

## CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES: CONSTRUCTING METAPHORS AND MEANINGS THROUGH ART

**Claudia Saldaña**  
*The University of Texas*

*The aim of this qualitative study is to explore how art, as a semiotic tool, transforms children with disabilities. To achieve this purpose, one must listen to the voices of teachers and childcare workers in the field of special education. The study's preliminary findings found three main categories through data analysis: 1) Teachers' perceptions of art; 2) How children with disabilities respond to art; and 3) Teaching practices through art. These findings show that children with disabilities can establish a connection with teachers through music. With music practices, teachers become aware of what the child wants to express, and of what the child is learning and developing. The study further shows the importance to understand how children respond to art through the diverse disciplines and the development of the practice routines. In addition, the study identifies the necessity to continue researching the area of art, semiotics, and children with disabilities.*

### Introduction

Art, like many interdisciplinary approaches to education, suffers from a general lack of research in existing studies. The diverse, but limited research points to an often underexplored, though potential and important, perspective between art and special education. Art gives us the opportunity to intensify our senses, connect with reality, and let humans be more critical in order to recognize the things that make us vibrate and feel. Joosa (2012) showed the necessity to continue researching the relationship of art education and the field of special education. The research findings are just a tiny contribution of acting and uncovering disabled children's identity, learning development, and behavior of the social world in which they interact. Langer (1957) argued that, *A work of art is an expressive form created for our perception through sense or imagination, and what it expresses is human feeling* (p.15). Art is a voice that can be transformed into a healing semiotic tool for a disabled child's learning and cognitive development, especially in the areas of communication and socialization.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how art, as a semiotic tool, transforms children with disabilities, as well as to understand what social and semiotic meanings these children develop through the diverse environments in which they interact. The semiotic signs are used to bridge art and disability. Semiotics, as a conduit, will be considered a tool for children to use it to convey their own expressions. To achieve this purpose, the goal of this research is to listen to teachers and childcare workers in the field of special education, so as to gain an understanding on how they experienced art and education in their practices with children with disabilities. The research study setting is conducted through the exploration of teachers and childcare workers. The explorations allow identification of the diverse meanings immersed in the experience of a teacher's practice. This study was conducted in a Childcare Center located on the U.S. –Mexico border. This study addressed the following research questions in regards to understanding children's meanings through teachers' voices and experiences.

Research Question 1: How do teachers and childcare workers at Childcare Center think about and use art in their practices?

Research Question 2: What do teachers and childcare workers think the impact of using art as a semiotic tool is in their work with children with disabilities?

Research Questions 3: How do teachers and childcare workers describe the ways in which students with special needs respond to art in their classrooms?

The research questions are supported through several data collection sources including interviews, observations, and field notes, which provide participants' evidences; further, the research questions are sustainable by empirical evidence that allows an analysis of the research interest and to identify the gaps in these important fields.

Research indicates that children with disabilities act in a variety of ways (Taylor, 2005; Joosa, 2012; and Nind, Flewitt & Payler, 2011). For instance, there can be considerable cognitive distinctiveness related to each different condition such as Autism, Down syndrome, and Cerebral Palsy. Craick and Simon (1984) and Hunt and Mitchell (1978) related the concept of distinctiveness to the discrimination of other words in the memory system (as cited in Swanson, 1984). In that sense, art can be used as a semiotic system to communicate with students from all types of disabilities, along with their teachers, childcare workers, and parents.

One way to approach the significance of art in the lives of children with disabilities is through the study of semiotics. Semiotics is about the creation and identification of meanings by the use of signs and symbols. In that sense, *semiotics can assist us in becoming more aware of the mediating role of signs and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing social realities* (Chandler, 2002, p.14). We must ask: how do teachers and childcare workers use art as a semiotic tool and in where it might transform the experiences of students with disabilities? For this reason, it is necessary to explore teachers' experiences with children with disabilities. The study's preliminary findings found three main categories through data analysis: 1) Teachers' perceptions of art; 2) How children with disabilities respond to art; and 3) Teaching practices through art.

