

ART CONNECTION

ART CONNECTION:  
PORTRAIT OF ARTISTIC EXPERIENCES IN STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

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To Kaylin Rae who has always inspired me with her 'never give up attitude,  
thank you my friend and daughter.

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### Abstract

This case study is an exploration of how engaging in an artistic process might assist students with dyslexia in better conveying their ideas. The arts elicit higher-order thinking skills and utilize multi-sensory learning approaches, allowing students with dyslexia to experience the visual and tactile stimuli that create memories for them. For many of these students, artistic expression is their way to personally connect and interpret what they are learning by capitalizing on their strengths.

Through a case study of two creative processes (one written and one visual), a series of individual interviews and a group discussion, the students and I explored the benefits art making has on their communication skills. The written and visual results, observations, interviews and group discussion responses were gathered, compared, and analyzed to provide an understanding of the benefits of an artistic process on the students' ability to communicate their ideas. I relied on portraiture methodology to portray individual encounters, observations and perspectives. This study represents the students' appreciation and awareness of the benefits art has in offering a different stimulus to improve communication skills in their learning. In addition, the awareness that artistic processes can benefit their communication in other modalities has given these students a potential strategy to enhance their writing abilities.

CHAPTER 1  
A UNIQUE LEARNING STYLE

**Viewing Details**

Defined by The International Dyslexia Association, dyslexia is a specific learning disability characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. Dyslexia is known to affect up to twenty percent of people. Burrows & Wolf (1983), experts in the field of dyslexia, find that children diagnosed with dyslexia tend to be very creative and talented yet struggle academically. Working as an art teacher in a school that is geared specifically to meeting the needs of dyslexic children, I understand the benefits art has to offer dyslexic children in emotional and social growth. The purpose of this thesis is to identify the role art might play in dyslexic children's ability to express written ideas.

According to Silverman (1997), a visual learner is a person who learns ideas, concepts, data and other information that is associated with images and techniques. Children diagnosed with dyslexia are often highly imaginative and creative problem solvers (Vail, 1990). Because of their language deficits, they are more apt to use their visual, spatial and perceptive abilities to assist with understanding what they are processing (Davis & Braun, 1994). In their minds eye, they often see in images instead of words. This tendency to think in images can facilitate and promote artistic abilities yet create academic challenges for these students when learning to read and write, yet . Armstrong (1987) cites growing evidence that points to the importance of the mental image as a crucial

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step along the way toward higher abstract thinking for the young child (p. 84). Brock and Eide (2011) discuss the predisposed abilities that come with dyslexia. Among these abilities are three-dimensional thinking, spatial reasoning, the ability to perceive relationships like analogies or diversity, remember important personal experiences, and look at the world with a big picture view. They talk of a top-down or big picture approach that students with dyslexia use to determine the purpose of the whole rather than the bottom up approach used to teach sentence construction.

Most learning environments that are not cognoscente of specific language difficulties are not suitable to a dyslexic's learning style. The pace of learning is much faster with less repetition or review, methods needed for many students with dyslexia to master the concepts being taught. Many times only one modality, speech, is used to teach lessons. A hands-on, multi-sensory, repetitive teaching approach provides these students a learning style that encourages understanding. "Multi-sensory training, which joins seeing, hearing, saying, and writing in one unified approach to reading and writing our language, helps students with dyslexia learn the skills needed for survival in our verbal, print-oriented society" states Vail (1990, p. 3). The art room is a place for exploration and inspiration; a place to investigate, question and create. The pedagogy used in art classrooms often includes hands-on learning, and may provide many of these students with a place where they can explore without fear of failure. This environment becomes a safe place where they learn to believe, trust and take

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pride in their artistic capabilities. “Art has the potential to enhance the making of meaning” (Lynch, 2007, p. 34).

My experience teaching art to dyslexic children for the past fourteen years has shaped the motives of this research. In the art room, I have seen unmotivated, timid, angry, and withdrawn children evolve into confident, happy, and expressive students eager to take on whatever is put in their path. With this knowledge, I am drawn to ask questions such as, what does art making bring to these students? Does it elicit skills in other disciplines?

### **Parallel Experience**

While reflecting on the creative process as a visual experience, I am drawn to Dewey’s (1934) description of art as an experience. He believed that art must become a crucial, living aspect of an individual experience and that the growth of the individual is produced by that experience creating new meanings and connections. Those connections contribute to individual beliefs, viewpoints, and voice. My previous experiences have molded my stance as an artist and educator allowing me to interpret the relevance of art making filtered through my personal lens.

Let me explain my position through a personal art experience. As I flew across the country from Seattle to Florida last summer, I anticipated the University of Florida’s Printmaking studio class *Place of Sense*, in which I was enrolled. The syllabus described the busy week of learning printmaking techniques through the use of our five senses, sight, taste, touch, sound and

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smell. I recall wondering how the senses would be incorporated into the process of printmaking. I understood immediately on the first day of class as we were taken outside and instructed to draw what we observed in thirty-second intervals. Moving slightly after each timed mark, we drew in quick bursts connecting unrelated objects until we had returned to where we had started leaving us with an amalgamate interpretation of what we had seen. With that drawing, we translated our vision of sight into a frottage process of printing. The four days to follow became the most exhausting, exhilarating, artistic experience I have had for many decades. Our goal for the week, our instructor Bill explained, was to explore experience and express image-making possibilities that engage the other senses.

The five intense days of printmaking opened my senses to experience the world as I saw, smelled, tasted, touched and heard it. My experience and exploration of my senses in that class parallel my questions about the connection between visual artistic creation and the communication of written words. I was pressed to ask myself the following questions: In what ways do having art making activities that tap into different learning styles effect the writings of children with dyslexia? Are integrative approaches, as such art making and writing, effective learning strategies for children with dyslexia?

### **Significance of the Study**

For a students with dyslexia whose self-confidence has been depleted from repeated academic failures, the fear of failure outweighs the chance of success. For them to admit that they learn differently and to trust in their own

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process and perceptions requires a level of confidence. The artistic process activates the mind to create, observe, evaluate and formulate opinions. Art might provide students with dyslexia with a means to find success by embracing the creative process and begin to believe in themselves, which in turn would give them security to take risks. If they could understand and tap into their artistic learning style with the knowledge that it may potentially assist their writing skills, they might consciously try harder, which in turn could produce more positive results.

My research explored the possible connection and the potential benefit art making has on a dyslexic's education. My research question is what is the benefits of the artistic process on assisting students with dyslexia in communicating their ideas? In essence, my study had two purposes: to explore the students' use of their visual skills, in order to determine if the artistic process alters their ability to express their ideas in writing, and to address the gap in the literature relating to the relationship between dyslexia, art and written communication.

CHAPTER 2  
LITERATURE REVIEW

The research that informed my study had an overarching theme of creativity and dyslexia. A clear and detailed awareness of dyslexia was essential background knowledge to conduct my research topic. Along with that knowledge, I also needed to understand the different learning styles of a child, methods of instruction, and have an overall understanding of the creative process of art making.

