This form of thinking is rooted in modernism where there is privileging of a “transcendental signifier” that acts as an anchor that allows for the pivoting and defining of what is other (Eagleton, 1983).

What makes dyslexia or any other cognitive learning difficulty different among most disabilities is that it is not physically or socially noticeable most of the time. This form of disability is only noticeable when one is put in a situation where there is a need to publicly read or is given a writing exam. When it is discovered, the social experience is more jarring and unexpected than other disabilities. Thus, those with dyslexia often have an idea of what it is like to be socially perceived as normal and other at the same time. Because of this they are in a state of socially navigating through daily life with the intention of staying within the normative zone, which can cause anxiety in particular
situations. Thus, context is a prevalent theme for those with dyslexia because in one environment they are disabled and in another environment they are abled. Robert Burns (1982) reinforces this point, originally described by Charles Cooley (1912) as “the looking glass self,” where one’s self-concept is a social construction that is determined by standards and norms of a particular society.

These theories concerning otherness also relate to the work of Humphrey and Mullins (2002), who found that dyslexic students who remained in the class with non-dyslexic students tended to feel more isolated and excluded in contrast to those in an environment designed for students with learning difficulties. These experiences of otherness often continue into adulthood. This is reinforced by Nalavany and colleagues’ (2011) research that found dyslexic adults felt excluded from mainstream society because of their difficulties with literacy, which originated during childhood.

However, the sense of otherness was also experienced if the dyslexic students were taken out of their main class during part of the day for special assistance, such as the case with Ben and Kara. This experience has been shared by other students with learning disabilities who feel a sense of belonging in the mainstream classroom and have experienced a “diminished social status” and “less-than-competent social identity” while being segregated (Fitch, 2003, p. 244). The experience of segregation left these students with the sense of being left on the outside of the mainstream.

On the other hand, students who remained in the contained classroom for most of their education, such as in the case of Deb, had a sense of belonging among their peers in the contained class, but a strong sense of otherness and even alienation among students in the mainstream classroom. For example, Frank Fitch (2003) found that some students experienced the resource room and/or contained classroom as a temporary sanctuary, appreciated the slower pace, were able to escape public embarrassment and failure, and felt a sense of belonging in this environment (also see Goffman, 1952). In this case, the mainstream became the outside group for Deb where she no longer felt she belonged and
consequently the community receiving special assistance became the inside group. This fluctuation of identification between in and out groups can continue throughout education, illustrating the ever-changing self and identification process that manifests through social interaction (Fitch, 2003).

**Coping Mechanisms for Self-esteem**

As participants navigated through their educational experience with the intent to avoid anxiety of otherness, they developed coping strategies. All of the participants remember developing coping mechanisms to elevate their self-esteem levels in an effort to combat feeling less intelligent than their peers. For example, starting in elementary school, Deb would make “stupid jokes” about herself as a way of coping with her learning difficulties; she continues to make them to this day. According to Deb, her friends tell her to stop making these jokes and stop saying that she is stupid. She thinks this form of humor may have come from her experience of feeling different from her peers. In public school, she felt she could not do anything except for art and this joking may have made this experience more tolerable.

The necessity of developing coping mechanisms for self-esteem during periods of academic difficulties for dyslexic students is important for accomplishing a state of well-being (Singer, 2008). Pearlin and Schooler (1978) discuss three types of coping mechanisms: (1) changing conditions that allow for the issue to arise, (2) changing the perception or meaning of the experience which lessens the intensity of the issue in the moment, and (3) managing the emotional responses to the issue after the fact. An example of changing perceptions of an experience would be Deb’s “stupid jokes.” She changed the perception of the difficult experience of otherness into something easier to deal with emotionally by making it humorous.

All participants remember making art as a way of dealing with their social and emotional issues while in school. For example, Kara mentioned that she became
immersed in artmaking during her difficulties in middle school. Deb remembers being the
class artist, which gave her positive self-esteem and identity. Deb felt that the other
students in her contained classroom did not think they could do anything with their lives.
She felt this way in high school as well, but most people in Deb’s circle disagreed
because she had art that she could do as a career.

Ben remembers doodling in class as a way of processing information, but also as a
distraction from his difficulties with language. He describes his artmaking experiences as
an outlet because it was a place where he did not need to worry about reading. Ben also
described artmaking as a disguise for his struggles with literacy.

Art class was also a place where Kara, Ben, and Deb could forget they had a
learning disability, felt that they belonged, and could show others that they were good at
something. Each mentioned the therapeutic aspect of artmaking, such as meditative or
absorptive experiences. Ben talked about not having to “stress out” in art class. For
example, Deb mentions the importance of meditation through making art that helped her
focus. As Deb states,

> When I paint, I feel like it is a little bit like a form of meditating… I’m
so distracted by things. I’m still conscious of my body and the painting but I
feel like I’m getting relaxed. I also feel like my attention is, for the most part,
in the painting.

She describes her painting experience as a state of being conscious of her body in
relationship to the canvas, but also relaxed while her attention would focus on the process
of making. Kara felt that absorption is the most meaningful experience during artmaking.
She also mentioned the pleasurable experience of how everything seemed to disappear
while in the artmaking process.

While students employed many different types of coping strategies when dealing
with their literacy struggles in the classroom, artmaking may have been the most
significant coping strategy during education. All of the participants mentioned how art
gave them a focus, purpose, and identity during their high school education. These
findings are similar to Sulewski and colleagues’ (2012) showing that artmaking helped with depression, anxiety, and stigmatization. Margaret Taylor (2005) specifically points out the importance of the arts during periods of identity conflict and life transitions, such as between high school and college for students with disabilities. Taylor also points out the potential for the arts to influence self-transformation and self-actualization (art and emotions will be discussed further in subsection: *Art as an Emotional Outlet*, p. 207).

**Sense of Belonging in School**

The experience of anxiety concerning otherness was primarily located within educational institutions. However, as all participants had some social difficulties of different degrees during their education, they were able to develop healthy social lives and a sense of belonging among their peers. Deb had the greatest difficulty with the sense of otherness among her peers in the mainstream class and struggled socially with students outside the contained classroom. She remembers that she was shy around these students and felt they had a perception that she could not do anything. However, Deb was able to fit in with the students in the contained classroom during elementary school. The contained class size was smaller and she was more social in this environment where she felt comfortable around others.

When Deb went to a private middle school for students with learning disabilities she did not feel different from anyone else, but when she returned to public high school she had to return to the contained classroom. One difference she experienced when returning to the contained class was a new population of students with more diverse behavioral and attentional issues. Most of the students she remembers from elementary school had dropped out by that time, but she was able to make some new friends.

Kara remembers struggling socially while in elementary school, but was not sure if this was due to her reading disability. There was a group of four girls she was interested in befriending and becoming a part of their social circle. However, these girls did not
accept her friendship during this time. It is unclear if the reason for her being excluded from this group was because she was a slow reader, but the experience did contribute to her sense of otherness along with her difficulties with literacy.

Kara’s mother, who was also a teacher at the school, would help her out socially by coordinating friendships among her peers. In the sixth grade, Kara finally was able to become friends with a group of four girls she was previously interested in. She had some social struggles during middle school, but developed self-confidence while working as a camp counselor during a summer in high school and had a healthy social life during this time.

Ben had good social skills and never had an issue making friends throughout his early education in either the resource or the mainstream classroom. He blended in socially and was almost able to forget he had a disability in high school. He was very vocal in class and always got a 100% rating for participation.

However, all of the participants mentioned the social implications of feeling left out and otherness when pulled out of their regular class for special education or having to attend extra language classes. Deb attended a contained classroom that was separate from the mainstream class. However, she remembers being taken out of her mainstream class when the “fun stuff,” such as birthday parties, were planned. Kara remembers watching her peers go off to recess while she had to spend extra time in the resource room. Ben remembers having to take phonics classes on Saturdays when his friends were out having fun and doing whatever they wanted.

**Influence of Family**

While the participants struggled with the anxiety of otherness at different points during their education, family relationships were always the location of acceptance. All of the participants had supportive families who made a difference during their struggles learning to read and write in school. For example, Kara’s mother would help her out with
making friends and other social situations in her role as teacher. Writing was a challenge and only possible through dictation, such as having someone from her family write down Kara’s ideas while she spoke.

Ben’s parents helped him when he was young and were supportive. His father would try to get whatever help he could for Ben’s reading difficulties. When Ben was falling behind in elementary school, his father took action and placed Ben in a different school that would give him more assistance, so that he would not fall further behind. Ben has always considered himself an active learner and feels he has picked up this attitude from growing up in his family environment.

He has a close relationship with his father who helped him with his reading difficulties. As reported earlier, Ben’s father would force him to read aloud at home from an early age. Sometimes Ben would get into arguments with his father because he hated to read, but he is grateful today because he is able to get through school without his reading and writing difficulties holding him back. Today, Ben still has his father or older brother proofread his papers before he turns them in.

Deb’s mother also has dyslexia and was supportive and understanding while Deb struggled with learning to read and write. Her mother would also encourage her artistically, such as buying her supplies, and would help her with art projects at home. Deb would draw on the walls and her mother did not mind.

Parental involvement was the primary factor that contributed to the participants’ sense of well-being as they moved into adulthood. The importance of family emotional and academic support for those with dyslexia has been discussed by Hellendoorn and Ruijsseenaars (2000), who discovered that families where the primary supporters when students with dyslexia were struggling in school. Findings also confirm the importance of having a supportive social ecology, such as the family, which was key for teaching disabled students to become successful adults (Gerber et al., 1992). There are further indications that dyslexic students relied on parents for support more often than peers and
teachers (Singer, 2008) and this dynamic is further supported by findings from studies in which there was little cooperation between schools and parents (Burden, 2005), just like Ben’s father feeling the need to take Ben out of school in second grade and enroll him in a private institution that would give him more attention.

In considering the psychosocial needs of the participants, it is difficult to distinguish a sequential order between different motivations, such as the sense of well-being, belonging, and esteem, because they appear to be interrelated during the participants’ development. Within this study it appears that participants needed to develop artistically (e.g., self-actualizing needs) before they were able to gain social acceptance from their peers through showing their abilities and thus self-esteem through their technical drawing and painting skills, differing from Maslow’s linear sequence (also see Goebel & Brown, 1981). The development of artistic skills also allowed for further cognitive development (post-formal operations will be discussed further in section: Artistic Identity Formation) as they were able to pursue their educational needs at the college level as art students. Maslow also points out the need to develop a sense of belonging before self-esteem; however, it is unclear with the participants if it happened in this order or if the two arose simultaneously. It is unknown whether gaining a sense of belonging caused an increase sense of self-esteem or if an increased sense of self-esteem in abilities caused a sense of belonging among peers; it is a matter of debate that can only be determined through a longitudinal study.

Summary

This section has considered participant psychosocial development through their motivations and needs (Maslow, 1943). Participants in the study experienced a sense of otherness through realizing their difference from peers, misunderstandings from teachers, labeling, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization. Participants remembered experiencing social and emotional anxiety during experiences of otherness, such as
having to read aloud in class. These difficulties ultimately led to the development of coping strategies to maintain and protect their sense of self, such as retreating to the art classroom and immersing themselves in artmaking. As all of the participants struggled with their literacy difficulties and developing positive academic self-esteem, they were able to form social relationships among their peers and a sense of belonging; however, being taken out of the mainstream class for special assistance increased the sense of otherness. In contrast to these difficulties in the classroom, the family served as the primary support mechanism during their early education, such as parents helping with extra assistance with homework, advocating for accommodations at school, and general emotional support.

**Artistic Identity Formation**

This section will discuss the participants’ artistic identity formation and how it relates to Robert Kegan’s (1982) subject-object balance theory of meaning-making. Emerging themes include being exceptional through being an artist, the experience of the arts as an emotional outlet, and their disinterest in conceptual forms of expression. Participants’ artistic growth between high school and college will be compared to William Perry’s (1981) cognitive developmental theory to find patterns of dualism, multiplicity, relativity, and commitment. Finally, artistic practices will be compared to the move toward interindividual balance and social development (Kegan, 1982).

**Being Exceptional by Being an Artist**

Despite the participants’ literacy difficulties, artistic abilities served as a vehicle for further development, such as the sense of well-being, belonging, and esteem. While foreclosing as art students early on during education, participants were able to further their cognitive development through attending college. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of
needs theory attempts to explain human motivation through a sequence of first satisfying “deficiency needs” (e.g., (1) physiological, (2) safety, (3) belonging, and (4) esteem needs) before self-actualization (e.g., cognitive, aesthetic, and moral development) where one’s full potential is realized (Maslow, 1943). However, it appears that participants needed to develop artistically (i.e., self-actualization needs) before fully developing their “deficiency needs.”