Furthermore, the analysis in this article is based on Eisner's (2002) Art and Education theoretical framework. Eisner's perspective explains how senses, through art, develop the capacity of consciousness, and is a way to explore and uncover the things that surrounds us. The connection of the senses with the environment is a process that continues to shape life, culture, and language. Eisner's perspective makes a connection between art and the following areas: senses, learning, aesthetics, culture, and curriculum. Eisner explains that in western philosophical tradition, knowledge is related with language or words: *The limits of our cognition are not defined by the limits of our language* (p.379). Langer (1957), Eisner (2002), and McLean (2008) showed that art is an expressive form of our imagination. In that sense, teachers forge art with students with disabilities, so that their abilities can develop in imagination and consciousness, as well as in their own expressions. In addition, Eisner (2002) explained how students' thinking are often non-verbal thoughts: *The use of imagination can be understood through their remarks about visualization, audition and the employment of metaphor as ways to deepen understanding* (p.151).

#### *Art and Voices of Children with Disabilities*

Analysis in the field of art, education, and disability, research indicates how artwork is the voice of children with disabilities in which they can express their emotions and feelings through the assorted symbols in art (McClain, 2005; Joosa, 2012; Taylor 2005; MacLean, 2008; Bacon & Bennett, 2013; Davis, 2010; Karr, 2013, Darrow, 2006, Dunn, 2013; Desrochers, 2014, and Williams-Carawan & Nalavany, 2010). Furthermore, Taylor (2005) explored the voices of children with disabilities with physical and sensory impairment through artwork in which young students can represent and express their own experiences. Taylor's study revealed how the use and application of art and painting in young people with disability can change their negative and oppressive experiences of life by encouraging positive and inclusive perspectives. It is important to mention how space, texture, and color are important characteristics to the expression of their artwork in order to uncover their self-identity. Their artwork is a voice to their disability, which promotes the inclusivity and diversity through the recognition of a space for them in the society.

On the other hand, MacLean (2008) stated that, *arts gives the opportunity to take 'interdisciplinary approach' to learning, by combining elements of music, dance, drama, and visual arts in order to explore a concept in multiple ways* (p.79). Researchers indicated how music strengthens various areas such as inclusion, teaching practices, identity in children, and younger children and adults with disabilities (Darrow, 2006; Mizuno & Sakuma, 2013; and Gerrity, Hourigan, & Horton, 2013). Darrow (2006) recommended that supporting deaf children in their communication skills can be done by using music within stories: *The pictures help bring meaning to the words, and the background music helps to convey the emotional content story* (p.12). The author explained that deaf participants are more influential to recognize the timbre, texture, and rhythm in the expression of their emotions. In a similar way, Mizuno and Sakuma (2013) discovered that musical instruments give children with disabilities the confidence

to perform in a positive way and encourage them to join the activity with their peers (Mizuno & Sakuma, 2013, p.194). The authors emphasize that children with disabilities are not social; however, musical instruments help develop their language and interaction abilities. Gerrity, Hourigan, and Horton (2013) mentioned that instruments give children the knowledge of different symbols immersed in music. The advantage of introducing music in practice is a benefit that is identified by teachers and children with disabilities. Through my study, it is evident how teachers create communication with children and children with teachers. The diverse symbols immersed in music enable and make this connection conceivable. The study of art through a semiotic perspective makes the identification of signs and symbols immersed in the diverse representations possible as well.