The literature that I chose to research had various components, which I analyzed and synthesized in order to illustrate the link between art making and expressive writing. The content of the articles encompassed the following topics: dyslexia, art and learning styles. I pooled my resources from the “Annals of Dyslexia” retrieved from the International Dyslexia Association, scholarly journals, art education books and periodicals of individual dyslexic stories found online. There are many scholarly articles written about the benefits of the artistic process on the well being of a child and the relationship it has with higher thinking, a few written articles about the positive affects on dyslexic children, and very few that specifically substantiate the relationship between art making and better written communication skills in students with dyslexia. It is my belief that both the learning styles of children and the hands-on visual approach of the arts are beneficial to these students, but together creates a dynamite combination promoting self-awareness and knowledge and a strategy in learning.

The literature on dyslexia is substantial and informative about the challenges that face students with dyslexia. Levine (2002) states some (dyslexic) children have difficulty writing. Specifically, they have difficulty forming letters quickly and accurately enough to keep up with their flow of ideas and words. Along with comprehension, fluency and

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writing, remediation is discussed in reference to auditory, visual and kinesthetic learning styles by offering a multi-sensory teaching approach. Utilizing two of those styles, art making encourages many students with dyslexia to work with their strengths to make personal connections. Vail (1990) believes that these students need to discover their strengths and that we (educators) must find the right method to teach these children so that they understand how they learn best and learn to embrace their dyslexia.

Gobbo (2010) talks of dyslexic artist Robert Rauschenberg's "creative process focused on his novel way of seeing things and the advantage he gained from some of the visual differences he experienced as an artist with dyslexia" (p. 1). Can processing through images aid dyslexic children in conveying their thoughts in written form? In her article, "The Gifted/Dyslexic Child: Characterizing and Addressing Strengths and Weaknesses", LaFrance (1997) states, "Most importantly, greater insight into "the child as he is" would be invaluable to the classroom teacher or language therapist who might then use the child's creative strengths to teach him or her "the language as it is" (p.176). LaFrance (1997) through her research on the gifted dyslexic child, recognizes their strength to creatively solve complex problems and the ability to understand the bigger picture of an idea. She concludes,

Attention to creative thinking strengths will complement the multi-sensory approach, improve motivation and self-concept, and hasten the remediation process because of the emphasis on the integration of all mind functions. Teachers are often struck by the ability of bright dyslexic children to think originally, to elaborate a story line, to express their feelings in drawings, to put themselves intuitively into another pair of shoes, and to understand the internal workings of things. These are all aspects of creative thinking, which have not been formally documented. (p. 164)

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As an art teacher in a school specifically for students with dyslexia, I have discovered that our population tends to be very talented in the arts. Most are visual thinkers and often use images to process their ideas. A dyslexic child that has been encouraged to use his big picture thinking abilities intrinsically uses his unique view of the world to creatively express and gain personal experience.

In examining the benefits of arts in the lives of children, the literature is unmistakably clear. Eisner (1986) says in his brief discussion of the imagination "the arts provide a platform for seeing things in ways other than they are normally seen" (p. 83). Arnheim (1980) classifies visual structuring into two groups, intuitive and intellectual. The intuitive process is achieved through perception, yet it is the intimate interaction between the intuitive and intellectual functioning that yield the best results in learning. The arts encourage innovation, exploration and inquiry allowing children to look at the world in a more perceptual way. Smith (2001) believes the arts capture children's excitement, interests, and passions and that they are motivators demanding involvement. She also talks of the change of importance of art in school curriculum since 1980. She states more than half of the states are now required to include some art form for high school graduation. She believes "the arts are important to all students, but for those (learning disabled students) whose educational lives are on the line, experiences in the arts are crucial" (p. 3). The arts facilitate higher abstract thinking skills, tapping into the big picture thinkers of dyslexic children. Silverman (1997) describes visual learners as those that think in images; they understand the big picture because they see the world through artists' eyes. For a dyslexic child, the arts are a means to find success in learning without the struggles faced with other academics.

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According to Nachmanovitch (1989), when we create, we open up expressive possibilities. Eisner (2002) argued that students who participate in the arts learn shaping form to create expressive content and the ability to transform qualities of experience into speech and text. Smilan (2009) talks of the importance of leadership in art-based creative inquiry and that these skills are essential for students to develop the skills such as interpreting, applying, and conceiving possibilities.

Although research has illustrated the learning styles of dyslexic children and the benefits of visual thinking for any child, the potential link between art and dyslexia is weak. In *The Dyslexic Advantage*, Brock and Eide (2011) explain how dyslexic brains differ from non-dyslexic brains. They claim, “dyslexic individuals often struggle to retrieve words from memory” and that “many have difficulty in learning the rules that describe how words work together in groups” (p. 21-22). Shaywitz (1998) found that individuals with dyslexia use their right hemisphere more than others not diagnosed with dyslexia. Arnheim (1980) discusses the sequence of learning for all students. He concludes that the child explores the world first through action, then through imagery, and finally through language. To understand language, perception and action play an important role. Hardiman (2003) argues that visual arts, drama, and movement activate the neurotransmitter serotonin, associated with high self esteem and enhanced cognitive skills. These authors talk of the importance of these styles and characteristics of learning, which are essential for a student with dyslexia to understand. Therefore, to combine self-esteem, enhanced cognitive skills and perception through the visual arts when looking for an encouraging language based outcome, it seems unlikely that a student with dyslexia would not benefit from this mix.

CHAPTER 3; METHODS

**Portraiture Methodology**

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), who developed *portraiture* as a method, defines portraiture as “a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life” (p. XV). On the cover of *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997) is the image of Picasso’s “Girl Before a Mirror.” The portrait is of a female looking into a mirror seeing not the reflection that is expected but an interpretation of her portrait. Lawrence-Lightfoot refers to the aesthetics of the portrait as she speaks of her method. She clarifies the design of portraiture as this mirror image of accuracy in documenting, interpreting, analyzing and narrating capturing “the mystery and artistry that turn image into essence” (p. XVII). The portrait of a child with dyslexia portrayed through my lens is a valuable part of this research. I hope to capture the essence of the participants by my personal interpretation that allows the reader to understand and relate to their unique, complex learning style.

English (2000) criticizes Lawrence-Lightfoot’s portraiture method by claiming the interpretation and the stance of the researcher deludes the reader into false assumptions. He believes the active and insider role of the researcher in portraiture creates and molds the story rather than merely searches for one. He states, “It is a far more assertive and interactive process than perhaps even some qualitative researchers would find comfortable,” and that it is “beyond reproach” (p. 22). I disagree, and contend that it is the relationship nurtured between researcher and participants portrayed in the study that offers the reader a connection to the experience. Moreover, using the

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portraiture method allows me to be transparent about the trust and understanding central to the relationships I have built with my students and, in so doing, makes this research more trustworthy (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Scheman, 2008).

Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions along with their authority, knowledge and wisdom (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). I chose portraiture as a methodology for this research because it not only offers me a chance to uncover the beliefs and passions of students with dyslexia, but also allows me to infuse my own voice with flexibility and liberties to set the scene and articulate the context of the study to the reader.

### **Examples of Portraiture**

In this section, I share three qualitative studies that use portraiture, each focusing on different qualities of the method. In *Allow the Music to Speak: A Portraiture Case Study of Pre-service Teachers integrated Literacy Methods Course*, (Moore, 2011), begins by introducing her own memories of a trip to the Grand Canyon. Her experiences become an intricate part of her voice, perspective and interpretation of her study. The reader begins to understand her particular viewpoint of situations and data collected in her research. Chapter 1, titled “Beginning the Journey,” takes the reader into the researcher’s emotional journey down the Colorado River with her sister. The physical trip was uneventful yet the experience was filled with an overture of artistic and musical metaphors. Moore (2011) states,

In essence, there are times when rocks tumble from the canyon above into the water, creating pockets of shallow water that struggles to pass over the rocks. In these rapids, I could truly hear the distressed call of the river over the rocks and the echoing response of the rocks against the

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river. But, there wasn't only rushing water over the rocks. There were many moments of peace. In my musician's mind, I likened these to rests. In music, there are moments of quiet, where the players or singers literally take a rest from creating sound; they pause in their making of music. (p. 3)

She compares this moment in the Grand Canyon to her music and to the journey she and the pre-service teachers take through her research. Through a rich detailed narrative Moore bequeaths the reader with the knowledge of their experiences. I have worked with students with dyslexia for over 14 years and have a child diagnosed with dyslexia of my own. My personal journey as their art teacher and as a parent is an essential part of this research. I then ask myself: how much of the researcher's story is important for the reader to know in order to make sense of the study? Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) have explained:

In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is everywhere: in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework she brings to the inquiry; in the questions she asks; in the data she gathers; in the choices of stories she tells; in the language, cadence, and rhythm of her narrative. (p. 85)

I will attempt to instill my personal predispositions into the study to gently enhance the narrative.

Descriptive story telling is the representation of portraiture. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) compare the portraiture method to an artistic process; the voice to the portraitist is like the brush to the artist and the voice or the hand finds and expresses the interpretation. Cravath (2002) uses Baron's (2000) critical storytelling combined with portraiture to re-paint his subject's story through his interpretation. He believes this approach allows him to insert his personal lens to sift and shape information and experiences. Using italics to set

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the subject's memories apart from the researcher's story, he flips from memories to "re-storying." For example:

*Sylvia: -and I remember that there was a hole in it because I was painting. It was just that experience more than anything else- just the love of color.*

### The Art Lesson ( researcher)

Sylvia swished the brush across the white board.

-Mommy big red flowers for me. White thing colors on it we put. Splash Mommy say, lots of it. So pretty Mommy say. And green put on. Colors in leaf green black yellow blue. (p. 97)

With full latitude, he re-writes her memories into a colorful, dynamic life journey inviting the reader to travel to the story's end with him. While the combination of methods accomplishes what this researcher was striving for, this blend of methods would not carry out my desire to uncover the beliefs of students with dyslexia and to interpret them as honestly as I can. Yet, the descriptive detail of portraiture provides defining context to shape my research study.

Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) state, "relationship building is at the center of portraiture," and that "portraitists hope to build trust and rapport- first, through the search for goodness; second, through empathetic regard; and third, through the development of symmetry, reciprocity, and boundary negotiation with the actors" (p. 141). Chapman (2007) demonstrates the reliance of portraiture on relationship building in *Interrogating Classroom Relationships and Events: Using portraiture and Critical Race Theory in Education Research*, where she combines portraiture and critical race theory (CTR) to experience participants' knowledge, perceptions and reflections of themselves as students of color and what influenced their learning. The researcher's relationship with those students is enhanced by her stance as a black woman, a teacher, a parent and a community member. She states, "structural issues such as

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teacher knowledge, curricular reforms, and school contexts significantly affect the classroom milieu,” and that “portraitists who use CRT must explore their own race, class, and gender roles in explicit ways that other methodologies and theories do not readily embrace” (p. 158). Her personal views, past teacher experience and former relationship with students help her to understand the participants’/students’ perspectives and experiences, which in turn creates an intimate rapport with them. She encourages dialog with the participating students through several group discussions. In these discussions, the students feel confident to learn from one another and form relationships, which in turn builds confidence to reveal family history. In a conversation with a few students, the researcher is able to understand why one student would not write about her heritage:

*Brittany:* I told her I didn’t know my family tree.

*Researcher:* Why did you tell her that?

*Brittany:* Because I didn’t feel like writing it down (focus group students laugh). I don’t know. My granny, she lives Down South and her name is Sadie.

*Researcher:* So why not share that?

*Brittany:* (Shrugs her shoulders).

*Dina:* Because it’s personal.

*John:* And it’s embarrassing. (p. 159)

As a researcher, I feel that understanding the feelings and emotions of the participating students is imperative. Through different stances, portraiture allows me to utilize a relationship with each student to create rich and meaningful narratives with introspection. As their art teacher, I have already established a working relationship with them. My hope is that revealing my experiences as a parent of a child with dyslexia it will validate my empathy and understanding of their world. With my experiences as an artist, we can share our passion for art. Candid interviews and group discussions will

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provide the students and I an opportunity to examine their feelings, thoughts and motives together while creating connections. The physical boundaries of this study will be limited to the art room and the student's homeroom where the students will feel at ease to participate in the activities.

All three of these articles provide interesting insight into my own work; I see unifying elements of my work in each of these pieces. Like Moore (2011), I frame the narrative by connecting my stance and part of the research through personal vignettes that help paint the portraits of the students. Like Cravath (1997), I attempt to project the voices of the students loud and clear. Their feelings, stories and thoughts are a fundamental component of my research. And, like Chapman (2007), the relationship fostered between the students and myself provide a foundation for intimate discussions to take place allowing personal perspectives and insight to come forth. In my research I attempted to merge three portraiture elements; stance, narrative and relationship painting a vivid portrayal of students with dyslexia revealing their voyage of self-exploration.

### **Research Design**

The school that I work at, which I will call Cooper School, is a transitional school for students with dyslexia to learn the reading and writing tools that allows them to successfully mainstream back into public or other private schools. Most students enrolled in our program have experienced years of failure that has depleted their self-confidence and self-worth. The art room is regarded by the students as a "safe zone"; a room where written assignments are seldom expected and self-expression through creativity is welcomed and universal. Among the four middle school students that

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participated in this study, two have been enrolled at the school for four years, another for three years and one student has just completed her first year. I refer to those students as Elaine, Gary, Fred, and Mary, all of which are pseudonyms. These students were acutely aware of their diagnosis, their needs, their strengths and hopes for success. They brought their own experiences and opinions into this study that were conveyed throughout the interviews, discussion and my interpretation. The objective was to open a dialog on dyslexia and explore the benefits art making has on communicating their written ideas.