Keeping in mind the psychosocial needs and motivations of the participants, early and mid-adolescence is often a period governed by social dependency. Kegan (1982) describes this period as an interpersonal balance between self and other, where people do not distinguish themselves from their social relationships. Jean Piaget (1954), Lawrence Kohlberg (1958, 1969), Jane Loevinger (1976), and Jane Kroger (2004) also describe this period when young minds are often impressionable and will take on similar views of those within their social group while looking for the approval of others. This is a time when the self is embedded in one’s developing social environment and is in a constant state of searching for social belonging. It is at this point in their development when Ben, Kara, and Deb found themselves identifying as artists and gained social acceptance, in contrast to the sense of otherness they experience because of their literacy difficulties.

Kegan (1982) describes the identification process as the move from the interpersonal characteristics of social dependency of belonging during early adolescence to the institutional balance of self-differentiation during later adolescence. This social distinction is accomplished through developing a unique identity and expressing individual agency. However, the identity process for the participants of this study may have started earlier as Kara, Ben, and Deb were seeking a sense of belonging through developing artistic abilities. Nonetheless, an artistic identity played a significant role during their high school years. For example, Kara, Ben and Deb all mentioned their focus on the arts during their senior year of high school while they were thinking about college and how their abilities were distinct from others.
From an early age artmaking was the most important activity for the participants. They talked about the significance of being a good artist and how these abilities were a part of their identity. The importance of their artistic abilities was clear – being a good artist was a way of showing others that they could do something well while at the same time they were struggling to learn to read and write.

During Deb’s early education being a good artist became a part of her social identity as she took on the role of the class artist. Deb felt that she would be lost if she did not have her art practice during this time. As Deb states, “[Being an artist] was always my identity, but I really held onto it the most I think in high school because then I was like, ‘Oh, well there’s something I’m going to have to do with my life.’” When Deb was struggling in high school, her identity as an artist became stronger. She felt that art helped her socially adapt in high school, because she was developing relationships with others who wanted to talk to her because she was perceived by them to be exceptional at drawing and painting.

Kara also spoke about the importance of being a skilled artist in school while she was struggling to learn to read and write. As Kara states, “I felt people were like, ‘[Kara] is good at art,’ so it would just boost my confidence.” Similar to Deb, Kara’s self-differentiation from others as an artist is a part of the identification process that usually starts during adolescence and can be compared to Kegan’s (1982) institutional balance of distinguishing self from others as autonomous individuals.

It appears that the participants developed artistic skills that satisfied self-esteem needs at school, receiving positive social reinforcement for their artwork from their peers and instructors. Often they got encouragement from instructors that they should consider art as a career. As they took on identities as artists, and gained a sense of social belonging, this positive identity also gave them self-confidence by showing others that they had abilities. For example, Ben recalls receiving positive feedback from others about his figurative work, eventually earning him some commissions for artwork. Kara also
mentioned that she started to receive commissions for her artwork while in high school, which continued into college. She also recalls receiving positive feedback from professors during college when trying something new in the art class.

Sometimes the participants even became competitive about their artistic abilities. For example, Ben mentioned the importance of being the best artist while in high school. As Ben recalls,

[B]eing dyslexic in school was definitely not fun, but then when I was in the art room … that’s where I excelled.... I wouldn’t say that I was one of the better kids or somebody who was at the top [in art], whereas in every other class I was mid-level for the most part.

Ben could show others who may have judged or doubted his literacy abilities that he was good at art. Showing that he was better than others at something was important. As Ben states, “[People are] naturally competitive because you want to be the best.... To go into the art room … be better than almost everyone in the room just doing what I was doing was nice.” Ben was always comparing himself with others, and if he saw someone do something good, he would also want to try to do it better.

Similarly, Deb recalls developing a competitive attitude toward artmaking from an early age. She remembers playing video games with other students from her contained class and wanting to win. This attitude extended into artmaking during middle school. As Deb reflects, “‘I’m going to beat myself at painting over and over again. I’m going to get better with each painting that I do,’ which was what I used to do with computer games.” Today, Deb is not concerned about making unsuccessful work because, much like the repetitive practice of playing games until she would win, she knows that if she keeps working she will eventually become successful.

Competition within education, such as described by Ben and Deb, has potential for both positive and negative implications. There are findings indicating that competitive behavior can encourage students toward their potentials in developing abilities, uphold high educational standards, keep high standards for educators, discourage favoritism and
power politics, protect against monopolies and incompetence, encourage learning, and stimulate advancement in particular fields (Rich & DeVitis, 1992). However, there are also findings showing the negative social and emotional implications of a competitive society, such as when rules are broken for advancement, opponents are injured, divisions of communities are created, alienation, or histories of inequality continue to keep some at a disadvantage no matter how objective and fair the standards are withheld (Rich & DeVitis, 1992). These negative characteristics were often experienced by Kara, Ben, and Deb when attempting to keep up with their peers in their literacy skills. Yet, the art classroom allowed them to compete and succeed within this dualistic school environment.

One prevalent issue with competitive frameworks is the reinforcement of dualistic modes between winners and losers, as when participants experienced a sense of otherness because they had fallen short with literacy skills in comparison to their peers. However, they were also able to compete with others and often came out ahead of their peers when it came to technical drawing and painting skills. Social dichotomies that are influenced by competition have been discussed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1848), who understood the progression of history as a class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These ideas have also influenced feminist theory, such as Carol Gilligan’s (1993) counter argument to Lawrence Kohlberg’s (1971) moral hierarchy of independence where she places importance on interpersonal responsibility for self and others. This framework gives an alternative understanding of the importance of social relationships that runs counter to competitive dichotomies (interpersonal responsibility is discussed further in subsection: Social Development Through Artmaking, p. 224). While Kara, Ben, and Deb made artwork out of a need to belong among their peers, competition was still a significant driving force during education that reinforced dualities and ultimately influenced their construction of an artist identity.
Art as an Emotional Outlet

Often, artmaking was the primary outlet for the participants to deal with emotional struggles. For example, Kara remembers the art classroom as a place where she could relax and feel a sense of belonging. Kara compared making art to cooking, where she had the experience of being completely absorbed in an activity that was deeply pleasurable. Deb related artmaking to a form of meditation that could help her focus her mind and put her at ease. She also mentioned that if she ever felt sad she could “make some art” and that would make her feel better.

Ben described his experience of artmaking in school as an outlet where he did not need to think about what he was doing when he was in the process of making. As Ben remembers, “Art was something that I guess was an outlet, to not have to think about [my dyslexia].” For all other subjects in school Ben needed to try very hard to succeed, but the art classroom was a place where he could relax. As Ben states, “If art wasn’t in school, I think school would have been ten times worse. Just because that was my outlet, you could say, and a place where I didn’t have to stress out.” The more Ben got better at art, the more accepting he became of his learning disability. The move from middle school to high school was a significant change and took time to transition. During this time, “art was everything” to Ben.

Emotions can be understood as a combination of both thoughts in the mind and sensations within the framework of the body. This dual quality can be experienced as both an object and subject of the self, such as described by Immanuel Kant (1785/2006), who understood the self as both having thoughts and being the recipient of passions. Emotions are often the driving force during development, such as in Robert Kegan’s (1982) description of self-object balance where emotions influence the pivoting between independence and social inclusion. There are two primary ways that the arts inspired emotionally significant experiences for the participants: (1) the emotional response of
belonging within the art classroom environment and (2) therapeutic release of emotions during the process of artmaking.

All the participants remember the art classroom as a place where they belonged and could relax and that stood in contrast to the anxieties experienced while in the mainstream classroom because of their sense of otherness. Sibley (1995) points out the relationship between spaces of exclusion and otherness experienced by those who do not fit social norms and leaves individuals seeking for a space of inclusion. It would not be a surprise that the art classroom, without a fixation on textual literary skills, is a typical place where students with learning difficulties (e.g., dyslexia) experience a sense of belonging while in the company of students without disabilities (Hall, 2010). These places of belonging and creative exploration can serve as a significant location for social and emotional development during education for students with dyslexia.

While the participants found the art classroom an emotional outlet, the process of making also has significant emotional implications (Burton, 2000; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982). This phenomenon can be understood by considering the relationship between emotions and the body. According to Antonio Damasio (1999), emotions are experienced at the level of body sensations and precede rational thought. While participants are often the subject of their biological drives and impulses that influence emotions during different parts of their life, emotions can also be experienced as an object where one can acknowledge they are having an experience of anger or happiness. This fluctuation between subject-object relations can be experienced during the activity of artmaking. This is illustrated through the emotional need to express and the agency during playing with materials that creates a third space between what is considered self and other (Winnicott, 1971). The integration of self and object during artmaking is often deeply gratifying emotionally and comparable to states of meditative absorption in its disintegration of boundaries between self and other.
Figuration versus Conceptualization

All the participants tended to be primarily interested in representational figurative drawing and painting and worked hard to master their technical skills. They all focused on figurative painting during high school, and this continued into college and graduate school. For example, Deb started to make portraits in high school because they were challenging and creating a likeness was a skill that she could get better at. Kara started to make figurative artwork, exploring her interests in people and faces in high school. Later in college, she started drawing distorted and humorous facial features. Ben was also interested in photo-realistic figuration, developing his skills in high school, which followed into college as he worked on a degree in illustration.

During high school and/or college, the participants were usually required by their teachers to make work that was more conceptual or content-driven, such as work that asks students to come up with an idea first instead of coming to a work of art through the process of making. They tended to resist assignments that called for conceptual work that forced them to think beyond realism and the process of making with materials. For example, one of Kara’s high school teachers exposed her to conceptual artmaking, but Kara was not interested because she was skilled in figurative drawing and that was all that was important to her at that point. This attitude continued in college: “Working through my thesis in college, where I was bashing conceptual art because I was like, ‘This just doesn’t make any sense to me,’ because I wasn’t there. I didn’t understand it....” Yet, in a final class project that dealt with important social issues, Kara explored some conceptual artmaking ideas with a group of girls exploring feminist activism. Later on in college, Kara saw a purpose in conceptual art when developing lesson plans for children.

Similarly, Ben does not understand why artists become fixated on content in their work and feels that artmaking is its own unique way of learning. As Ben comments, “People are forgetting about how important it is [to just draw].” Ben also mentioned that
representational artmaking is part of a developmental stage that all students experience. As Ben reflects, “Being good at art means knowing how to draw realistically or being able to copy something. I still haven’t really left that stage … all the way through high school into college I was always into more of the realistic look.” However, Ben would often make work in college that would illustrate a narrative and would sometimes confront the viewer with something that may challenge or make one feel uncomfortable, such as a girl receiving CPR or a child suicide bomber who is about to blow himself up. This form of artmaking does show the intention of expressing ideas that move beyond realist representation. These sorts of conflicts between different positions is common among art students who are often attempting to synthesize different views about their interests in artmaking, the contextual dimensions of art history, and different ideological positions while attempting to make artwork that is meaningful.

Deb feels confident in the skills she developed during her undergraduate experience, but she also felt she did not get into graduate school the first time she applied because she did not have any conceptual artwork in her portfolio. Deb believes that the meaning of her artwork is found through the process of making, but art galleries want artists to have a concept, such as an overarching theoretical framework that infuses the work of art with meaning and historical relevance. As Deb states, “I don’t really understand. I haven’t really been in the art world but I’ve been told that you need to have some kind of concept behind your work to make it work.” She feels it is important to have a concept if she is showing in a gallery, but she has never done this before and does not understand how the art market works.

Deb mentioned that there are some things she is just not ready for yet, such as conceptualizing her artistic practice. She is often intimidated by how artwork is discussed. As Deb explains,

Some of the work that I’ve seen in galleries are so conceptual and their writing is so dense and kind of hard for the average person to understand that
I feel like that is a little bit alienating, it makes me feel like you have to be smart or like a professor-type person to understand….

She feels bound to making the figurative work that she has been because she feels competent in this form of artmaking. Deb often becomes overwhelmed when attempting to describe her artwork. As Deb reflects,

I’m really bad about talking about my work. I feel like I go in all different directions like I don’t know what I’m talking about…. Sometimes, we have visiting artists to critique our work. To be honest, I never really want to sign up with them because I don’t like talking about my work because I don’t really know what it’s about yet.

While she is in graduate school, one of Deb’s professors is helping her write an artist statement, which is about multiculturalism and family conflicts through the representation of food, visual patterns, and family members. Thus, she is in the process of synthesizing multiple themes through her paintings and, with the assistance of a mentor, is conceptualizing her figurative work.