Research studies conducted through the lense of social semiotics and art (Barden, 2012; Stamou, Alevriadou, Eleftheriou, & Vamvakidou, 2008; and Joosa, 2012) showed how students forge their social interaction by recognizing their strengths in literacy events and practices. It also revealed how students show awareness of their disabilities by motivating them to identify their own disability as a strength that is taught in their learning development. Joosa (2012) stated, *For years people with Down syndrome and others with a cognitive disability have been neglected in the discussion of meaning making and little is known how they live their life and experience their social world* (p.26). The author explored art as a social multimodal and semiotic resource field. Joosa (2012) conducted an ethnographic study of a child with Down syndrome named Billy. She analyzed emotions, behaviors, feelings, and social relations in the child's interaction with others. Through narratives and images, the child expressed his meanings by gestures, writing, drawing, and language. Billy used metaphorical depictions of 'super heroes' in his drawings. The findings showed that he represented satisfactory social relation with peers expressing excitement and happiness through body language. In addition, Stockall (2013) stated, *There is little research on the use of visual semiotics to analyze change in teacher beliefs* (p.313). The teaching experiences and practices of inclusion through art promote social interaction with the larger society for children with disabilities (Baker, 2007; Naraiian, 2008; and Ponder & Kissinger, 2009). Baker (2007) explained that teachers and practitioners need to understand children's cognitive processing and using the arts as a path to do that. This is especially true for many autistic learners who might engage better with images than with words. In addition, my study shows that teachers recognize how art allows communication without words. The children can express themselves through body movements. Furthermore, Kliwer, (2008) claimed, *Allowing him access to symbols required a teaching team who believed that child could grow in his communicative and language capacities* (p.115). Teachers play an important role in children's learning development. When a teacher and student work together with their creativity, amazing things happen. Art allows a connection between a teacher and student, which is possible not only to identify how the children are able to produce art, but as humans to recognize and feel the mind and body.

Ponder and Kissinger (2009) conducted a study, which encouraged the inclusion of three teachers in student's art learning practices. They proposed classroom inclusion with one art specialist, one special education teacher, and one teaching artist. The teachers shared knowledge between them. The research findings showed how the majority of teachers do not have the knowledge and teaching experience in art education, and for this reason it is limits the integration of art instruction in their daily teaching practice. Also, teachers of diverse content disciplines can learn to work collaboratively amongst each other by encouraging art activities to include children with disabilities. Through the curriculum, practices are led by a structure; however, it is possible within the formal instruction that teachers create and plan art practices, which leads to all students to develop creativity, imagination, and learning through their senses. The evidence in this study shows that by means of routines, teachers are aware of children's necessities. A teacher explains that children know how to practice routines; however, the teacher wants to develop art practices, especially since children ask for them. Once a teacher is aware of what the children like to do, that teacher can develop a child's consciousness by using art to connect their minds and senses in their everyday life practices. Eisner (2003) stated that, *Our inclination to control and predict is, at a practical level, understandable, but it also, exacts a price; we tend to do the things we know how to predict and control* (p.378).

## Methodology

### Setting

This phenomenological, ethnographic case study took place in a nonprofit organization along the U.S. – Mexico Frontera area in an inclusive Childcare Center. The childcare center is a place that has various services including therapeutic, educational, and day care services for children with/without disabilities. The childcare center supports parents and families by providing special educational programs for all children and their families. The childcare center included children of all ages while incorporating childcare classrooms from: six-week newborns, 1 to 2 yrs., 2

to 4 yrs., 3 to 4 yrs., and 4 to 5 yrs. Each classroom has 12-15 children per group. Also, an afterschool childcare, a program from 6-12 years, and the summer camp are offered once a year.

The study was conducted during the summer of 2014 during the months of July and August. During the study, as the researcher, I had the opportunity to participate as a volunteer in the summer camp provided through the Childcare center. The data collection included teacher and daycare provider interviews, classroom observation activities, and summer camp observations.

#### *Data Collection*

The first step in the study data collection was conducting audio-recorded interviews with teachers and childcare workers. The second step was conducted through classroom and summer camp observations. Also, my role as the researcher was as a participant observer and by taking field notes. The interviews were conducted during 6-8 weeks during 20-minute sessions, and observations and field notes were obtained during teachers' instructional times and specific summer camp art activities. During the interview, the research questions were structured to provide participants the opportunity to express their understandings and personal experiences of the role of art in instructional practice for students with disabilities. One teacher and two childcare providers participated in this study. Helen is a Caucasian childcare worker, and she teaches children from 4-5 yrs.; Nora is a Hispanic childcare worker, and she teaches children from 3-4 yrs.; and Alice is a Caucasian teacher who works in the Childcare Center during summer camps with children from 4-12 yrs. The children in the Childcare Center have disabilities such as autism, diabetes, ADHD, Down syndrome, and Cerebral Palsy. Also, to be eligible for the research, participants were required to be a teacher or childcare workers of the Childcare Center, and must be interested to participate in the study. The anonymity of the participants' names and information was given great thought and care. In that sense, consent form procedures were introduced to each participant from the Childcare Center, as well as explaining to each of them the process and purpose of the research project. Further, teachers and childcare workers who contributed their time in face-to-face interviews were required to voluntarily sign their authorization of conformity to participate in this research.