Through a study of two creative processes, one written and one visual, along with a semi-open ended interview and group discussion, the students and I explored my research question. The student participants were eleven to twelve years of age. The students were asked to participate in a study but were not made aware of the intent up until the interview process. The written process consisted of roughly two twenty-minute writing sessions. The students were asked to write a small descriptive paragraph, around fifty to one hundred words, comparing summer and winter. The student writings varied in size. These writings occurred both before and after they completed an art project based on the same topic. Both creative writings took place in the morning in their homeroom with their homeroom teacher directing them.<sup>1</sup> The art project was created in the morning in the art room. The students were given a choice of medium consisting of modeling clay, watercolor and acrylic paints, colored pencils and oil pastels to create their artwork. They had approximately fifty minutes to complete their project. The

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<sup>1</sup> The key to this case study was to conduct it without causing undue emotional distress to the students. I set the location of the writing portion of the experiment to the student's homeroom where writing is more commonly expected than it is in the art room. This ensured their perception of the art room as a safe environment to explore and express.

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students conversed freely as they created their projects. In this setting, I felt more of an observer than teacher or participant, although eventually I joined in the conversation that had focused on summer. Two of the four projects were finished within the allotted time; the other two were left unfinished. After the second writing exercise, the students were asked a series of semi-open ended questions about their experience and feelings. I collected the paragraphs of the four students from the homeroom teacher and the art project created in the art room. These paragraphs and art project can be seen in figures 4.1- 4.12

My research question asks what is the benefits of the artistic process on assisting students with dyslexia in communicating their ideas? The data generated from the writing and art making process opened a dialog between the students and I about the positive affects art making had on them. The art making activity was fun, relaxing and therapeutic for the students. We conversed freely and at ease about their writing, their art project, its process, and how all of it tied into assisting them in retrieving descriptive words. They discussed and compared the different art mediums and processes they personally chose. In my eyes, the activity and environment produced a very stress-free atmosphere to explore art making and their own thoughts about how it assisted them in their written thoughts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The time of day, limited ages of students, time constrictions, and unavoidable distractions may have limited this study. Many students with dyslexia also diagnosed with attention deficit disorder are on medication to help them focus. Mornings are often more productive than afternoons because of medication effectiveness. The determined

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age range of students helped ensure the writing skill level required to participate in all sections without due stress. Spelling and word retrieval are obstacles these students face. The older students have received more language intervention and likely have the tools to compensate for their disability. Most often students with dyslexia require additional time for writing lessons. By discussing the student's academic needs with the homeroom teacher, I determined ample time for the writing portion (approximately twenty minutes) of the study. I based the estimated time for the art making portion by my own experience as an art teacher. Disruption from other students and noises could not be avoided. Some readers may feel that my own bias that art making does in fact assist in the student's mental status, thus positively trickling into other academic studies limits the study as well. Although I do not view this as a "limitation," the bias was unavoidable, and I chose a method that would allow me to contribute my role and perception as an educator and parent of a dyslexic child in my research.

### **Collecting Data**

The general interview guide found in "Collecting data by in-depth interviewing" (Berry, 1999) guided my approach to the interview process. An in-depth, semi-open ended interview allowed me the flexibility to explore, probe and focus questions on my research interest. I used a set of 10 questions for this interview shown in the Appendix. I also gathered, assembled and examined examples of students' written and visual work. Art work and written paragraphs are shown in figures 4.1 - 4.12 after each individual stories. The students and I then explored their thoughts and feelings about the procedure, their art making, and dyslexia and to discern if this process was beneficial in

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their ability to generate and express ideas. This group discussion with all participants was the final portion of this study.

CHAPTER 4  
FINDINGS

**Personal Connection**

After examining the writings, my initial thoughts were there wasn't much of a connection between the first and second writings. Although some written responses varied in length, the amount of descriptive words used and content the sequencing seemed sporadic and didn't demonstrate the enhancement of descriptive words that I had hoped for. One student, while writing his second paragraph, chose to write about the artistic process rather than using the prompt. Another students' second writing was much shorter and used his descriptive words to describe summer and winter in contrast to comparing them. I state these written processes as discrepancies in my original deliberation of whether the artistic process assists these students ability to express written ideas. Which leads me to believe that their personal perception of the benefit of art making is what changed their attitude to learn difficult subjects.

Consequently, as I sat down to write the introduction to this chapter, I found my mind drifting back to when my daughter was beginning her educational journey as a child with dyslexia. I contemplated the influence my personal experiences as her mother had on my stance as a researcher, educator and participant of this study. Remembering back to her school years, her experiences and struggles parallel the thoughts and emotions of the four students that I write about in this case study. My daughter's experience in school was so similar to the experience of my students in this study.

My daughter's stories came to life through her artwork. Her primary school years became difficult for her as she was expected to engage in the process of academic learning. She was not interested in learning to read, write or spell, although she could

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remember songs and stories with ease. At home she adored bedtime stories that let her mind run freely into her personal creative world. Once, while volunteering in her classroom, I realized that she had learned a coping skill to blend in with other children, using her visual and memory strengths to compensate for her inability to read. Her confidence through this facade was short lived when others learned that she indeed could not read. As her mother, I observed and empathized with her frustration and lack of motivation over the years as she realized she was different.

These personal experiences, emotions and knowledge allow me to join my students on a journey of exploration of beliefs, passions and awareness of their dyslexic learning style. Our conversations and their creative activities prompted us to collectively ponder the benefits art making has on their written communication skills. Here are their stories.

### **Interviews**

#### **Gary**

Gary has been enrolled at the school longer than the other students in the study. Even though he carried himself with confidence as he walked into the art room, he greeted me with hesitation and asked, "Is this going to be hard?" "No," I said as I prepared the tape recorder for the interview. "I would like you to answer how you feel." The interview began with the first question, "How do you think you learn best?" Gary defined himself as an artist and a visual learner. He told me that creating calms him down and he just "goes for it." This statement reminds me that he is a skateboarder and loves the spontaneity and freedom of the sport. Although comparing his approach to skateboarding and to his artwork, from my observation as his art teacher, his creations

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are detailed and carefully thought out. He said, "It expresses my feelings and makes me think." As he talked about his enjoyment of art, I thought of the artwork he has produced in class and smiled. He is definitely a talented artist. I asked about writing and if it was hard for him. He nodded and admitted that he mixes up his words. When I asked for clarification, he explained that he mixes his vowel sounds while he writes the words on paper. With a pause, he also stated that it is the spelling and sounding out of words that is the hardest. Gary has tested at a third grade reading level in word recognition and comprehension. As we talked, he used many "ums" and "I don't know." His face was tight, his eyebrows positioned in a downward slant. He was clearly not comfortable talking of his academic difficulties. With a pause, he professed that he feels very awkward when he writes and informed me that his biggest problems are reading, writing and math. This was a statement that I have heard many times from students, and as Gary said it aloud, I grasped the severity of it. Many experts of dyslexia refer to learning difficulties that affect all subjects as global difficulties. How could these students feel success with such monumental challenges?