While participants made distinctions between figuration and conceptual artmaking practices, there was no consideration of how the two have been intermeshed throughout art history, such as in visual diagrams made within both Western and Eastern traditions for didactic reasons, including religious art that depicts narrative scenes or cosmologies that represent stages within the subtle body. The French academy also developed a hierarchy within painting that placed historical, religious, and mythological works at the top (e.g., Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Socrates*), followed by portraits, genre scenes, landscapes, and still-lifes (White, 1993). Historically, figurative painting often had layers of content and narratives that held cultural significance. When participants were asked about their knowledge of the conceptual significance of figurative painting they mentioned that they felt that figurative work often did have a message, but conceptual art had a distinct history that they did not fully understand during high school and early college.
This fixation on figuration and the resistance toward concept-driven artmaking can be understood in terms of Lowenfeld’s (1949/1982) identification of a tendency toward realism and figuration during early adolescence (12-14 years of age), when students become increasingly critical of their own work. However, Piaget’s cognitive developmental theory offers further insight into the relationship between concrete and formal operations. The period of concrete operations is marked by the capacity for inductive logic (e.g., the ability to move from specific observations to general knowledge) that usually starts to develop during pre-adolescence (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). During this period, young people are primarily bound to concrete situations in the world and have difficulties with abstraction and deductive reasoning. Representational figuration is concrete in the sense that it is observable in the physical world; however, conceptual artmaking requires formal operations, which allows for abstract thinking that moves beyond the observable world.

Figuration is also a form of imitation, which has cognitive, social, and cultural implications. As the mimetic phenomenon is often common during early forms of artistic expression, it also lies at the foundation of learning. For example, imitation can be found during child development, such as Piaget’s sensorimotor stage (0-2 years of age), where imitation takes on both a social and educational role during growth (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; Piaget, 1962). Like many other developmental psychologists (Meltzoff & Moore, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978), Piaget observed that children start to imitate others’ actions, such as facial expressions between 8 to 12 months of age (Gallagher, 2006; Piaget, 1962). As this interaction is an example of an early form of embodiment and subject-object relations, it also leads to the capacity to make meaning out of the experience of others and empathy, a term used by Theodore Lipps (1903) to describe the relationship between artwork and viewers who experience the sense of entering the work of art (Montag, Gallinat, & Heinz, 2008). (Figuration and empathy are discussed further in subsection: Social Development Through Artmaking, p. 224.)
Dualism

Post-formal operational research (i.e., an extension of Piaget’s stage theory into adulthood beyond formal operations that allows for abstract thinking) is the attempt to find patterns in adult cognitive development. Ben’s, Deb’s, and Kara’s artistic development during high school can be understood as a narrative of fixation on the concrete nature of figuration. However, this started to change during college, such as when Ben and Deb started to explore narrative elements through their figurative paintings or when Kara started to organize feminist art projects. This trajectory of post-formal operations during adulthood is similar to the findings of William Perry who studied how college students often move through periods of dualism (e.g., right or wrong reasoning), multiplicity (e.g., understanding that there are many approaches), relativity (e.g., all decisions are contextual and may need to be reconsidered in a different environment), and multiple conflicting commitments (e.g., sorting out contradictions between different positions) before graduating (Perry, 1981).

The artistic growth of college students can be compared to Perry’s theory of cognitive development. For example, Elsa Bekkala (2002) found relationships between cognitive and artistic development of college art students at RISD through skill development, visual ideas, identity formation, influence of others, and perceptions of how their artwork related to the art world. However, what is unique about Bekkala’s findings is the non-linear trajectory of development each participant took during the four-year study, which ran counter to Perry’s model, such as students falling into more than one stage of development during their first year of study (also see Widick et al., 1975). Similarly, Kara, Deb, and Ben appeared to develop in a non-linear trajectory, such as the need to develop artistically (a self-actualization need) to gain a sense of well-being, belonging, and self-esteem for further cognitive development.

A potential interpretation of non-linear development is the need for the dyslexic students to adapt and navigate through the demands of an educational system that puts
them at a disadvantage, causing atypical cognitive, emotional, and social development. It may also be caused by reliance upon visual-spatial modes of meaning-making (e.g., artmaking), which is inherently non-linear and differs from Perry’s sample group. My analysis attempts to extend the concepts discussed by Perry to illuminate some of the developmental dimensions that dyslexic college art students may progress through during the process of artistic growth.

According to Perry (1981), dualism is a state during early education when individuals follow an authority figure or model they believe can distinguish what is right or wrong. This is often the relationship students have with instructors throughout their pre-college years. All of the participants were focused on their technical abilities in figurative drawing and painting during their transition from high school to college. This form of making is an attempt to represent the physical world as accurately as possible in two dimensions, which is an ideal within a hierarchical model that participants were striving toward.

This model can also be described as a form of dualism between representational likeness and difference (e.g., right likeness vs. wrong proportions). Participants’ fixation on figuration was also associated with displaying their abilities, in contrast to their disability, eliciting acknowledgment and rewards from others for their abilities in making drawings and paintings that looked real. Consequently, representational figuration artmaking can be understood within a dualistic structure of the school environment that distinguished right/wrong, pass/fail, or abled/disabled.

For example, this form of dualism is evident when Ben describes his interest in hyper photo-realistic figurative drawing and painting. He spoke about his interest in creating a likeness that started from an early age. As Ben reflects, “I would copy pictures.... I would like copy illustrations. It’s the best way to learn.” He believes this desire to render likeness is a natural stage that everyone goes through during their artistic development. As Ben states,
All kids go to that stage of... Being good at art means knowing how to draw realistically or being able to copy something. I still haven’t really left that stage and I’m still, I am more into abstractions now but all the way through high school into college I was always into more of the realistic look.

His interest in figuration and realism was challenged a few times when he was exposed to conceptual ways of making art, but he is less interested in this form of making that moves outside of concrete operational modes of thinking (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958), creating a dualism between figurative realism and conceptual art.

This interest in figuration was also found in Kara’s artistic development and illustrates a dualistic dynamic. Kara mentioned that she started making figurative work from an early age and continued into college. As Kara states, “I have loved doing portraiture my whole life. I started just doing people and then started getting into doing faces and then I really just kept doing that. When I went to college, I kept doing faces.”

During her early school years, she primarily focused on her technical drawing skills while she was struggling with literacy, which was reinforced by her teachers. As she reflects, “I don’t know if I really got [to explore] as much as I wanted…. I felt since I was good at the technical part of [artmaking] I focused on that and teachers kept me going on that department.” Kara continued to focus on technically rendered figurative work during college and mentioned her attitude toward other forms of making. As she states,

> When I tried different things all my paintings or drawings just came out badly. “Why do I need to change?” If I tried to draw something from my mind or memory or whatever nothing would have come out the way that I wanted it and I would be like, “Why I’m I doing this?”

Even though Kara has moved beyond her fixation on technical skills while in graduate school she still makes comments that appear as though she is concerned with a hierarchy that places realism at the top.

Similar to Kara, Deb also invested herself in drawing and painting people, which illustrates a dualistic way of thinking. From an early age, she had an interest in developing a perfect copy through drawing. As she explains, “I was tracing comic books
over and over and over again. Then, I stopped tracing them. Then, I started drawing people. Then, the next step was maybe I’ll paint people.” This interest in figuration continued into college as a way of developing abilities. As Deb continues,

My art, I think it improved a lot. In the beginning of college… I’m still doing that now, but I was really trying to get my skill base up. I was just doing repetitive kinds of paintings of people’s faces…. I want to get good. I want to get a likeness.

These notions of skills and likeness are both within a concrete and dualistic mode of thinking where representation and likeness are observable in the world and unambiguous in comparison to other forms of artmaking, such as conceptual art. Representation and likeness is given priority over other forms of making, ultimately allowing Deb to navigate socially and create realistic aims to accomplish positive self-esteem.

**Multiplicity**

All of the participants were knowledgeable about art history and knew there were multiple ways of making artwork early on in their education. However, exploration outside their established identities as figurative artists was not a prevalent characteristic during their high school and early college years. Yet, as participants developed artistically in college they eventually became interested in different approaches toward artmaking. This development can be compared to Perry’s (1981) theory of multiplicity as a departure from dualism and the concrete nature of observational figuration toward various ways of making.

For example, Kara started to explore other mediums and forms of artmaking while in college, which shows a move toward multiplicity. As Kara remembers, “Then going to college I was exposed to a bunch of different kinds of artwork, more digital and sculpture and photography. More things that I wasn’t necessarily always getting in high school…. “ During the end of Kara’s undergraduate experience, she made an artistic leap during a project when she decided to abandon figuration to organize a feminist performance
“happening”\(^1\) with a group of girls. In this project, Kara directly confronts viewers with a symbolic act concerning political issues she has made a commitment to (e.g., attitudes against sexism). She also used performance as a form of political protest, which is a method of resistance and opposition to dominant modes of production and representation (e.g., drawing, painting, and sculpture) running counter to established social and historical hierarchies within the arts.

However, it was not until later that she fully embraced material exploration. As Kara reflects, “It was only until I got to [graduate school] where I started working on different materials and appreciating different media for what it is.” As Kara gives some examples of different ways in which she deviates from her technically rendered figurative work, she still has tendencies toward thinking of how work should look. As she reflects,

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\text{I would love to do the technical and then maybe do some collage and put the technical with the abstract maybe, and be more into the materials and being inspired by the materials than the technical aspect of it. Try and just let go. It seems like I’m a bit of a control freak. }
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Even though there are numerous examples of Kara’s interests in multiplicity, she still feels there is a right way for her artwork to look, which is contingent on realistic representation.

During graduate school, Deb is still working with figuration, but has also experimented with digital forms and other materials. In terms of her figurative work, she is now expressing her interests in abstraction through bold colors, thick outlines, pattern exploration, leaving some parts unfinished, and loosening up in her painting approach. Deb also describes an interest in mixing different materials together without knowing what the results will be, which started between college and graduate school. This move could be described as a transition from representational dualism (e.g., realistic figuration

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\(^1\)Kara refers to this event as a happening, which references the Fluxus art movement. Allan Kaprow (2003) is know for first using this term “happening” during the 1950s to refer to multidisciplinary art events that often blurred boundaries between the artist and the audience.
that stood as a form of authority for having abilities) to a multiplicity of approaches, where she is more interested in deviating from a model and understanding there are no right answers in artmaking.

Yet, Deb is still relying on others she deems as authorities for assistance in discussing her artwork. Currently, she feels that the meaning of her artwork is based in the process of making and thinks that the conceptualization process happens afterwards. Staying within concrete operations, she is just not ready to do this yet (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). However, this issue is inherent in the visual arts when attempting to articulate visual-spatial forms into oral or written forms; they are both discrete forms of representation that do not always translate into another form (Shepard, 1978). It appears that Deb is primarily engaged in the pre-linguistic process of making. Similarly, Ben has also been exploring other interests in mark-making and expression through different qualities of light and shadow. He is still focused on hyperrealism, but is incorporating his other current interests into his practice.

At the time of the interviews, all of the participants were at a stage of artistic development where they were synthesizing numerous interests together through the creative process. For example, Ben makes work about his interests in the ocean, political issues, the phenomenon of light and shadow, photo-realism, and is interested in telling stories through images. Deb mentioned her interest in making work about her family, food, multiculturalism, patterns, people, formal abstraction, and domestic conflicts. While Kara continues to make figurative work, she is also involved with collaborative and multi-media projects. She is currently inspired by material exploration, mark-making, feminist activism, and art education.

Risk-taking during the creative process is another example of openness toward multiplicity and is evident in the unique artistic trajectories of each participant (e.g., mentioned above). Agency is the level of freedom of choice one has in a given environment (Dewey, 1903, 2004). Within educational studies it has been found that the
sense of agency in learning is important for developing positive self-esteem, the sense of competence, confidence, control over outcomes, reactions toward difficulties, and self-investment (Burden, 2005). Agency through artmaking has also been considered a by-product of the democratic process that contributes to a sense of self and assists in the meaning-making process within our social environment (Rolling, 2011). As Judith Butler (1990) points out, “the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (p. 142), as the self is created through the interaction with the other.

As participants experienced a sense of creative agency through making artwork during their early education, they foreclosed on studying art before entering college. Their reasoning for foreclosure included the enjoyment of the artmaking process, feeling that they would be successful in the field, having developed an identity as an artist, and the belief they would be unsuccessful in a vocation that utilized textual representations as a primary mode of communication. This early foreclosure also was contingent on their abilities in figurative representation as they moved from high school to college.

The participants were sometimes hesitant or disinterested in trying something outside of what they were already good at, which may have caused them to be less interested or resistant toward artistic experimentation during high school and early college. For example, Deb, Ben, and Kara mentioned that they were less interested in conceptually driven work during high school and early college. Deb continues to struggle with the conceptualization process during graduate school and mentioned numerous times that she was being challenged to do some things during college that she was not ready for yet. Developing an artist statement has been a serious issue for her and she has been avoiding opportunities to talk to professional artists about her work while in graduate school.