#### *Findings*

The different sections came from a list of sixteen codes that led the analysis to respond to the main research questions. Each theme expressed the opinions from one teacher, Alice, and two childcare workers, Helen and Nora, as well as classroom observations with teachers and children from the Childcare Center. The analysis was divided into three main sections: 1) Teachers' perceptions of art; 2) How children with disabilities respond to art; and 3) Teaching practices through art. In addition, the analysis was based and reviewed by relevant literature peer-reviewed journal publications, and founded in the structured theoretical framework based on Eisner's art education perspective. Eisner's perspective provided a framework on how art in education is a medium, which enhanced human learning experiences.

#### *Teachers' perceptions of art*

This section describes teachers' perceptions of art. The perceptions involve different sub-themes, such as teachers' and childcare workers' perceptions about art, as well as their learning experience through art.

With assorted personal art experiences, the teachers described how they experienced and perceived art in special education. Helen expressed that art is everything:

I think art relates with everything; to me art is everywhere. But art and special needs children [is] not specially related with special needs. I think art gives an extra outlet to let them to express themselves. Depending on children disability art let to express more. (Helen, Childcare worker)

Helen recognized that art is an extra outlet that allows children to express themselves. Helen's experience allowed her to identify how different children are developing their own learning and expressions. It is important to understand how children with various disabilities, i.e. Autism, Down syndrome, and Cerebral Palsy, act differently, as well as how they develop their own diverse learning cognitive distinctiveness. Joosa (2012) explained that, *From a cultural-historical perspective it required attention to the uniqueness of the individual, as well as the context such as interaction with peers, environment and other [semiotic] [artwork] factors* (p.28). Through art, disabled children have the opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts. In addition, Nora claimed that art is a way to communicate, and recognizes that some children with disabilities cannot express through language:

I think art is beautiful because [it] allow[s] for us to communicate without having to use words, and a lot of my kids do not able to use the words. They can express themselves [through art]; they like to mix colors and it is a wonderful way to interact with them as well. (Nora, Childcare worker)

Nora related art with beauty; she explains that children communicate through the use of art. Because children sometimes cannot speak, they use their body gestures and movements. Art is a voice that transforms the diverse language experience of children with disabilities: Lowenfeld (1982) beautifully explains that, every work of a child will be a new flower if it is their own creation.

It is important to recognize the necessity to create awareness about art meanings in order to develop a sense of learning of life. On the contrary, Helen's perception about art revealed that she enjoys art, and she relates this experience with her teaching practices:

I remember that my family enjoyed my artwork. In that sense, I enjoyed it, and I bring it to class. Sometimes we have the opportunity to do something similar, with leaves, or rocks, they pick up their own leaves or materials. I enjoyed it and I try those experiences in class. (Helen, Childcare worker)

Helen is a graphic designer, which allowed her to apply her professional experience in teaching practices. She connects the real context with the materials that she uses in practices. Causton-Theoharis and Burdick (2008) observed that paraprofessionals play the role of a gatekeeper. The paraprofessional opens and closes gates to students with disabilities in the art classroom practices. In addition, the authors mentioned that when paraprofessionals value art in practices, the environment is an opportunity for teachers and students to learn in a positive way.

#### *Responding to art: children with special needs*

This section describes teachers' perceptions about the ways children with disabilities respond to art. This theme involves different codes, such as teachers' art experiences with children with disabilities, and teachers' activities with children with disabilities through art.

The following evidence revealed the teachers' own descriptions of their experiences teaching a variety of art activities, and show how the children responded through art. They described diverse activities or materials, which promoted a meaningful tool with art. The most relevant evidence showed how teachers perceived that children respond through art practices, and the first evidence was related to music. Nora explained that children with a severe disability respond in a good way to musical practices, *it is nice to look how children with more disabilities join more to music activities. They like to see in front of the mirror, they like it so much. It is funny* (Nora, Childcare worker). The children with disabilities want to uncover their identity and explore themselves. Identity is an important characteristic that shapes their consciousness of themselves, and they do this through art. Davis (2010) stated that, *Creative and expressive arts activities are well suited for children who often do not have the words or vocabulary to explain or express their feelings* (p.131).