With a few more questions about writing, he confided that he enjoyed the writing assignment I gave him for this research because he was able to write about what he liked. He said that it was hard to think of descriptive words in the first writing, but that it was easier in the second due to the artwork he created in between. He recalled, "It got a little bit easier because I drew it and it gave me a better picture of the words I wanted to use." I remembered observing Gary as he engaged in his creative process. Sitting amongst his friends, he was carefree, talking about summer, skateboarding and loving art as he diligently worked on his project. At ease with his surroundings, he was safely

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and enjoyably in his element. Anticipation swelled in me as I prepared to ask him the last question of the interview. I wondered, did he also believe that art making helps him discover his ideas? "Do you think the art making helped you express your ideas better?" Immediately he replied, "Yes, because you don't have to say it. You can just draw it and that's easier for me."

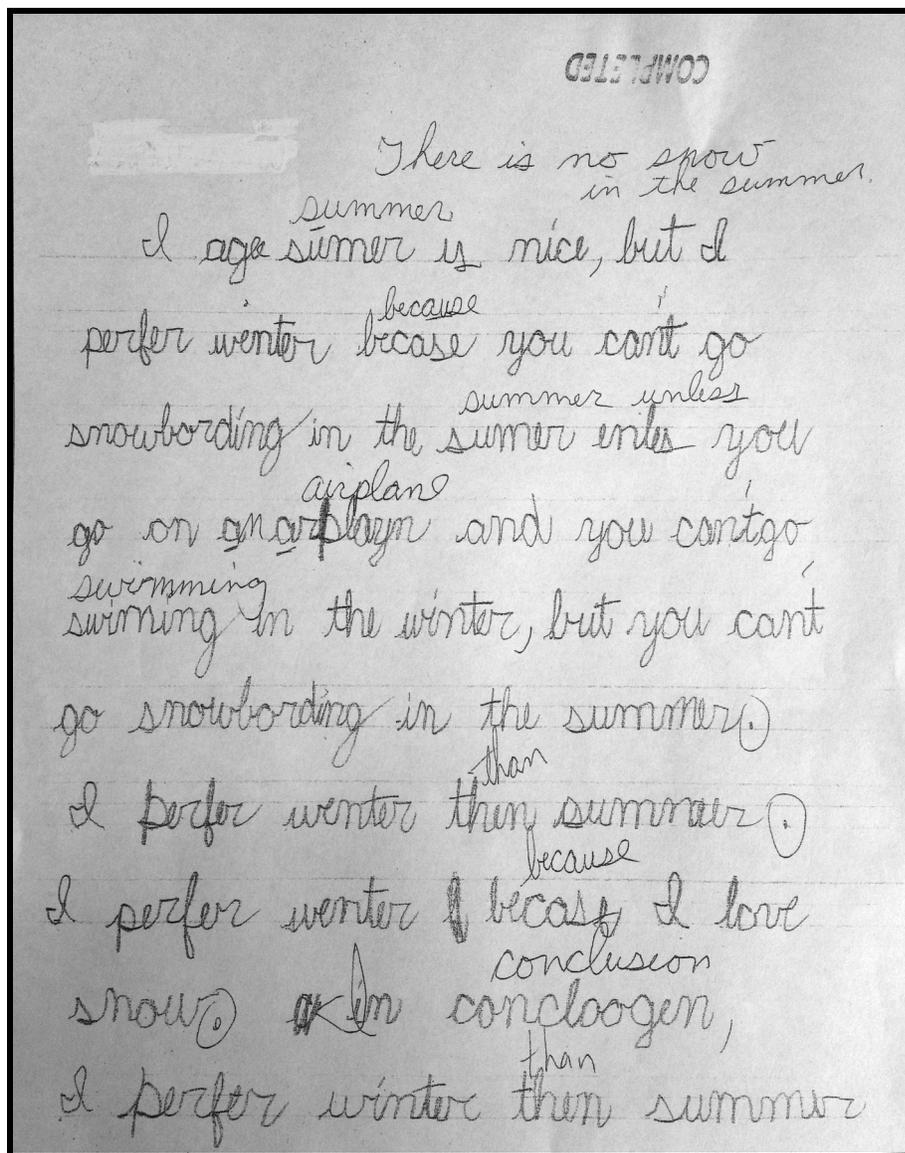
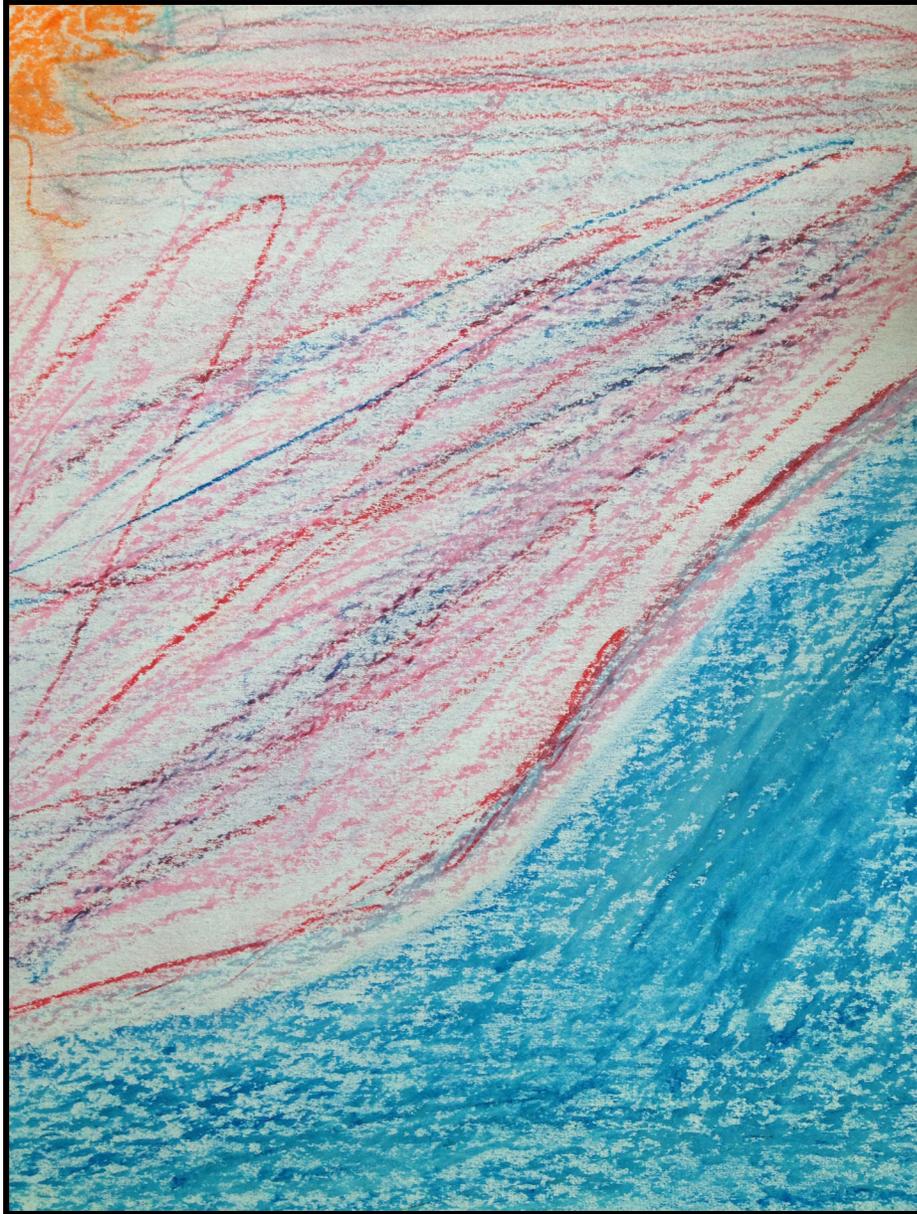