However, during college and graduate school there are examples of the participants taking on artistic challenges as well. For example, Deb mentioned the difficulties of learning to use the program Maya for the first time, but continuing to work through these
challenges until she accomplished her goals. Kara recalls the collaborative performance feminist project she organized that threw her out of her comfort zone, but was also one of the most profound things she had done up to that point in her education. Ben also stated during his graduate studies that he is always looking for challenges that will help him improve, but if he does not understand the assignment he does not participate.

There are a number of examples of times when participants deviated from their figurative work later on during college and graduate school. However, risk-taking was often prompted by class assignments. For example, Kara started to take more risks in her artmaking as an undergraduate in college while receiving support from her mentor and other professors, such as when she helped organize a collaborative feminist political performance for a school project. However, during graduate school Kara has been making more conceptually driven work on her own, such as a collaborative video piece about food memories.

**Relativity**

The move from multiplicity toward relativity is the realization of shifting context when taking a position, such as the understanding that some forms of art have a differing status within particular communities. As all of the participants understood this issue when discussing their artwork with different populations (e.g., parents, peers, and professors), Kara is the only participant who directly discusses relativistic thinking through her artistic practice. As Kara states, “I really started liking collage and more abstract and understanding that it’s not about being totally technical with your work, but it’s more about the process of how you come up with your idea, if that’s what you want to do.” When working with her own students, Kara will often focus on technical drawing and painting skills, but does not create hierarchies for what is considered good artwork. This illustrates how Kara is thinking on her own and understands there are multiple ways of making artwork and that they are relative to personal interests.
This progression toward relativity is also shown in Kara’s change in attitude toward content-driven artmaking. Kara remembers having a bias toward conceptual modes of making during high school and college. As Kara reflects,

“I was like bashing conceptual art because I was like, “This just doesn’t make any sense to me,” because I wasn’t there.... I think I understand it more now, of why people do it and why it’s important. Now I want to try and incorporate that to my kids. To be like, “You’ve got to think about your artwork before you do it, instead of just drawing that.”

Later on during graduate school, Kara saw a purpose in conceptual modes of making when developing lesson plans for children. Reflecting back, Kara feels that part of her bias toward conceptual art originated out of her lack of understanding of this movement in art during high school and early college.

While discussing artwork with her students, Kara has become sensitive toward dualistic ways of thinking about making. She inspires her students to consider that there are other ways of looking at artwork, which is dependent on what one is interested in. As Kara explains,

“I try to not talk about [this] with the students, if it’s good or not or if it looks like something. I try and focus more on the … marks that they make. Whether it’s, “Oh, that’s a really interesting mark here and here, and I like how they come together here,” instead of them being like, “Well, this doesn’t look good,” or, “This doesn’t look like this,” or, “This should look like that.” I’m like, “It shouldn’t look like anything unless you want it to.” It’s all about how you like it or don’t like it and then try and explain why you like it or don’t like it. Then I try and help them like some aspects of it, if they don’t.

By redirecting her students to look at different types of marks, Kara attempts to have her students move beyond dualistic patterns of thinking. This statement also shows Kara’s understanding of the importance of context and intention in artmaking, representing relativistic thinking.

Today, Kara continues to make portraits but is less interested in making technically rendered works that appear realistic. She is more interested in process, materials,
exploration of ideas, and mark-making. Her interests in mark-making come out of her studies in art education and observing children’s drawings. This reinvestigation of mark-making can be seen as a return to an earlier period of development of what Viktor Lowenfeld describes as the scribble stage where children make marks out of the physical pleasure of making (Gardner & Winner, 1982; Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982). However, this is not a return to this period of development but rather a re-contextualization of mark-making within figurative representation. This new form of making includes the picking, choosing, and playing with different modes of representation out of a developing repertoire of skills and ideas.

**Multiple Commitments**

While all participants made a commitment early on to studying art in college (i.e., foreclosure), they were challenged by multiple ways of making and thinking about their artwork. They also showed some signs of relativistic thinking (e.g., the understanding that context is important for the evaluation of artwork), such as Kara’s comments about artistic intentions being dependent on context. Often they did not fully discard their interest in figuration, but rather attempted to incorporate their new knowledge and understanding with the artistic identity they had already established during middle and high school. As their interests brought some contradictions (e.g., between formal elements versus conceptualization) they seemed to be in the process of working through the conflicts within their commitments to their artistic practice.

For example, Ben has made a commitment to his artwork and has taken a position that content-driven artistic making and inquiry is less important than the formal qualities of making. Yet, at the same time he talks about the narrative quality of his illustration projects and his interest in confronting the viewer with something that may be uncomfortable, which is an idea he learned from studying art history. Here, it may appear that Ben is contradicting himself. However, part of the issue is that he is in between two
artistic paradigms: (1) the formal school of thought where elements of design and realistic representation are given precedence, and (2) illustration that is focused on communicating a narrative. Ben has made a commitment to both of these schools and it is unclear if they are being synthesized or continue to exist as separate modes.

Kara has come to a point in her life where she has made numerous commitments on her own terms. Within her artistic practice, she continues to involve herself in a number of different types of projects. As Kara reflects, “People ask me, ‘Oh, what type of artwork do you do?’ I’m like, ‘I mean, I used to do a lot of portraits and now I do a bunch of different things and I like it all.’” However, these multiple commitments do not appear to cause Kara conflict, but are rather in a constant dialog with each other. However, she also mentioned the experience of moving back and forth through having control and letting go of control during the artmaking process, which seemed to express a moment of conflict.

Today, Kara has made a commitment toward becoming an art educator and is having issues with keeping up with her artistic practice. As Kara explains,

An artist is somebody that continues to do their art a lot. Like on the weekends and in their free time. I feel like when I have my free time what I do is cook. That’s what I do right now … it’s a practical thing. I can be creative in the way that I cook, but if I’m creative doing my artwork, that’s not a thing. When do I have time to go to a studio to do that? … I have other things [to do].

Although she has these feelings about being an artist, she continues to make artwork on her own. For example, Kara finished illustrating a book for children after our interview was conducted.

Deb is also experiencing conflicts while making commitments to both her artistic practice and her interests in speaking out against social inequality. During graduate school, she is attempting to deal with this conflict by making artwork concerning social issues within her own family. However, she is experiencing conflict because she feels
that the artwork is elitist in nature (i.e., having little interest in having dialogues with individuals who lack art education and understanding of the history of painting).

Within William Perry’s model for college development, there are some instances in which students may express later forms of relativity within one domain, but also express modes of dualism within others. Bakkala (2002) also found unique and non-linear development between stages in studying art students at RISD. This issue could arise for a number of reasons, such as students’ constant state of fluctuation when learning new material and/or the nature of thinking through visual-spatial forms. Asynchronous development has also been shown among both gifted and disabled students, which is characteristic of differences in abilities across the spectrum of personal qualities (e.g., intelligence, awareness, maturity, age) that differ from the norm (Silverman, 1995). Also consider that Widick et al. (1975) found that these stages varied depending on how questions were asked during the interview. While this study does not show a progression of change over time, it does provide a record of how the participants understand their motivations and interests as they reflect upon their personal memories of development while in graduate school.

Social Development Through Artmaking

According to Erikson (1982), the college years are usually a time when students are concerned with developing intimacy with others. However, the majority of the developmental research that defines this period has been described by male researches and/or collected from all male participants (Kohlberg, 1969; Marcia; 1966, 1967; Perry, 1981) and may not be an accurate depiction of how females develop socially. For example, Gilligan (1993) mentions the importance of inclusive social behavior and intimacy that is central throughout development for females, which lies at the foundation of their reasoning and precedes identity development.
All participants of this study, starting during elementary school and continuing into higher education, mentioned the significance of developing close relationships with peers and family. Often artmaking was a way of gaining a sense of belonging during early education that continued during their college years. While the early adult years may be a period when significant bonds are developing between the opposite and same sex, feminists (e.g., Caffarella & Olson, 1993) have made a crucial point in considering differences between female and male meaning-making that offers some alternative perspectives that run counter to linear and hierarchical models of development. Thus, deviations made by participants of this study from linear models of development can be understood by considering the feminist perspective.

Nonetheless, all participants mentioned developing identities as artists that distinguished themselves from others during high school. However, during art school in college they were able to forget they had a learning disability and socially integrate in this environment. According to Robert Kegan (1982), after young adults differentiate themselves from institutions, their sense of self-authorship becomes internalized and the interconnection between self and others becomes the new object of attention. This is similar to Kohlberg’s post-conventional and the Neo-Piagetian post-formal operations period where one is able to stand outside one’s own paradigm to make evaluations (Kegan, 1982; Kohlberg & Rynearz, 1990). This is also a transition toward understanding the importance of the social networks one is immersed in.

This is evident in Deb’s, Kara’s, and Ben’s experience when they were able to develop individually as artists and then later found the desire and need to contribute and give back to society in different ways, such as making artwork for others and teaching. This transition sometimes caused conflict between the self-centered interests in having an art career and having a life devoted to social causes. Thus, this move is an example of a focus on oneself toward an integrated self-balance with society.
The need for social integration also compares with the participants’ experiences of otherness during childhood and adolescence. As Deb, Kara, and Ben had invested time and themselves in their artwork over the years, developing identities as artists, it was also evident that they were all coming to a point in their lives where they understood the importance of helping others, which manifested through their artistic interests. For example, both Kara and Ben were involved in becoming art teachers during the time of the interview and expressed their desire to help others through education.

Kara’s interest in collaboration also illustrates a further development in her artistic practice. Kara mentions the importance of sharing during the collaborative process of artmaking, such as an art project about food memories that tells a personal story that she shares with another colleague about their mothers who had passed away. This collaborative form of art making moves beyond binaries of self and other into a socially shared creative space. Kara also mentions how she often keeps in contact with the participants of these collaborations, sometimes sharing topics of interests. Through the process of making, Kara is using art as a vehicle to develop relationships with others.

Kara also explains that she is inspired to make artwork for others because this satisfies a practical purpose in her life, that of developing relationships. She would rather make artwork for others than spend time in the studio alone making art for herself. As Kara explains,

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\text{I like to do [art] for other people, but then I don’t do artwork just for myself because I feel like I don’t have the time to do that. I’m a practical person … creating something just to create is like, “What am I going to do with that now?”}
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This interest in thinking beyond herself in her artistic practice is similar to Gilligan’s (1993) thoughts about care-based morality, where the conventional state is characteristic of placing the needs of others before oneself.

Sometime in between college and graduate school, Kara shifted from wanting to become an artist to a commitment to teaching art to children. This shift is evident in the
last conversation Kara had with her mother before she passed away, when her mother told Kara that she should keep making art. However, Kara knew in her heart that she would be happier helping children rather than working alone in a studio making artwork. This shift may have also been influenced by her experience working at an art gallery that left her with a negative impression of the art market. However, this new commitment to teaching art allows Kara to satisfy her needs to help others.

The need to integrate socially and help others is also expressed by Deb in an artist statement where she mentions her interests in dealing with issues of social inequality through her artwork. As Deb writes,

> I feel that art is meant to be social and public, and should be available to all, but often it is disconnected from people’s lives and considered elitist. Therefore, in the future I would also like to explore narrative themes of social inequality that might speak to people who feel disconnected from art.

During our interview, Deb mentioned her interest in helping others, which is not satisfied through her artistic practice. As Deb states, “Part of me wishes that I could be a doctor … where I could save lives…. I guess life is short and so you should do what you enjoy but, I want to eventually give back to people.” She mentioned that she felt guilty that her art practice was inherently about her own pleasure and wished she could have a career where she could help others: “I felt like I should be doing something more than just doing something that I enjoy…. I like when other people enjoy it…. I really like making things for people.” The commitment to a creative mode of expression and deviation from social artistic conventions with the intention to influence and change humanity toward the better is an attribute that distinguishes creative individuals from others (Gruber & Wallace, 1989). However, continuing to make paintings for her own pleasure or to please others within a mysterious art-market (e.g., making paintings that she thinks will sell in an art gallery) keeps Deb from fulfilling her social/belonging needs and the ability to develop into the person she wants to become. Thus, she is considering going into art education so that she can become a teacher, help others, and fulfill this social gap.
While Kara and Deb’s need for inter-social relationships may be best understood through studies concerning female development (e.g., Gilligan, 1994), Ben also expressed the need to help others as an educator. Though Ben has been helping others through working as a lifeguard for a number of years, he has just recently become a teacher leave replacement. While Ben struggled in school with literacy issues, he would prefer not to put his students through the same socially embarrassing situations that other teachers put him through, such as reading aloud in class. As Ben states, “I’m very conscious as a teacher, making sure I don’t force kids to read, because I know that feeling…. ” Ben is also very cautious with middle-school students who are just starting to build their confidence in their artwork. As Ben reflects, “I don’t even like to critique my kids’ work, really. I will help them but they are in middle school and I find that. That’s the stage where kids build confidence. You don’t want to crush them.” Understanding the importance of a nurturing class environment, Ben has made efforts to create a space where children can grow toward their potentials without reinforcing the sense of otherness.