The second evidence explained that some children with disabilities respond in a different way with art related materials. Children develop assorted ways to communicate and express their desires and emotions. Helen mentioned that when children want to ask about activities, they point to her. She said that they have their own way to ask about a certain activity or material. In a similar way, Alice described how Diego, a child with autism, enjoyed painting and touching the paints:

Diego likes art a lot because we introduced him to the watercolors, and he liked it. Some autistic children do not like to touch paints. Diego has been introduced to painting at a very early age because that is the first thing he wants to do: play with paint. He likes even to do paintings with his fingers. The way he sees it is the way we just need to go along with it because this is what he sees; this is what he perceives as his [art] creation. (Helen, Childcare worker)

The evidence showed how the child enjoyed doing art by painting. The art material gave the child an opportunity to express himself. For example, he liked to use paint because it is the material that he feels that supports him in communicating better. In addition, I observed during the summer camp activities that Diego did not enjoy listening to music because it altered his senses. Eisner (2003) explained that materials have important qualities, which students use to represent their meanings and forms of expression. The author compared the flute *which makes*

*certain qualities that bass fiddle will never produce, and vice versa* (Eisner, 2003, p.380). For this reason, teachers and parents need to be aware about how to develop practices in order to support each child in the process of their learning, i.e., through music, art, and dance. The disciplines will forge the children's knowledge of their abilities and emotions.

Kliwer (2008) explained that, *Allowing him access to symbols required a teaching team who believed that [child] could grow in his communicative and language capacities* (p.115). Every child responds in a different way. Baker (2007) mentioned that teachers and practitioners need to understand children's cognitive processing which is a path to do that. The solution is not to avoid the use of metaphors that children expresses during practices; instead, it is necessary to learn what a child's cognitive process for learning is.

#### *Teaching practices through art*

This section describes teacher and childcare workers-perception practices through art. Each teacher's and childcare worker's perceptions involves different codes, such as teaching connections with children art practices, course schedules and curriculum, and teachers' and childcare workers' perceptions about teaching practices.

The special education practices require an extra effort in teaching practices. The participants interviewed in this study expressed that they enjoy teaching children with special needs. During the development of many activities with children in special education, a teacher mentioned that it is necessary to schedule and plan routines. Helen mentioned that a routine provides a support to teaching practices. Helen connected planning practices with children's art experiences. Helen discussed how children ask for art activities during instruction:

They ask me, *Can I paint? Can I have a paper?* They always want to do something. That's why I have a plan. Today one child told me, *Can I paint with easel?* Realistically with the schedule, I explain to children to paint on the table. So they are getting a painting experience, but normally [they] use something else.

They always want to do it, even if we have a plan. (Helen, Childcare worker)

By planning, Helen became aware of children's necessities on activities and how children enjoyed developing art activities. Wexler's (2005) research study suggested teaching students with disabilities not only through formal instruction, but he stresses that students should follow their interest and inclinations (p.260). Wexler (2005) explained that students with disabilities follow a routine everyday: *often all get into routines, but I think people with developmental disabilities get really routine oriented* (p.260). Similar to Helen's perspective, Wexler (2005) argued that routine and planning practices support teacher practices; however, the most important factor is to understand how the child responds through these routine teaching practices. Helen mentioned that she follows a structured routine; however, she taught children how to work through a routine environment, which allows child the development in art activities.