Figure 4.1 Gary's first written sample

what I was thinking when I did my  
art. was the colors of what I see.  
when I am skying. I see blue  
snow and I see pink, blue, red, white,  
and that's why I prefer winter than  
summer. By: \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 4.2 Gary's second writing sample



*Figure 4.3 Gary's artwork*

**Elaine**

Gracefully gliding into the art room, Elaine, a small-framed stylish young lady sat down with poise. She eagerly awaited the interview. I started the interview with the first question. She engaged by answering that she is a visual and auditory learner. Spelling is hard for her but she has always enjoyed writing, especially poems. I asked her if she

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thought poems were creative. She responded by saying, "They are, they are because you are using words in an artistic way." When writing poems, she taps into her emotions and the words flow out of her, many times, spelled correctly. She mostly writes her poems when she is angry or frustrated. She referred to her ease of writing poems as a weird happening that just poured out of her. There was calmness in her voice as she spoke of her poems. This was an area where she could use her creativity. She concluded that she enjoyed writing much more than reading because she has a "phobia" for reading. I asked her to explain what she meant. She tensed, and then told me of a memory of her old school: "When I was at my other school, my teacher would make us read out loud. So I would be reading and my whole class would be laughing at me. Ever since that day I have hated reading out loud. Now, when I read out loud I have a flashback of kids laughing and laughing, saying, "What's wrong with her? Can't she read?" This conversation brought me back to a similar experience my daughter had with her friends. I instantly wanted to make Elaine feel better, but she had mentally moved on and was anticipating the next question. While talking about the first and second writing assignment for this study, she said that the second was somewhat easier because she could look at her painting and describe it. Her demeanor had relaxed. She smiled. She loves free art where she can use her imagination to create and enjoy her friends as she paints. Using the word prompt in the art making process allowed her to imagine different things, like the ocean, ice cream and summer vacation, which in turned helped her to describe what she created in her second writing. When asked if the art making helped her express her ideas better, she was unclear, yet later in the group

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discussion she described writing a summary after doing an art project as a process that simply requires visualizing the steps.

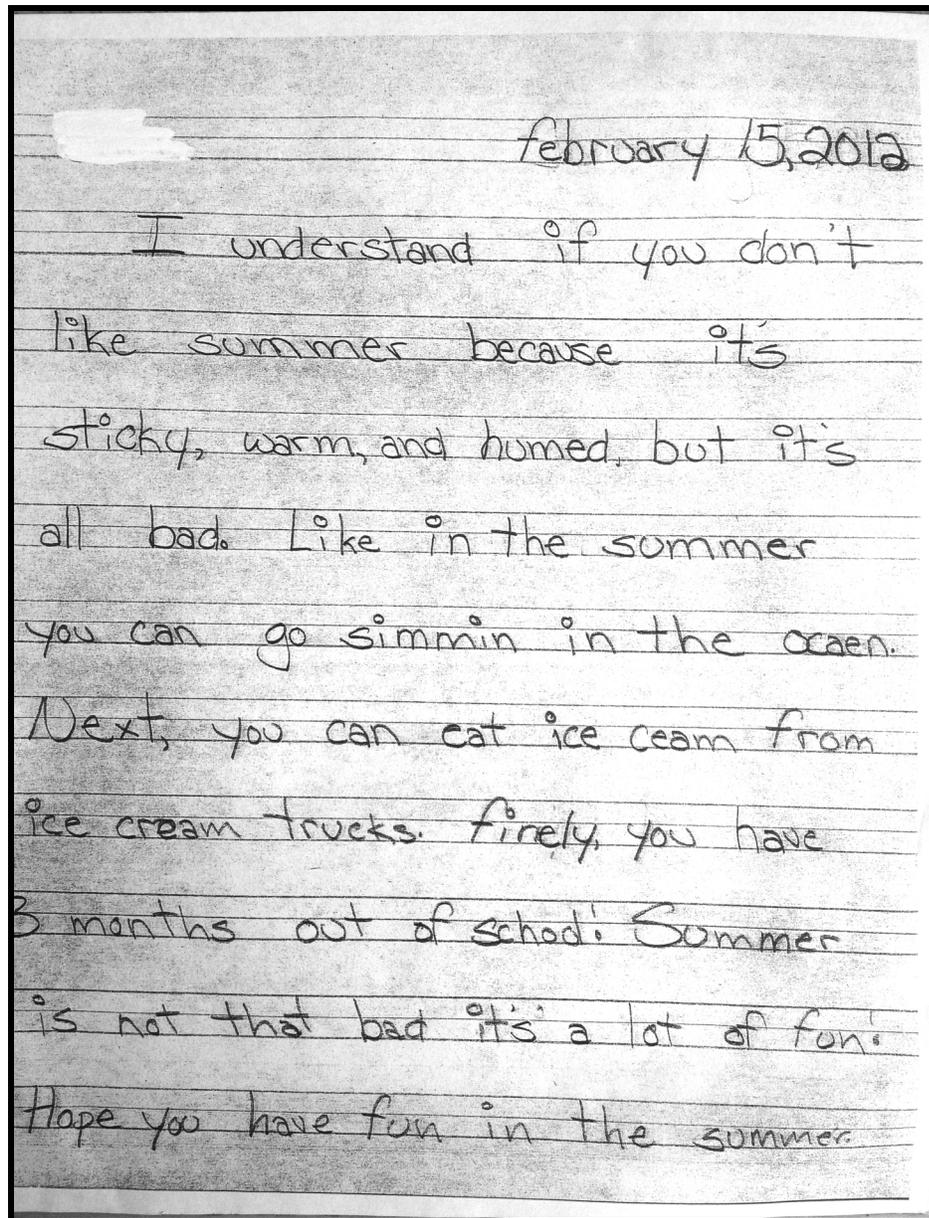


Figure 4.3 Elaine's first writing sample

February 17, 2012

Summer is warm,  
sticky, and humid. In some  
places summer is cold, or  
you might be think of winter.  
Winter is different for example  
summer you can go swimming in  
the ocean, you can ride bikes,  
you can eat ice cream of trucks, and  
you get 3 months off of school!  
In winter you can play in