A prevalent theme that developed among the participants of this study was the sense of social otherness experienced because of their literacy difficulties, which was contrasted by the sense of belonging experienced through developing artistic skills in figuration and social inclusiveness in the art classroom. As a result of their experience of otherness, Kara, Ben, and Deb were empathetic toward others who experience a sense of social exclusion. These findings are similar to those of Fink (2002), who found that expression of empathy toward others was a central characteristic of the self-concepts of adults with dyslexia, illustrating the importance of connecting with others who have also struggled with learning.

This sense of empathy for others was also expressed through the participants’ artwork. As the participants may have been drawn toward the concrete nature of figuration, they may have also been influenced by embodied experiences of empathy for
others through the figurative forms within their drawings and paintings. For example, the interest in having a connection with another life through artmaking is expressed by Ben during a studio visit. As Ben states,

> Whether it be a foot, or a hand, or anything like that. I’d rather be painting … from life than a ball or … an apple, a pear or whatever. That I’m not as interested in. I think there’s just less substance to it because it’s dead…. There’s something beautiful about that person alive … even if I’m only doing a hand, I’m still drawing a hand that’s alive whereas the apple is not alive. It’s not breathing.

Deb mentions the experience of entering into her figurative paintings. As she explains, “I feel like when people look at [my large figurative artwork] they kind of feel like they can be a part of the painting….?” Deb also mentions her fixation on the figure that causes her to be less interested and spend less time working on the background of her compositions.

Kara, while discussing Mary Cassatt’s artwork, expressed her experience of empathy through viewing a figurative painting. As Kara reflects, “[Mary Cassatt] was so good at capturing that love between the mother and daughter…. It just made me a little bit sad that she couldn’t experience that….?” While Kara’s, Ben’s, and Deb’s early interests in figuration were a way for them to show their abilities during a time when they experienced a sense of social otherness, figuration may have also allowed them to experience connections with others through the embodied interaction of making and viewing figurative artwork.

**Summary**

This section presents emerging themes relevant to the formation of an artistic identity, such as the importance of being a good artist and the arts as an emotional outlet. Through developing artistic abilities, Kara, Ben, and Deb were able to gain a sense of belonging among their peers. Having an artist identity gave the participants a focus and purpose during their education. It was a way for them to develop self-esteem and self-confidence that they could do something in contrast to the difficulties they had when
learning to read and write. Being an artist also gave the participants a sense of agency in their education, which contributed to their sense of individuality and independence in contrast to the sense of dependence they have on others to help them succeed with their literacy difficulties. Artmaking was also an emotional outlet for their struggles during education and the art classroom was a location of inclusion among their peers, contributing to a positive self-image.

Kara, Ben, and Deb identified as figurative artists early on and had a resistance to conceptual modes of artmaking during high school and early college. As the participants continued to develop in college they showed patterns of meaning-making in concrete operations (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958) and a move from dualism toward multiplicity, relativity, and multiple conflicting commitments (Perry, 1981). Participants also showed a move from self-differentiated identities toward a socially-integrated sense of self (Gilligan, 1994; Kegan, 1982). As Kara, Ben, and Deb developed more confidence in their artistic abilities they acquired more confidence that they could pursue other interests that could satisfy their social needs, such as careers in education. This sense of confidence has allowed the participants to progress further toward their potentials (Maslow, 1943), develop the ability to keep long lasting commitments, and ultimately contribute to society in a meaningful way.

**Discussion Summary**

This chapter discussed the participants’ learning and instructional experiences during education, psychosocial development, and artistic identity formation. Kara, Ben, and Deb had similar literacy difficulties that are characteristic of dyslexia and were all eventually diagnosed. During their education, they were able to develop some personal learning strategies; however, they still needed extra assistance while in school. Whether the participants stayed in the mainstream classroom, were separated for part of the day in
the resource/contained classroom, received extra assistance after school, or were placed in a private school for students with learning disabilities, they still experienced a sense of social otherness. On the other hand, the art classroom was a place where they experienced inclusion with non-disabled students where they excelled and could show their abilities.

While Kara, Ben, and Deb showed interests in other subjects, such as math and science, they were uncertain of success in a field that focused on textual representation. The arts gave them a sense of well-being, belonging, self-esteem, confidence, and a positive identity. They enjoyed artmaking and felt they would be successful in the field, thus they foreclosed (Marcia, 1966) early on in college to study visual art. While they did not spend time exploring other subjects during college, they did experience a contained moratorium within the visual arts where they could explore their interest and agency.

Kara’s, Ben’s, and Deb’s psychosocial development can be understood as the attempt to avoid the experience of otherness caused by their literacy difficulties and accomplishing a sense of belonging among their peers. During their primary and secondary education, the participants experienced a sense of otherness through realizing they were different from peers, misunderstandings from teachers, labeling, harassment, exclusion, and stigmatization. Anxiety that came out of these experiences of otherness led to the development of coping mechanisms to protect their sense of self. Artmaking was one coping strategy that provided a sense of well-being, belonging, self-esteem, and confidence. While participants struggled socially and emotionally during their early education due to their dyslexia, they were able to develop positive peer relationships and had supportive families during their difficulties.

Ben, Deb, and Kara were able to avoid the anxiety of otherness and create positive identities through showing their artistic abilities. The emotionally therapeutic quality of the artmaking process and the inclusive nature of the art classroom were also important themes in the development of self. While participants were focused on the concrete and mimetic nature of figurative representation during high school and early college, their
artwork developed toward patterns of conceptualization during their college and graduate school years. Patterns of artistic development were compared to William Perry’s (1981) cognitive developmental theory, showing a progression from dualism toward multiplicity, relativity, and multiple conflicting commitments. Patterns of psychosocial development through artmaking were compared to Robert Kegan’s (1982) subject-object balance theory that defined a movement from identity differentiation toward social integration and the need to help others. Non-linear patterns of development were found (e.g., the need to develop artistic skills first to satisfy well-being, belonging, esteem, and cognitive needs—running counter to Maslow’s hierarchy) as participants pursued their self-actualization potentials (Maslow, 1943) through the arts.

Implications for this study will be discussed in the next chapter and will include: (1) the potentials for deeper understanding of how dyslexic students develop through the visual arts to determine an appropriate mentoring strategy, (2) the potentials for the visual arts to foster cognitive development for dyslexic students and give access to fields of study in other disciplines that are dominated by textual representation, and (3) the potentials of the visual arts to act as a vehicle for self-actualization for dyslexic students to progress toward their potentials.
Chapter VI
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Dissertation Summary

Within the findings, it was shown that all the participants experienced varying degrees of literacy difficulties due to developmental dyslexia. Because of these learning difficulties, they received extra assistance at school, home, and from other learning specialists. Often during elementary and middle school, Kara, Ben, and Deb were segregated from their mainstream classroom for part of the day in a resource room or contained classroom. While this segregation ended toward the end of middle school for both Kara and Ben, Deb spent a few years at a private school for students with learning disabilities in eighth and ninth grade. When Deb returned to public school in tenth grade, she needed special assistance throughout the rest of high school.

Educational segregation was the attempt to compensate for the participants’ literacy difficulties, giving extra cognitive support; however, there were emotional and social implications in feeling different from their peers, such as the experience of otherness. Kara, Ben, and Deb recalled feeling misunderstood by both their peers and teachers, labeled, harassed, socially excluded, and stigmatized, which they contributed to their difficulties with dyslexia. However, the visual arts acted as a coping strategy by offering an emotional outlet through artmaking with materials. The inclusiveness of the art classroom during education also had positive social and emotional implications.
Ultimately, participants were able to gain a sense of belonging among their peers, which increased during high school and came into full integration during college.

During primary and secondary education, Kara, Ben, and Deb remember being interested in subjects, such as math and science, but felt they would be unsuccessful in these fields because of their literacy difficulties. Thus, they defaulted in the visual arts because they had artistic abilities that had helped them develop a sense of belonging, self-esteem, self-confidence, a positive identity, and focus for the future. The participants foreclosed (i.e., deciding on a field of study before exploring all options) (Marcia, 1966) on becoming artists before entering college, with the feeling that art was something they could succeed in while enjoying the process of making with materials.

The development of Kara’s, Ben’s, and Deb’s artistic identity during middle and high school was contingent on their abilities to represent the visual world accurately in two dimensions, such as their ability to represent the figure and express a sense of likeness. While these abilities gave the participants a special status among their peers, they were often less interested in other forms of expression, such as conceptual modes of artmaking, that excluded the concrete (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008) nature of figuration during high school and early college.

However, during their college studies participants eventually showed a progression in thinking toward their work and self. For example, participants expressed a move away from dualism (e.g., right likeness vs. wrong proportions), toward openness to multiple forms of expression, the understanding of the contextual nature of artistic discussions, and committing to their artistic practice while in dialogue with contradictions concerning their work (Bekkala, 2002; Perry, 1981). Participants also showed a move away from an independent artistic identity toward the need to contribute to society in a meaningful way (Gilligan, 1993; Kegan, 1981), and reach toward their potentials (Maslow, 1943, 1968, 1971, 1974).
While participants moved from concrete representations in secondary school toward post-formal operations during higher education, their development cannot be described as linear. Participants showed non-linear patterns of development in comparison to Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, Erikson’s (1982) life-cycle, Marcia’s (1966) identity status, and Perry’s (1981) adult cognitive development. Rather than moving in a normative direction from childhood to adulthood, they expressed their own unique patterns of growth through the visual arts and understanding of self and other.

Conclusion

This dissertation sought to address the question: In what ways do issues of identity construction and artistic development contribute to the overall meaning-making of three graduate dyslexic visual arts students? Specifically, how is the self-other meaning made, and personal identity formed, through general experiences of being a learner with dyslexia? From the findings it was shown that participants struggled against the sense of otherness influenced by their difficulties with dyslexia during education. However, they developed self-esteem and a sense of belonging through showing others they had artistic abilities. Artmaking was also an emotional outlet and the art classroom was a socially inclusive space. Taking on an artistic identity and foreclosing on art during college were ways participants were able to enter higher education and continue learning. During art school participants could forget they had a learning disability and continue to develop cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

The second sub-question specifically concerns artmaking: In what ways does artistic development in high school and higher education support self-other and personal identity formation in learners with dyslexia? It was found that technical figurative drawing and painting abilities were a concrete way of showing others competency in comparison to difficulties with literacy, allowing for self-esteem, confidence, positive
identity development, and a sense of belonging among peers during primary and secondary education. Later during higher education participants foreclosed on studying art and continued to make figurative work in art school, but developed beyond concrete figurative representation toward multiplicity, relativity, multiple commitments, and empathy for others through the visual arts. In conclusion, the participants expressed empowerment of self-worth through the visual arts that enabled them to further their education and reach toward their cognitive, social, and emotional potentials.

Educational Implications

This chapter considers three primary implications for the findings of this study—appropriate educational environments, visual-spatial learning, and the opportunity for growth through the visual arts. First, there are implications for mentors, counselors, educators, school administrators and leadership to determine appropriate techniques and learning environments for dyslexic students during education. Propositions for suitable holistic approaches toward working with dyslexic students are considered.

Second, there are implications for ways the visual arts can be approached within the education system that can make some fields of study more accessible for dyslexic students. Potentials for learning through visual-spatial modes are considered. Implications for STEM/STEAM\(^1\) and the inclusion of the visual arts in the overall school curriculum is discussed. Third, potentials for self-actualization through the visual arts for students with dyslexia are discussed, such as cognitive, emotional, and social development. Implications for asynchronous growth are considered in relationship to gifted children and visual-spatial modes of meaning-making. Finally, this chapter

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\(^1\)STEM is an acronym for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs. STEAM is an acronym for science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics programs.
presents implications for further research needed in the areas of art education and
disability studies.

**Holding Environment**

One salient issue that emerged during this study involved the psychosocial
implications for inclusive and exclusive learning environments during primary and
secondary education. Different school environments can influence a student’s sense of
social otherness or belonging. This was illustrated when participants experienced a sense
of otherness while in the mainstream classroom because they could not keep up with their
peers. However, the experience of otherness was also reinforced when they were
separated from their mainstream classroom when receiving special assistance (e.g.,
resource room or contained class) for their literacy difficulties.

While educators and administrators work to determine the ideal learning
environment for student cognitive development, psychosocial development may become
secondary or difficult to coordinate within the educational situation. For example, the
contained classroom may be presenting new material at an appropriate rate, but students
may not be developing healthy social relationships with their peers in this environment.
Both inclusion and exclusion from the mainstream classroom can have negative cognitive
and social implications for dyslexic students.