In addition, via art instruction, teachers experience the way that the child interacts with art. Children enjoy art activities, and the support of the teacher and childcare providers are important to them. However, they want to develop their own autonomy. Using different movements, gestures and expressions, the children with disabilities express their meanings, their willingness, and their desires through art. The following description reveals Alice's perspective on how a child can convey their language using art with their sense of autonomy by drawing. Alice explained during the interview that one of the children, a boy, was required to trace his hand by drawing, and there the child was able to communicate by himself through his movements. The art activity allowed the child to think about how he wanted to develop the activity by articulating his ideas, gestures, and position:

I think that they do it, like today, one particular child, we were supposed to trace the hand, so I traced his hand the first time, then he closed his hand, he wanted me to close it, you know, we close it. He is different because first he went like this, (fingers closed) and then he went like this (hand closed). (Alice, Childcare-Teacher)

Throughout the interview, Alice explained how the child closed his hand without any verbal communication. The parenthesis in the excerpt expresses the meaning of the teacher's gestures. Alice showed how the child can convey and communicate by his movements using art activity. The child articulated his own desires to create what he likes by communicating and creating. In addition, teachers recognize how children reveal their emotions and autonomy through art.

On the other hand, the evidence showed that art can not only forge the children's expressivity and autonomy, but teachers mentioned that children can develop learning connections with other children through music activities. In addition, the teacher and the childcare workers agreed that children express themselves with music. Music provides the opportunity to establish a connection between a teacher and child. Helen asserted that she encourages practice activities using music. The following evidence showed that Helen established a connection with the child by recognizing that she has an understanding of the children communication:

I had an experience with a child with Down syndrome; he does not speak, he is very smart, and he knows everything about questions you ask him. In classroom we play music through a CD or some music, and we sing. He participates by dancing by himself. I can see he knows, but he can't verbalize; he shakes his hands. He showed that he understands what is happening. He was able to experience a life performance of music, and he enjoyed a lot himself. (Helen, Childcare worker)

Mizuno and Sakuma (2013) explained that children with disabilities are not social; however, musical instruments can develop their language and interaction abilities. Teachers' practice perceptions with music showed how children enjoy learning, and express themselves through the diverse signs immersed in art. Gerrity et al., (2013) explained that instruments provide children the knowledge of different symbols immersed in music. The diverse signs immersed in art have meanings that can be used to transform a child's experiences in a significant learning development. This means that with some students with disabilities, it is more difficult to communicate or have an interaction. The learning, which the child gained through art practices, encourages children's identity and self-confidence.

Art, in teaching practices, cannot be seen only as a free activity; art is a discipline that needs to be implemented in the curricula through the education system. The combination of disciplines with art allows teachers and students to develop a learning connection between meanings and senses. Eisner (2002) explained the importance to unify the form and content of teaching practices. In that sense, children have the opportunity to question how things are. Alice identified art with other disciplines:

Everything is related; math is connected to science; there is art in math; there is art in science; there is art in language arts; there is art [in] social studies; there is art in doctors; there is art in lawyers; there is art in teachers; art is everywhere; art is an expression. (Alice, Childcare teacher)

Alice proclaimed that art is an expression; she recognizes the importance to connect other disciplines with art in order to give meaning to children's knowledge. Eisner (2003) mentioned that more value is assigned to the element of surprise instead of control, especially where the metaphorical approach is more interesting than the literal. Teachers' identified that they require following a structure in their teaching practices. Helen described the teaching experiences through the curriculum, and she mentioned that:

Sometimes [through] curriculum I have some books that I follow; for example, in summer is different it is more free. The curriculum that I followed is about 10 books. I stopped in the summer; June and July at least and part of August is free projects. Sometimes the curriculum shows me to work subject by subject. (Helen, Childcare worker)

It is important to identify that Helen followed a structure through curriculum, but at the same time she gave students the opportunity to change the structure in regards to practices; the diversity in activities allow teachers to create choices in practices. The development of art with other disciplines and the construction of curriculum using a diversity of choices can shape children's learning, as well as encourage them to develop and take awareness about other possibilities of learning. Art provides freedom for teachers to choose activities and to evaluate students. Art gives all students and teachers the opportunity to work without rules, to evaluate, and make the right decision through the development of teaching and learning experiences.