Figure 4.5 Elaine's second writing sample



*Figure 4.6 Elaine's artwork*

### **Fred**

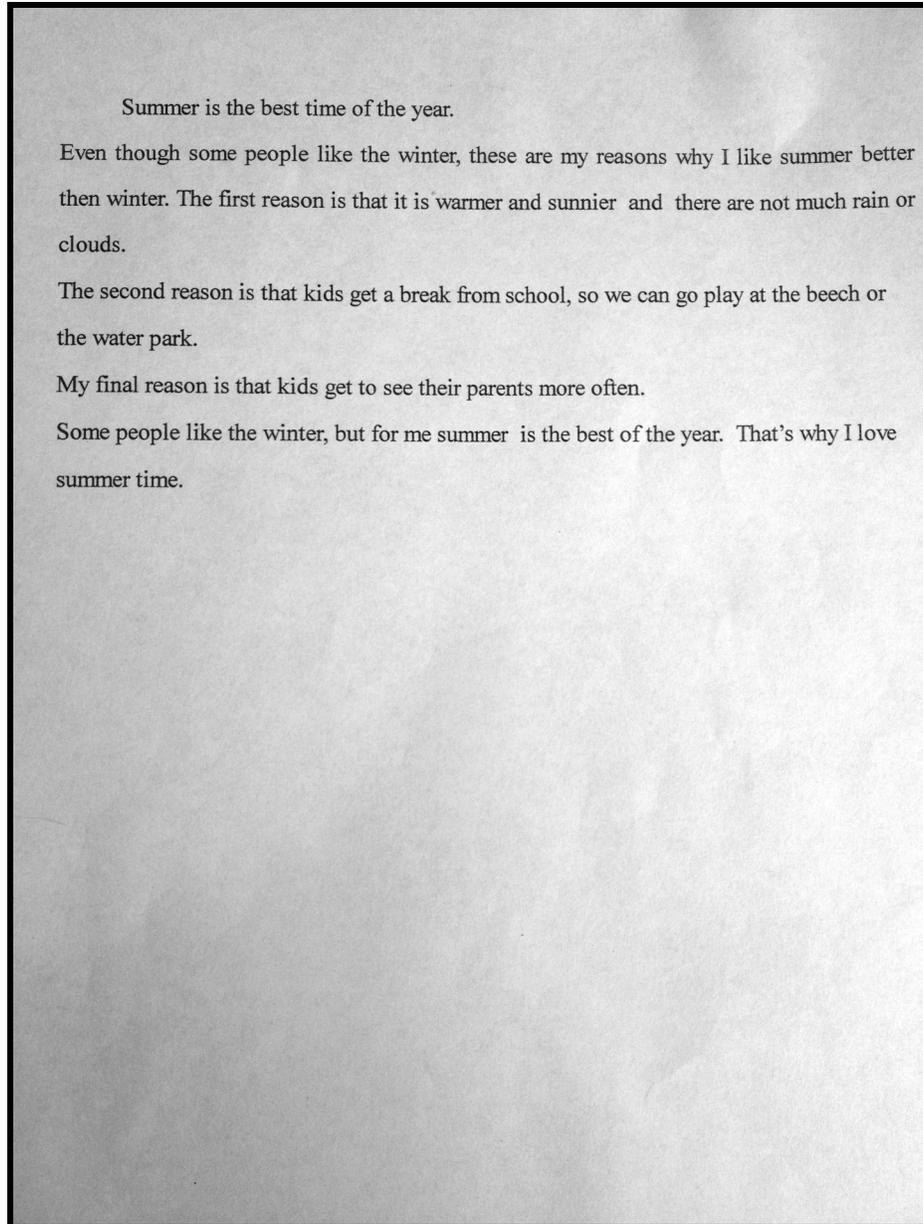
Fred is a character. He is clever, intelligent, full of questions and bursting with energy. He is an only child and is much more comfortable around adults than other children. He initiates conversation effortlessly. His vocabulary is advanced and his thinking is complex. Many days, he is ready for a serious philosophical dialogue when he walks in the art room. When asked to participate in this study, he jumped at the chance. "Well," he stated, as he answered the first question, "due to some studies of me, I'm more of an auditory learner." "What studies?" I asked. "It was in a study skills class. I was tested twice, both times I was labeled as an auditory learner" he exclaimed. When I asked him to define auditory learner he explained, "I don't learn best by feeling or looking. I learn best by having things explained to me." Fred is in constant movement

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with pent up energy. His body and his mouth rarely take a break for a moment of silence. His non-stop energy at times can stir others into a frenzy. Many times he is unaware of who is talking and continues to loudly talk over others to get his thoughts out. Somewhat into the interview he told me that he has attention deficit disorder. I nodded; this information did not surprise me. The staff at my school, closely works together to share pertinent information that allows us to consistently teach appropriately to each individual student. I asked him if writing was hard for him. "Yes," he replied, "it's the organization of the letters, the writing itself and of course the spelling. My verbal vocabulary is better than most of students my age, but I have no idea how to spell the words." He continued to explain that typing on the computer is much more bearable than writing and that he has been diagnosed with dysgraphia. Dysgraphia is a writing disorder that is associated with impaired handwriting. Fred concluded that getting the letters to look right is one of his biggest struggles.

When asked about the two writings he completed for this study, he stated the second writing was easier to think of descriptive words. He felt the art making process in between the two writings had helped him see the words visually. He continued to explain, "because I drew it and it gave me a better picture of the words." He enjoyed being able to talk to other people while working on his clay project. He does not consider himself to be good at art, although he is passionate about photography. When I asked him if he thought the photos that he takes are art, he answered, "I think of art as more of the sketching process of art." I asked him, "Are you creative?" With a smile, he instantly said "yes."