Educators and school administrators need to understand the difficult social,
emotional, and cognitive situation dyslexic students are in so they can make informed
decisions on helping these individuals find an ideal environment that will foster growth in
all dimensions of self. The art classroom is a space where a diversity of students can
interact, feel a sense of belonging, and have agency over their education. It is an inclusive
space where students with disabilities can freely interact and express themselves among
others with positive psychosocial implications (Hall, 2010). Educators, school
administrators and leadership should be open to and understanding of the emotional,
social, and cognitive significance of artmaking and spending time in the art classroom for dyslexic students, and consider artmaking activities with respect among other school subjects.

Findings within this study show a dynamic between educational inclusion and exclusion that ultimately reinforced a dualistic hierarchy between abled/disabled that participants had to navigate through to avoid a sense of otherness. This dynamic also had a significant influence on identity formation through elementary and secondary education. Through the development of representational artistic abilities (e.g., technical figurative drawing and painting skills), participants were able to gain a sense of belonging within this dualistic educational environment and show their peers and teachers they had value. This, in turn, contributed to the formation of an artist identity that continued to develop throughout college.

These findings have implications for contributing to a better understanding of the dyslexic experience that can benefit educators, mentors, counselors, school administrators and leadership when determining appropriate techniques and learning environments for development. Further inquiry into the cognitive, emotional, and psychological benefits of artmaking and art spaces for dyslexic students would help to remedy the lack of research on the subject in art education. Findings can contribute toward a deeper understanding of holding environments (Winnicott, 1965) within art spaces to determine the need for developing an appropriate mentoring style (e.g., confirmation, contradiction, and continuity) to help move from a state of academic dependence toward independence and interdependence (Kegan, 1980; McGowan et al., 2007).

Because written languages are usually comprised of abstract symbols that bear little or no relationship to what they represent (e.g., semi-transparent orthographic scripts: English), dyslexic students often feel detachment between what is being communicated and the forms being used during communication that are required in school. Artmaking fills this gap by allowing expression of emotions and thoughts directly through forms and
images. During the process of artmaking, students often experience a mental state of heightened concentration, self-awareness, agency, expansion of time, and satisfaction where learning appears to be at its maximum state.

This state of consciousness is characteristic of flow, an experience described by Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi (1975, 1997) where one becomes completely absorbed during an activity. Studies in the development of states of flow during artmaking for dyslexic students could provide further insight into ways of creating learning environments that are able to optimize student learning through personal engagement, finding a space between boredom and being cognitively overwhelmed. Further research into the relationship between environments of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and otherness, identity formation, and motivation during education for dyslexic students would give insight into developing supportive environments for growth.

This research has implications for educators, mentors, counselors, school administrators and leadership through providing insight and a better understanding of the psychosocial and cognitive benefits of inclusive education found in art programs. For example, educators can benefit from knowledge of how art spaces that emphasize student-centered, open-ended projects can influence the sense of agency and self-development during education for dyslexic students. Educators should be open to inclusive artmaking educational spaces for fostering the development of the whole person rather than perceiving the arts as a solely recreational and peripheral activity. Educators should understand that the visual arts allow for multisensory learning that is an essential form of meaning-making for students with learning differences, as well as an activity where they can develop socially without experiencing a dichotomy between abled and disabled. It is also important for educators to develop an awareness of the balance between cognitive extremes, such as experiences of being overwhelmed or bored (Czikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1997), and how this spectrum intersects between psychosocial
experiences of otherness and belonging to determine ideal educational environments during development.

Counselors and mentors can also utilize the knowledge of the spectrum of intersection between cognitive readiness (overwhelmed vs. boredom) and psychosocial factors (otherness vs. belonging) in determining the appropriate approach for a student with literacy difficulties. Developing counseling and mentoring approaches through the visual arts could be more appropriate for helping students move between dependence, independence, interdependence, (Kegan, 1980; McGowan et al., 2007) and ultimately their full potential (Maslow, 1968, 1974). Counselors and mentors need to understand the importance of artmaking spaces for the experience of social inclusion for students with literacy difficulties and advocate for the inclusion of the visual arts in the education system as an essential form of meaning-making for students with learning difficulties. Administrators and educational leadership can also develop policies and curriculum standards that are inclusive of the visual arts and support difference in abilities between students.

**Visual-Spatial Potentials**

A second implication for this study is the potential for the visual arts to grant access to other fields of inquiry for dyslexic students. While participants struggled with gaining literacy skills with textual representational forms, they were unable to fully immerse themselves in most class content during their primary and secondary education. However, while they struggled with literacy, they had the visual arts as a form of communication and a way of learning about themselves and the world. While pursuing the visual arts in college they were eventually able to pursue their educational interests and cognitive needs.

All of the participants mentioned interests in other fields of study during primary and secondary education, such as science and math. However, they did not feel they
would be successful in these fields because the terminology, textual forms, and/or mathematical abstractions intimidated them. However, they were far more engaged by multisensory, hands-on and experimental activities during the learning experience. Their literacy difficulties may have been less of an issue if there was an integrative program that combined art and science in a meaningful way. The potentials for learning through the visual arts does not need to end at studio practice and be confined to one particular art historical narrative. The potentials for learning through visual-spatial modes can be extended far beyond into fields of inquiry that have yet to be imagined (Burton, 2016).

There are numerous opportunities and potentials for learning through visual modes of representation, which have been explored within cognitive science research. For example, Barbara Tversky (2010) has discussed how visual-spatial representations (e.g., drawings, maps, and diagrams) allow for ways of knowing that are different from linguistic ways of understanding the world, such as through spatial arrangements, size, and similarity. Similarly, Merlin Donald (1991) has pointed out the development of visual-spatial tools, such as visual diagrams, that increase mental abilities and allow for knowledge that is difficult to communicate through textual language.

Roger Shepard (1978, 1988) has also asked some fundamental questions about ways of knowing through visual-spatial forms, such as transformations of images within the mind that can yield discoveries and solutions to problems within the arts and sciences. There are many examples of how mental visualizations have led to creative insights and inventions, such as scientific innovations made by James Clerk Maxell, Michael Faraday, James D. Watson, and Alicia Boole Stoot. For example, Friedrich A. Kekule (1829-1896) came to his understanding of chemical structures during a dream full of visualizations. As Kekule (in Weisberg, 2006) remembers,

the atoms were gamboling before my eyes. Whenever, hitherto, these diminutive beings had appeared to me, they had always been in motion; but up to that time, I had never been able to discern the nature of their motion. Now, however, I saw how, frequently, two smaller atoms united to form a
pair, how a larger one embraced two smaller ones; how still larger ones kept
hold of three or even four of the smaller; whilst that whole kept whirling in a
giddy dance. I saw how the larger ones formed a chain...I spent part of the
night putting on paper at least sketches of these dream forms. (p. 76)

Shepard (1978) makes the argument that creative innovation naturally develops out of
visual-spatial modes in contrast to language because the visual-spatial is not defined by
social conventions and rules of meaning construction that are found in verbal language.
Visual imagery is a pre-linguistic mode of spatial understanding that directly influences
the affective dimensions of self and motivates the psyche.

Shepard (1978) also mentions that such visual discoveries were often experienced
by those with disabilities, such as dyslexia. This point is further elaborated upon by
Thomas G. West (1997), who describes how learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) may
often allow for such leaps of insight to occur.2 This argument is further supported by the
numbers of scientific and literary pioneers who have also shown signs of dyslexia, such
as Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Leonardo da Vinci, William James, Hans Christian
Andersen, and William Butler Yeats, to name a few. While there are many examples of
successful individuals with dyslexia, participants often felt they would be unsuccessful in
vocations that were presented to them as textually dominated disciplines.

There are tremendous opportunities for educators to integrate art with science,
technology, engineering, and mathematics, such as with STEM (to create STEAM)
education. There are some studies that have considered students with learning disabilities
during STEM lessons with multisensory learning approaches. For example, Lam,
Doverspike, Zhao, Zhe, and Menzemer (2008) compared middle school students with and
without IEPs showing some potential benefits for motivation, social inclusion, and
learning during STEM projects; however, the study does not specify the nature of the

2While some researchers argue that dyslexia enables advanced visual-spatial abilities
(Grant, 2010; Tafti, Hameedy, & Baghal, 2002), there are also findings that show there is no
substantial difference between those with and without dyslexia on visuospatial tasks (Brunswick,
Martin, & Marzano, 2010).
learning disabilities or the subject of the workshop. Further research needs to be conducted on the significance of STEM programs for dyslexic students to determine specific psychosocial and cognitive benefits.

There are noted benefits for integrating the arts in STEM to create STEAM. For example, Michelle H. Land (2013) mentions the need for the arts in STEM education to appeal to more U.S. students, cultivate more creative innovators, nurture more problem solvers that are not preconditioned to be looking for a right or wrong answer, and foster communication through visual modes. The benefits of multisensory learning experiences for dyslexic students have been noted (Armstrong, 2000; Gardner, 1982; Hearne & Stone, 1995); however, there are no current studies that specifically investigate the educational implications of STEAM programs for students with dyslexia. The need for further research on the educational implications of STEM/STEAM programs for students with dyslexia was demonstrated when all of the participants of this study expressed interests in other subjects in school, such as oceanography, medicine, science and math, but were discouraged to pursue these interests because of their difficulties with literacy.

STEM/STEAM programs provide examples of how students with learning difficulties can be engaged in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. However, the arts can also be integrated into the whole mainstream school curriculum, allowing students with different learning needs to discover their interest through creative and multisensory projects. For example, the Waldorf School fully embraces the arts in teaching every subject (Nicholson, 2010; Nordlund, 2013). There are significant implications for implementing lessons that utilize multiple forms of expression for students with disabilities (Gardner, 1983; Hearne & Stone, 1995). For example, the use of an ideographic system that includes teaching language to students with dyslexia with three-dimensional letters has shown to be beneficial for developing reading skills (Gardner, 1982). Arts-based research (Knowles & Cole, 2008; Sullivan, 2005) projects also have implications for engaging students with literacy difficulties through multimodal
exploration of interests that require both internal and external investigations (Carawan & Nalavany, 2010; White, 2012; Winters, Belliveau, & Sherritt-Fleming, 2009). Including the arts in the mainstream curriculum in teaching course material would increase the potentials for learning for students with dyslexia, as well as create an environment where they would not experience a sense of otherness among their peers, allowing for healthy psychosocial and cognitive development.

Educators need to consider the diversity of their students and their educational needs when presenting course material. They also need to allow for multiple forms of expression of comprehension of course content, such as art projects that demonstrate learned knowledge rather than relying on only textual evaluations. Educators can utilize the visual arts as a way of engaging all students, especially dyslexic students, in all class subjects (e.g., English, history, social studies, math, science) as a mode of understanding and a way of expressing learned knowledge. They should also encourage students with dyslexia to pursue their interests, even if their literacy difficulties seriously challenge their abilities. Educators should be knowledgeable about new forms of technology that can assist dyslexic students during the learning process, such as computer speech and dictation applications. They can also make recommendations that are available through audio versions or documentary films.

Educators can develop artist-based projects that engage their interests through multiple sensory modes. They can also give examples of research projects that utilize other modes of expression—for example, Nick Sousanis’s (2015) Unflattening, a dissertation produced entirely as a graphic novel. Allowing the opportunity for students to demonstrate their knowledge through drawing, sculpture, performance, video, or mixed media projects would help build academic self-confidence and self-esteem in subjects that are usually dominated by textual forms.

Mentors and counselors should understand that students with literacy difficulties are in a complicated social and cognitive situation and need a sense of belonging among
their peers during education. They need to be able to show their abilities, whether artistic, athletic, or in other physically oriented activities, while attempting to find ways that they can learn about other subjects through modes and activities they can express through. Mentors and counselors can advise their students with dyslexia in considering other modes of learning that engage them in more than just textual forms and may be more appropriate for their educational needs, while encouraging their interests.

School administrators and leadership need to understand that students with dyslexia have much to offer society in contrast to their difficulties with culturally dominant modes of communication. They should be understanding and accommodating toward students with literacy difficulties, especially when transferring IEP’s between institutions. They should also encourage educators to allow for multiple forms of evaluation on subjects that are usually valued through timed writing exams or other textual dominant forms.

Self-Actualization

Finally, the visual arts can aid in the cultivation of cognitive, social, and psychological potentials and self-development for students with dyslexia. Both psychologists and art educators have discussed the potentials for self-actualization through the arts (Ryder, 1987). For example, both Abraham Maslow (1968, 1971, 1974) and Carl Rogers (1954) have commented on the importance of creative exploration and meaning-making within the arts that allow students to move toward their full potential. As Maslow (1971) comments, “The concept of creativeness and the concept of the healthy, self-actualizing, fully human person seems to be coming closer and closer together, and may perhaps turn out to be the same thing” (p. 57). Both Maslow and Rogers have mentioned the close relationship between artistic creativity and self-actualization.