## Conclusion

The opportunity to explore teachers' and childcare workers' experiences and observing how art instruction is applied in an inclusive childcare center allowed for me to reflect upon how teaching art, children's responses to art, and the impact of art as a semiotic tool in teachers' practices interplay in an inclusive childcare center. The variety of researchers reviewed showed how image by painting provides children the support to communicate their feelings and expressions. There are multiple expressions of art, such as painting, drawing, dance, music and theatrical expression, which enhance the learning opportunities for children with disabilities. Moreover, this study showed that

children with disabilities establish a connection with teachers via music. Through music instruction, this teacher became aware of what the child wanted to express and of what they are learning and developing.

In the same way through this learning connection, the findings revealed how children with disabilities expressed themselves by sharing his/her thoughts and feelings, and establishing a connection with the teacher. Eisner (2002) mentioned that with art, students reflect on what they have discovered and think on questions that they might have in the inquiry process. In addition, the symbols immersed in art activities encourage and enable children to learn and develop their awareness to learn what is happening in the present moment of the activity, as well as after the activity. Eisner's art and education perspective explained that senses, via art, invigorate the capacity of children's consciousness as a way to explore and uncover things that surround them. The connection of the senses with the environment is a process that continues to shape life, culture, and language.

This study although limited to the experiences observed and voiced by one teacher and two childcare providers revealed how teachers in this setting connect children classroom learning with the real environment through music; this connection makes it possible for child recognition and leaning of symbols immersed in this environment through art. In addition, the study identified the necessity to continue researching in the area of art, semiotics, and disability. Through the recognition of symbols in art practices, it is also possible for teachers and children to communicate and develop other cognitive abilities. MacLean (2008) argued that when children participate in art activities, they can engage in a number of cognitive, sensory, physical, and emotional levels.

Through a study like this, it may be possible to understand how a child responds to routine practices and curriculum structure. The findings also showed that children express what they want to do in art activities. This is an expression of his/her meanings and desires to do art practices. The study further shows the importance to understand how children respond to art through the diverse academic content area, materials and the development of daily routines.

MacLean (2008) stated that, *The arts are seen primarily as a kind of relief from the rigorous demands of academic subjects* (p.76). In line with this, Eisner (2002) emphasized the necessity of attention to students' hidden messages and ideas that they uncover through practices: *There is no one size fits all curriculum for a nation as diverse and large as ours. Intelligent curriculum planning takes into account such differences and uses them to inform its own policymaking and construction process* (Eisner, 2002, p.157). In that sense, this study allowed us an understanding of art in teaching practices, and how teachers intuitively recognized the importance of including art as an activity however were limited in how they could integrate art into academic instruction. Teachers need to be aware and learn how art, as a semiotic tool, provides a child the cognitive learning development to disclose words, codes, and movements, which acts in connection as an intervention in the context.

#### *Limitations and Future Implications*

The research results reflect the knowledge and understanding of a teacher and two childcare providers and cannot be generalized to the general population of *all teachers*. However it did provide the knowledge about teacher's experiences in art education, which is useful for researchers, teachers, special educators, and instructors in order to understand how children with disabilities respond through art and their meanings. . However it is necessary to continue researching the role that teaching art through semiotic lenses - and how teachers and professionals develop their practices, their knowledge, and their meanings through art. Teachers and professionals need to identify and follow art symbols created by children in order to specifically understand how children with special needs are learning and develop in their social skills. It is necessary to continue to explore through teachers' experiences how teaching art expands children's world view and understandings of their environment. *Teachers of art have a necessary role to play in bringing culture to nature* (Eisner, p.67). Eisner explained the importance of teacher's role on assisting children by helping them develop their skills, sensibilities, and awareness about the world in which they live in.

Regarding future research implications, it is important to consider further research analysis under Eisner's theoretical perspective. Eisner's theoretical framework provided the lenses to understand art education as a complete word, visualizing aesthetics, representation, creativity, and children cognitive character through art. In addition, the research findings showed how children with disabilities express meanings through music. Music provides confidence in students, and they learn how to express themselves and socialize inside and outside the school (Darrow, 2006; Desrochers et al., 2014; Gerrity et al., 2013). Art allows children to recognize differences between each other and how they discover themselves.