Within the field of art education there are findings on the importance of self-discovery through the artistic process. As Lowenfeld and Brittan state (1982),
No art expression is possible without self-identification with the experience expressed as well as with the art materials by which it is expressed. This is one of the basic factors of any creative expression: it is the true expression of the self. (p. 19)

Other studies in art education have also found relationships between artmaking and self-development, such as Allison Renee Manheim’s (1998), which found that creative artmaking with three-dimensional materials (e.g., clay) could lead toward openness and self-acceptance. Cultivating awareness of the self-transformational potentials of the visual arts for dyslexic students can aid educators, mentors, and counselors to better understand and foster student development during critical periods of education. Understanding of the self-actualization potentials of the visual arts can also inform educational administrators and leadership on the need for policies for students with disabilities that consider their psychosocial development alongside their cognitive development.

While the participants in this study remembered cognitive limitations during primary and secondary education due to their literacy difficulties, they found the visual arts were an activity they could do well in. The participants mentioned that they did not feel they could become successful in a field other than the visual arts and foreclosed early on to study art in college. While this limitation deterred participants from a period of moratorium (Marcia, 1966) and self-discovery in other subjects, their study in the visual arts acted as a contained moratorium that allowed students to pursue their personal interests and introspection, thus allowing them to develop toward their potentials.

The most obvious way that the visual arts were able to assist participants to reach their potentials was through enabling them to continue their education in college. Participants recalled that if it were not for the arts they were unsure what they would have done during their education. The visual arts gave them a focus, a mode of expression, agency, self-esteem, a sense of belonging, and academic confidence. If it were not for the
arts it is possible they would not have gone on to college and reached their cognitive potentials.

During their undergraduate experience, participants continued to develop artistically and exhibited post-formal operational patterns of openness toward dialectical modes, multiplicity, relativity, and the ability to make multiple commitments while accepting paradoxes between different positions (Perry, 1981). Through the visual arts participants were able to develop cognitively and pursue their educational potentials. This point is reinforced by Heinz Hartmann (1958), who mentions that creative practices cultivate an adaptive mechanism for ego mobility through synthetic problem-solving, leading toward an increased sense of independence.

Through the creative visual arts, participants were able to develop skills and abilities to compete within the job market. Even though the art market is a very difficult field to enter and in which to make a living, there are other career opportunities in the arts. For example, Kara had worked in commercial galleries and is currently working as an art teacher; Ben is working as a teacher leave replacement; and Deb is currently working on her teacher certification. While studying art in college does not necessarily guarantee a career as an artist, it did give participants career opportunities that were personally meaningful. The significance of finding a meaningful career also has beneficial implications for developing a positive self-image during adulthood.

There are many ways of observing the emotional significance of the artmaking experience, such as social belonging, release of stress, meditative absorption, agency, and self-expression through making. The visual arts allowed participants to develop emotionally through the process of making with materials that ultimately contributed to positive self-esteem, self-confidence, a cohesive identity, and optimism for the future. It has been found that making through visual-spatial modes can allow for the processing of emotional information that is psychologically therapeutic (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1982;
Lusebrink, 1990). Implications for emotional development through artmaking can contribute to an ever-evolving sense of awareness of self.

The transformation of self also has social implications. For example, participants were able to develop their social needs while in the art classroom and by showing their artistic abilities. All participants came to the conviction that they wanted to give back to society and help others at different points of their education. As they had experienced a mentor relationship during their education, they in turn wanted to become mentors themselves to help others. Through the arts they were able to find ways of exploring their social interests and concerns, as well as ways to contribute and give back to society. Ultimately the visual arts became a way for the participants to express their interests in having a positive social influence in the lives of others, which contributed toward a deeper and fuller sense of self.

While there is evidence for the ability for disabled students to develop toward their potentials through the visual arts, it is also possible to reach toward one’s capacities through other fields and/or activities, such as sports. However, the visual arts are unique in that they enable those with literacy difficulties the ability to communicate information that is emotionally salient through a mode that does not challenge their textual decoding abilities. Young artists can create their own symbols for meaning. The ability to decode visual representations allows minds access to embodied knowledge and is a way of processing information as a whole rather than a fixation on the distinctions of separate parts.

Keeping in mind the spatial dimensions of the visual arts, there are a number of examples of non-linear growth patterns among the participants. This can be understood by the influence that learning disabilities can have on individuals who have average or above average intelligence. For example, there have been findings of asynchronistic development among gifted individuals as well as those with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia (Silverman, 1995, 2003). While a gifted child may be brilliant at playing chess
at age seven, she or he will also have to contend with being unable to fit in with the same age group while she or he is at a typical emotional development. This is similar for dyslexic students who have reasoning abilities at or above their age group but their reading skills are considerably behind. Such discrepancy between age and ability can contribute to non-linear modes of development.

Educators, mentors, and counselors need to understand the significance of artmaking for students with literacy difficulties during periods of education and self-transformation (e.g., the evolution of self and identity), allowing some students to reach their educational potentials. They need to offer encouragement and optimism, while at the same time acknowledging that one can be successful even though it will take time and be difficult. Giving examples of successful individuals who have dyslexia and informing them of their difficulties during education is helpful for encouragement. School administrators and leadership also need to understand the importance of the arts for self-development and meaning-making while leading the way toward inclusion of the arts in education by locating funding and keeping art programs functioning within our school systems.

**Implications for Further Research**

Further research on the artistic development of dyslexic students would give insight into alternative modes of growth that run counter to linear hierarchies, such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (i.e., the linear progression from physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, to self-actualization), Lowenfeld’s artistic development (i.e., the linear progression from scribbling, pre-schematic, schematic, to realism), and Perry’s adult cognitive development (i.e., the linear progression from dualism, multiplicity, relativity, to acceptance of paradox within multiple commitments). New patterns of post-formal operations, as well as the development of self and identity can elucidate
multidimensional growth that considers spatial rhythms rather than linear progressions. Implications for these findings could contribute to interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perceptions of self and world through the visual arts for students who struggle with literacy.

Future longitudinal studies concerning artistic development and identity formation during high school and college would provide data on their changing meaning-making process. Subsequent research could also generate insight into ways in which the sense of self pivots between independence and social integration (Kegan, 1982) during the course of artistic development. For example, how does the artmaking process influence the development or disintegration of boundaries between the sense of self and other during different periods of growth?

A follow-up longitudinal study would also benefit the understanding of the meaning-making process over time. For example, interviews with dyslexic participants could be taken during childhood, adolescence, and different stages of adulthood for comparison. However, a study on children and adolescents would also raise more confidentiality issues that would have to be considered and approved by an IRB committee.

Possible future considerations for data collection could include an additional sample group of non-dyslexic visual art graduate students for comparison to the dyslexic group. This research could also be extended by considering similarities and differences in meaning-making between dyslexics and non-dyslexics in other disciplines (e.g., musicians, dancers, actors, sculptures, designers, engineers, biologists, mathematicians).

**Implications Summary**

This chapter considered three implications for this study: appropriate educational environments, visual-spatial learning, and the opportunity for self-actualization growth
through the visual arts. The challenges of compensating for cognitive struggles without social exclusion in the classroom were considered. Defining the appropriate educational environment (e.g., confirming, contradictory, or continuity) (Kegan, 1980; McGowan et al., 2007) will ultimately maximize the effectiveness of educational materials and students’ ability to learn. These findings have implications for educators, mentors, counselors, school administrators and leadership for acknowledging and determining the needs of dyslexic students during different periods of education. For example, this study emphasized the significance of the sense of belonging and identity formation so that mentors and counselors will have a better understanding of dyslexic students’ motivations and emotional development. Artmaking was presented as a way of cultivating positive self-esteem, confidence, social belonging, and identification that can inform educators who are seeking methods for working with dyslexic students. Through understanding states of engagement through the arts, educators can create an environment that optimizes learning, as well as emotional and social development.

There are cognitive advantages for learning through visual-spatial modes for dyslexic students. For example, visual-spatial forms relate directly to experiences in the world, influence the emotions, give multiple ways of making meaning, are a holistic experience, engage viewers publicly, and allow for the development of personal language systems. There are many examples of how inventors and scientists have come to their discoveries through visual-spatial modes of thinking. Often dyslexics are turned off from studying subjects dominated by textural forms because of their struggles with literacy. Thus, learning through the visual arts has some important implications for accessibility of subjects that are often out of reach for some dyslexic students. Further implications can be investigated through STEM/STEAM projects that integrate the arts with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The visual arts also have significant implications for integration into all subjects within the mainstream classroom that can make learning meaningful for dyslexic students, such as arts-based research projects.
As the visual arts played a significant role during the psychosocial development of the dyslexic participants in this study, there are implications for understanding how the visual arts can lead toward self-actualization. It has been shown that creative activities have an influence on the development of self and a healthy psyche. Artmaking has a therapeutic dimension that allows for an emotional outlet during times of struggle and frustration. For the participants, the arts gave them a focus, mode of expression, agency, and confidence that ultimately allowed them to pursue their educational needs during college and develop toward their potentials. The arts gave the participants skills to make them competitive within the work force and a sense of belonging in society. All of the participants mentioned their interests in helping others that bore some relationship to their interests in artistic expression. While development appeared non-linear, the visual arts seemed to be an ideal mode for dyslexic students to reach toward their potentials.

This study has further implications for research in the field of art education and disability studies in considering the meaning-making process for students with developmental dyslexia during different periods of education and modes of artistic expression. For example, while this study attempts to consider the life narratives of the participants through a series of interviews during graduate school, the interviews do not show a transformation of meaning-making during different periods of development. The interviews only showed how the participants make meaning from one vantage point during development, graduate school. A longitudinal study that collects interview data during childhood, adolescence, and different stages of adulthood would allow for a comparison between different periods of meaning-making, showing how the sense of self and artistic practice develops over time. Longitudinal studies in the artistic development of dyslexic students will give further insight into developmental patterns of meaning-making and self-transformation.

Further implications for research also include considering students with dyslexia who also differ in artistic practice. For example, within this current study participants all
were interested in figurative representation during different periods of development. In subsequent studies, it would be insightful to consider students with dyslexia who have no interest in figuration to determine patterns and differences in meaning-making and interests in artistic expression.

Comparing participants with and without dyslexia and their interests in particular artistic forms of expression would also show patterns of meaning-making that would further deepen understanding of why art students gravitate toward particular modes of expression over others. This cross-comparison between dyslexic and non-dyslexic participants could also be extended into other disciplines within the arts (e.g., creative writing, music, dance, sculpture, performance, theater, and design) to find patterns of meaning-making between different forms of expression. This trajectory of inquiry between those with and without dyslexia could also continue into fields outside the arts (e.g., engineering, science, technology, and mathematics) to find patterns of meaning-making, development of self, and the reasons and motivations that drive their interests.
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Appendix A
Glossary of Terms

Artmaking: The process of creating through materials, forms, and representation that can later be discussed in relationship to art history.

Embodiment: The ways in which knowledge and experience are situated within physical confines of the body. Embodiment cognition can be understood through a number of different disciplines, such as linguistics, cognitive neuroscience, semantic processing, and visual-spatial representation.

Developmental Dyslexia: a genetic condition that embraces a number of different cognitive mechanisms (e.g., grapheme-phoneme conversion, attention and working memory) that affects one’s ability to gain fluency in speaking, and writing, but does not affect intelligence.

Literacy: The ability to encode and/or decode a given representational system into meaning.

Meaning-Making: The ways in which one makes sense of the self and world through representational forms and narrative that are situated within personal experiences and culture.

Narrative Construction: The activity and process of linking events together into meaningful sequence or compositions.

Orthographic script: The graphic or textual representation of verbal language. For example English is an alphabetic orthographic script, the Japanese language Kana is a syllabic orthographic script, and Chinese is a logographic orthographic script. Orthographic scripts can also be described in terms of their relationship to the speech sound they represent, for example Spanish is a transparent orthographic script, English is a quasi-transparent orthographic script, and Chinese is an opaque orthographic script.
Representation: The attempt to create some form of a mimetic device (e.g., spoken utterance, written word, gesture, painting, mathematical equation, graphic chart, or ritual performance) for communication. For example, the word “tree” is a symbolic representation for the actual referent tree (the experience phenomenon of a particular tree). Charles Sanders Peirce wrote significantly on different modes of representation, such as the iconic, indexical and symbolic, where he describes the nature of relationship between signs and what they represent.

Visual Language: A system for communication rooted in visual-spatial representations, excluding textual systems on their own. For example, the arrangement of shapes, colors, forms, gestures, lines, graphic elements and other visual representational modes within a composition would constitute a visual language.

Visual-Spatial Representation: Reference to multimodal representations that have both a spatial and visual dimension within the field of cognitive science. Any sculpture could be discussed in terms of both visual and spatial qualities. Performances, interior design, architecture, installations, action research, and community projects could also be discussed in terms of visual-spatial representations.
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street
New York NY 10027
212 678 3000

INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: Differences between Art-Making and Writing for College Students with and without Developmental Dyslexia

Interview Consent

Principal Investigator: Brian J. Bulfer, Teachers College 714-254-5749

INTRODUCTION

You are being invited to participate in this research study called “Differences between Art-Making and Writing for College Students with and without Developmental Dyslexia.” You may qualify to take part in this research study because you are over 18 years old, a college student, and enrolled in either a visual art or creative writing M.F.A program. If you are presently participating in another study you can be part of this study as well. Approximately ten people will participate in this study and it will take approximately 2 hours of your time to complete.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

This study is being done to determine differences in meaning-making between different forms of representation, specifically art-making and writing, for college students with and without developmental dyslexia.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by the principal investigator. During the interview you will be asked to discuss your K-12 education, reading and writing, alternative programs, college, technology use, and art-making experiences. This interview will be audio-recorded. After the audio-recording is transcribed the audio-recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate. The interview will take approximately forty-five to sixty minutes. You will be given a pseudonym or false name/de-identified code in order to keep your identity confidential.

You then will be asked to participate in a second interview concerning your studio and/or writing practice, which will also be audio-recorded. This will take about one hour. Participants will be asked to discuss and give a digital sample of their artwork and/or creative writing during the second interview.

Finally, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire concerning dyslexic characteristics. This questionnaire will be sent out via email or given in person during the first interview and will take about fifteen minutes. Participants can complete the questionnaire at a location and time of their preference.

IRB # 16-155
INFORMED CONSENT

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harm or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life while taking routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel embarrassed to discuss problems that you experienced during your K-12 education and/or college. However, you do not have to answer any questions or divulge anything you don’t want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty.

You might feel concerned that things you say might come back to you in some form. The principal investigator is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name, omitting any other identifiers, and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a safe.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the field of teacher education, art education, special education, and educational policy development.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?

The study is over when you have completed the interviews, studio visit, and filled out the questionnaire. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you haven’t finished.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY

The investigator will keep all written materials locked in a safe in a locked room. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio-recording will be transcribed and the audio-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym made available to anyone other than the principal investigator.

IRB # 16-155
INFORMED CONSENT

The list of codes and pseudonyms linked to participants will be kept in a locked safe. Regulations require that research data be kept for at least three years.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?

The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the principal investigator.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING

Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish to be recorded you will not be able to participate in this research study.

______ I give my consent to be recorded ________________________________

_________________________ Signature ________________________________

______ I do not consent to be recorded ________________________________

_________________________ Signature ________________________________

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

______ I consent to allow to be viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College__________________________

_________________________ Signature ________________________________

______ I do not consent to allow to be viewed outside of Teachers College Columbia University ________________________________

_________________________ Signature ________________________________

OPTIONAL CONSENT FOR FUTURE CONTACT

The investigator may wish to contact you in the future. Please initial the appropriate statements to indicate whether or not you give permission for future contact.

I give permission to be contacted in the future for research purposes:

Yes __________________ No __________________________

IRB # 16-155
INFORMED CONSENT

Initial Initial

I give permission to be contacted in the future for information relating to this study:

Yes __________________________ No __________________________

Initial Initial

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Brian Bulfer, at 714-254-5749 or at bjb2158@tc.columbia.edu or the research coordinator, Judith M. Burton at 212-678-3362. You can also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Mary Hafeli at mch34@tc.columbia.edu)

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu. Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.

IRB # 16-155
INFORMED CONSENT

PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his or her professional discretion if I don’t fulfill all participant criteria.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study

Print name: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Signature: ___________________________
Appendix C
Original Artist Statements

Deb: Artist Statement

In Ways of Seeing John Berger makes a comparison between the nude, as depicted in traditional European art works, to nakedness as in being wholly oneself in the most absolute form. I am particularly interested in this concept and I try to push myself to make portraits that reveal the inner traits of a person rather than just what they physically look like. Currently I am experimenting with less representational detail in favor of suggestions done with color, light and shadow. As I continue to evolve as a painter I hope to explore more figurative abstraction in my portraits. Additionally, I feel that art is meant to be social and public, and should be available to all, but often it is disconnected from people’s lives and considered elitist. Therefore, in the future I would also like to explore narrative themes of social inequality that might speak to people who feel disconnected from art.

Deb: Second Artist Statement

I have been exposed to art making since childhood due to the fact that my mother is an artist. We always had, paints, paper and clay available in the house and my sister and I experimented with them freely and frequently. Therefore, I never stopped making art or thought of myself as anything else but an artist. My art practice has been further nurtured by Professor Randy Williams. He has been my mentor since high school when I first studied under him at the [summer part program] and then all through my four years at [undergraduate}
college]. I am currently a graduate student at the [graduate school].

**Ben: Artist Statement**

[participant’s name] is known for many things. Lifeguard; Teacher; Surfer; Swimmer... As [first name] Riis, he is an artist who transcends his adoration for learning, teaching and the water into surrealistic visual experiences.

Using paints, sable brushes, neo-megilp and pencils, Brian creates realistic and dream-like visuals in the form of oil paintings; sometimes exploring the depths of fear while exposing its truth and reality. Although there is no cohesive theme to his work, every piece is created with the purpose of conveying a message.

The Long Island native graduated from the [undergraduate college] with a B.F.A. in Illustration (2014). He is now pursuing a Masters in Art Education at [graduate school].

**Kara: Artist Statement**

This summer I illustrated a children’s book, called *Get Used to Losing*. It is a book to educate children on being a good loser in a sports setting. Through this project I researched different illustrators, children’s books, characters, character development, ways of laying out storyboards and dummies, how to capture the appropriate audience and how to actually create a children’s book. I explored different artistic techniques like Illustrator, colored pencil, watercolor, pencil, and Photoshop. I also explored different main characters, i.e. different kinds of children, animals, and even made up things.

Through all of my exploration, experimentation, and research, I came up with these
anthropomorphic, androgynous dog characters playing soccer. I decided to create dogs playing soccer because I wanted to make the characters relatable to a wide range of children, genders, ethnicities, and races, and soccer because it is the most played sport for kids between the ages of 5-13 years old. I also chose blue and green for their uniforms because blue and green are the most popular colors for that age group. I chose graphite drawing and watercolor because I am the most familiar with these media and I could work the quickest.

After my extensive research I began by making a few small storyboards, then creating a picture book dummy, then moved on to my final. Through each phase I looked for flow, comprehension, engagement, and sought help from the author, family and friends, which led to more editing of the composition, flow and characters. Once I had the final picture book dummy, I moved on to the final watercolor paper. I drew and painted the middle pages first because research shows that the middle of the book are least remembered, so if I messed up a little, the audience wouldn’t remember it as much as if I messed up on the first page. After completing 4 middle pages, I decided to change my tactic and draw all the pages, then paint by color. So I painted the same color blue on all of the pages, then all of the grey, then all of the black, and so on. At the end I scanned all of my pages and edited and added text through Photoshop and InDesign.

These illustrations are different than anything I have every created. In the past my art making has been more formal and traditional, where I have done many commission portraits and figure drawings in a realistic style. So for this project I pushed myself out of my comfort zone and into the mind of an illustrator. I accepted where I was as an illustrator, and tried not to be too judgmental. I am very happy with the outcome because
of how much work I put into this project and how much I learned. I learned how much work goes into illustrating children’s books, I learned about myself, and what it means to illustrate. I have a greater appreciation for artists in general because of how isolating it can be, how focused they have to be to get stuff done and just how much time it takes to create.
Appendix D

Cognitive Survey Template

Participant Questionnaire - Adult (Dyslexia Study)

TEACHERS COLLEGE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Differences Between Art-Making and Writing for College Students With and Without Developmental Dyslexia

Please answer the following questions. Thank you for taking the time to provide us with this valuable background information.

Today's Date (M-D-Y):

Gender:  
- Male  
- Female

Date of Birth (D-M-Y):

To the best of your knowledge, were you early or late to begin any of the following:

Note: All children develop at their own rate. Early or late onset of milestones is not necessarily an indication of atypical development.

Crawling?
- Early (6 months)  
- Typical Development (9 months)  
- Late (12 months)  
- Unsure

Walking?
- Early (9 months)  
- Typical Development (12 months)  
- Late (18 months)  
- Unsure

Talking? (single words)
- Early (9 months)  
- Typical Development (12 months)  
- Late (2+ years)  
- Unsure

Tying shoes?
- Early (4 years)  
- Typical Development (5 years)  
- Late (6+ years)  
- Unsure

Handedness:
- Right Handed  
- Left Handed  
- Ambidextrous

Do you sometimes have difficulty telling left from right?
- Yes  
- No

Do you have an excellent memory for experiences, locations, and faces but difficulty recalling facts or information not experienced?
- Yes  
- No

Do you lose track of time?
- Yes  
- No

Have you been diagnosed with any of the following (check all that apply):
- Dyslexia  
- Dysgraphia (poor to illegible handwriting)  
- Dyscalculia (significant difficulty with math)  
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)  
- Other (please specify below), or none of the above

Please specify any additional or other diagnoses here:
When recounting a story, do you find that you frequently mix up the sequence of events?

- Yes
- No

Is there a family history of reading and/or spelling problems?

- Yes
- No

You consider your reading speed to be:

- Slow
- Average
- Fast

Do you have difficulty with grammar?

- Yes
- No

When writing, do you have difficulty expanding your ideas?

- Yes
- No

When reading directions or assembling a piece of furniture, do you prefer written instructions or diagrams?

- Written Instructions
- Diagrams
- Both

When you encounter an unfamiliar word, do you find it difficult to "sound it out"?

- Yes
- No

Do you have difficulty with spelling?

- Yes
- No

Do you ever use an incorrect word in place of a similar sounding word, sometimes resulting in a humorous phrase?

- Yes
- No

Do you avoid reading aloud in public?

- Yes
- No

When you read a passage, do you focus more on the details or the big picture?

- Details
- Big Picture
- Both to the Same Extent

When you are tired, under a time constraint, or emotionally stressed do you notice that you become more easily confused and makes more mistakes than usual?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

How much reading do you do daily?

- Less than 30 minutes
- From 30 minutes to an hour
- From 1 to 2 hours
- From 2 hours to 4 hours
- More than 4 hours

Do you enjoy math?

- Yes
- No

Which, if any, of these math skills do you have trouble with (check all that apply)?

- Addition
- Subtraction
- Multiplication
- Division
- Word Problems
- None

Do you sometimes reverse numbers (for example, write 24 for 42)?

- Yes
- No

Do you generally enjoy reading?

- Yes
- No

As a child, did you receive any tutoring outside of school?

- Yes
- No

If so, how many times a week and for how long?
Confidential

Do you notice that when reading you find it difficult to track a sentence across the page with your eyes?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Do you notice that sometimes your eyes rush back and forth horizontally for short periods of time while reading?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Do you frequently need to reread words, sentences, or passages multiple times to comprehend them?

- Yes
- No

Do you find it difficult to focus on the words on the page, that they blur and/or drift to other lines?

- Yes
- No

Please feel free to make any specific comments about your experience of learning to read and/or with the experience of reading today.

Some of the questions from this survey were adapted from the checklist featured on the Bristol Dyslexia Centre website (http://www.dyslexiacentre.co.uk/signs-of-dyslexia/) as well as the International Dyslexia Association (http://www.interdys.org/AreYouDyslexic_AdultTest.htm). These questions probe issues with spelling, memory, organization, sequencing and the reading experience.
Appendix E

Researcher Bio

www.brianbulfer.com

Brian Bulfer is an artist and educator interested in how different forms of information representation influence the meaning-making process. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A) in drawing and painting and a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in religious studies at California State University Long Beach in 2008. He earned his Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) in visual art at Rutgers University in 2010, with a thesis focused on social data, referential modes, meditative practices, visual didactics, and consciousness studies. Currently, Bulfer is pursuing a Doctorate in Art and Art Education (Ed.D.) at Teachers College, Columbia University with a dissertation focused on how graduate students with developmental dyslexia make meaning of their educational experience and artistic practice. Since 2012, Brian Bulfer has held the position of Director of the ART-Haus Academy program at the Mason Gross Extension Division, where he has been working to develop an art education program for children and adolescents. As an artist, Bulfer is interested in encoding, decoding, and representing data in both digital forms and traditional materials. He has exhibited both nationally and internationally, such as in New York City, Lisbon, Portugal and Venice, Italy.