## References

- Bacon, A., & Bennett, S. (2013). Dyslexia in higher education: the decision to study art. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 28 (1), 19-32.
- Baker, L. M. (2007). The Art of visualisation: Understanding metaphors. *International Journal of Disability, Development & Education*, 54(2), 257-262.
- Barden, O. (2012). '...If we were cavemen we'd be fine': Facebook as a catalyst for critical literacy learning by dyslexic sixth-form students. *Literacy*, 46(3), 123-132.
- Causton-Theoharis, J., & Burdick, C. (2008). Paraprofessionals: Gatekeepers of authentic art production. *Studies In Art Education*, 49(3), 167-182.
- Chandler, D. (2002). *Semiotics: The basics*. London: Routledge.
- Davis, K. M. (2010). Music and the expressive arts with children experiencing trauma. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 5(2), 125-133.
- Darrow, A. (2006). The role of music in deaf culture: Deaf students' perception of emotion in music. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 43(1), 2-15.
- Desrochers, M., Oshlaq, R., & Kenelly, A. (2014). Using background music to reduce problem behavior during assessment with an adolescent who is blind with multiple disabilities. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 108 (1), 31-66.
- Dunn, M. (2013). Using Art Media During Prewriting: Helping Students with Dysgraphia Manage Idea Generation Before Encoding Text. *Exceptionality*, 21(4), 224-237.
- Eisner, E. (2003). Artistry in education. *Scandinavian Journal of Education Research*, 47 (3), 373-384.
- Eisner, E. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gerrity, Hourigan, & Horton (2013). Conditions that facilitate music learning among students with special needs: A mixed methods inquiry. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 61(2), 144-159.
- Joosa, E. (2012). Drama and dreams: Looking through a cultural historical and semiotic lens at the graphic dramatic interplay of a young adult with Down Syndrome. *Cultural-Historical Psychology*, (1), 26-33.
- Karr, V. (2013). 'Silver Scorpion' Communal comics and disability identities between the United States and Syria. *International Journal of Education Through Art*, 9(2), 173-187.
- Kliwer, C. (2008). Joining the literacy flow: Fostering symbol and written language learning in young children with significant developmental disabilities through the four currents of literacy. *Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 33(3), 103-121.
- Langer, S. (1957). *Problems of art, ten philosophical lectures*. New York, Scribner.
- MacLean, J. (2008). Art of inclusion. *Canadian Review of Art Education*, (35), 75-98.
- McClain, P. (2013). Seeing learning disability through re/claiming a book: an Art/topographic Inquiry. *UNESCO observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts*.3 (1), 1-13.
- Mizuno, E., & Sakuma, H. (2013). Wadaiko performance enhances synchronized motion of mentally disabled persons. *Perceptual & Motor Skills*, 116(1), 187-196.
- Naraian, S. (2008). Institutional stories and self-stories: investigating peer interpretations of significant disability. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 12(5-6), 525-542.
- Nind, M., Flewitt, R., & Payler, J. (2011). Social and home environments. *Children & Society*, 25(5), 359-370.
- Lowenfeld, V. (1982). *The Lowenfeld lectures*. Pennsylvania State University.
- Ponder, C., & Kissinger, L. (2009). Shaken and Stirred: A pilot project in arts and special education. *Teaching Artist Journal*, 7(1), 40-46.
- Stamou, A., Alevriadou, A., Eleftheriou, P., & Vamvakidou, I. (2008). Constructing an identity of able-bodiedness: Discourses of disability by primary school children, in Ross, A. & Cunningham, P. (eds.) *Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice and Innovation*. London: CiCe, pp. 643 – 652.
- Stockall, N. (2013). Photo-elicitation and visual semiotics: A unique methodology for studying inclusion for children with disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(3), 310-328.
- Swanson, H. (1984). Effects of cognitive effort and word distinctiveness on learning disabled and nondisabled readers' recall. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 76(5), 894-908.
- Taylor, M. (2005). Access and support in the development of a visual language: arts education and disabled students. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 24 (3), 325-333.
- Williams Carawan, L., & Nalavany, B. (2010). Using photography and art in concept mapping research with adults with dyslexia. *Disability and Society*, 25 (3), 317-329.
- Wexler, A. (2005). GRACE Notes: A grass roots art and community effort. *Studies in Art Education*, 46 (3), 255-269.