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*Figure 4.7* Fred's first writing sample

2/15/12

My feelings on  
summer are that they  
are both good.<sup>10</sup> One is  
cold, chilly, and beautiful  
in the opposite way.<sup>20</sup> Another  
is hot, sunny, and beautiful  
in the opposite way.<sup>30</sup>  
There are many things  
you can do in  
both winter and summer.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 4.8 Fred's second writing sample



*Figure 4.9 Fred's artwork*

### **Mary**

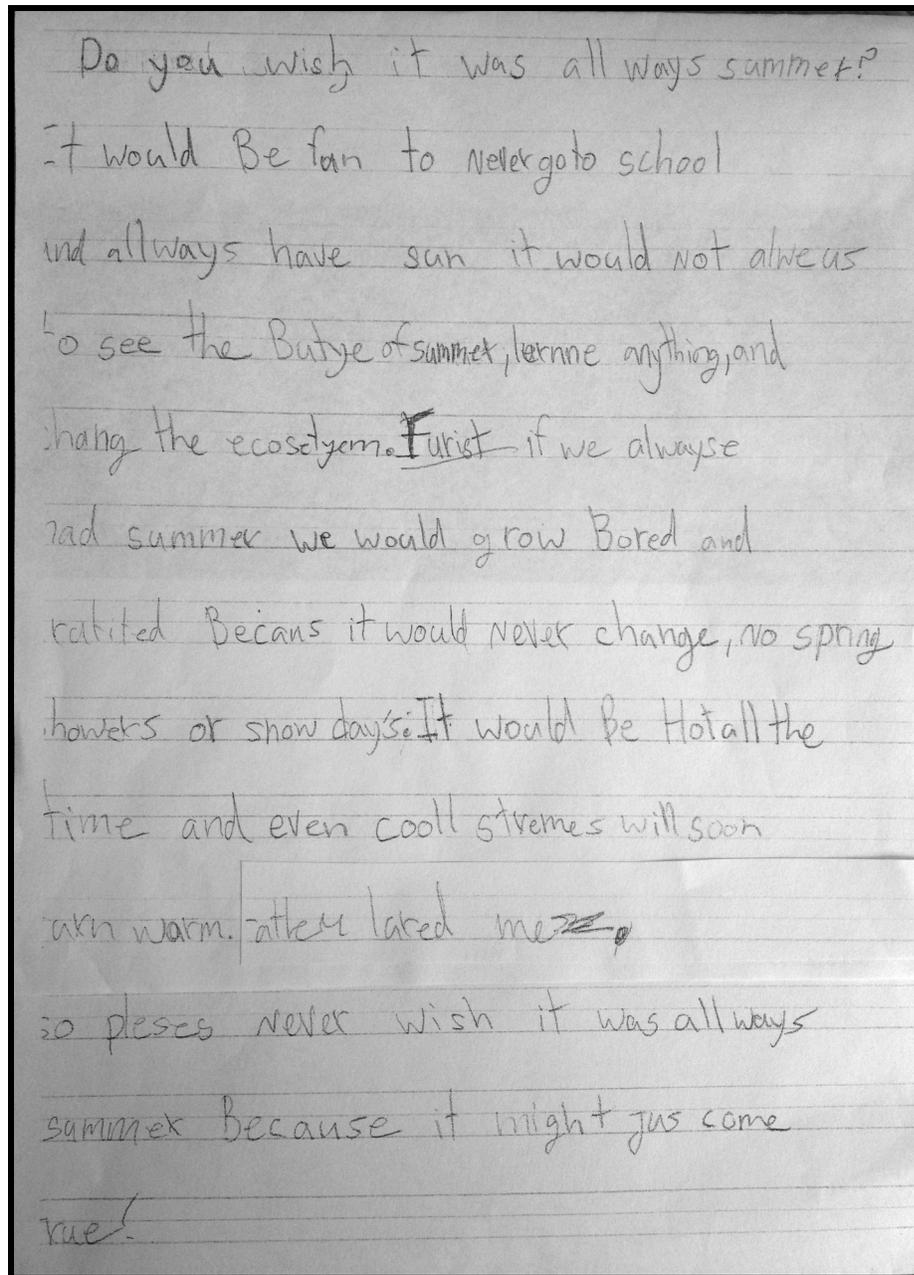
Mary just finished up her first year at Cooper School. She is twelve years old and has been enrolled in three other schools before coming to this one. She is an only child raised by a single mom. She is smart, witty and very talented in art, theater and storytelling. She is a doodler, a non-stop drawing machine. Her classroom teacher and I have discussed how her drawing helps her focus on what she hears and understands. Drawing is deemed as a healthy sideline activity for Mary in her classes. She was waiting outside my door as I approached. "Hello," she said confidently. She smiled and entered the art room. "Lets get started," I said. She nodded. "How do you think you learn best?" "Tactile, kinesthetic. Doing, seeing someone doing it and then working with it, um, writing," she explained. "When we are decoding words, I remember it actually

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better if I have been drawing a picture of the words. I can associate that picture with whatever set of decoding words we are working on even if I'm not actually writing down the words." She described how spelling is very frustrating to her and that she wants to use complicated words that she understands and can say, but can't spell. While talking about the writing process, she concluded that writing is not the problem for her. She does not struggle with thinking of descriptive words, but struggles with spelling those descriptive words. "Often times, in my head, there's kind of like a narration going on, a story already forming," she stated. As I listened to her speak of the story forming in her mind, I wondered if she was also a visual learner. She continued to talk about the second writing process. "Um, for me it was easier and more fluid, for a few reasons: I had done the art project and I was more comfortable because I had this mental image which helped me translate it into words. I thought the second writing seemed more thought out because I had gone through those two steps in the process." I asked her if the image came from the art making process and she said, "yes." The art making helps her calm down and collect her thoughts. She told me that art is awesome and she really enjoys painting. Mary has a natural talent in art. Her ideas flow out effortlessly into beautifully designed drawings and paintings. As the topic of our discussion turned to the visual project, Mary said she felt that the day in between the writing and the art making process allowed her time to form a mental picture in her mind of what she wanted to create. Looking forward to her answer to the last question, I asked, "do you think the art making helped you express your ideas better?" "Yes," she replied, "I could think about it and translate it better into words. Art made it easier to understand what I wanted to say

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in the writing. It helped me get a more visual and personal connection than just writing a paper."

A photograph of a piece of lined paper with handwritten text in cursive. The text is written in dark ink and is somewhat messy, with some corrections and a large scribble. The paper is slightly wrinkled and has a dark border around it.

Do you wish it was all ways summer?  
It would Be fan to never goto school  
and allways have sun it would not always  
to see the Butye of summer, learn anything, and  
chang the ecosolyem. ~~Furist~~ if we always  
had summer we would grow Bored and  
ratited Becans it would never change, no spring  
howets or snow days. It would Be Hot all the  
time and even cool stremes will soon  
wkn warm. ~~at least~~ lated me ~~me~~  
so pleses never wish it was allways  
summer Because it might jus come  
true!

Figure 4.10 Mary's first writing sample

Summer is Butafal and fun But without  
winter we would not find Butfy in it.  
Summer and winter effect evoxything  
I Panted a half picture of the same  
Bech in winter and sammer in one there  
is snow and the ocean is Ice covered and  
in the other it is sand and the ocean is Bright  
and Butafal. I think of winter as a time of  
wimmse and still ness. I think of summer as a time  
of stark Relesom and rushing. the ocen is samthing  
that fasanats me and earnges me

Figure 4.11 Mary's second writing sample



*Figure 4.12* Mary's artwork

### **Group Discussion**

The group discussion took place a couple weeks after the final student's interview and was very informal. The students arrived together laughing and chatting as they entered the room. It was clear to me that they are friends and enjoyed each other's company. It was a sunny day in the city and we were all feeling stimulated and joyful as the result of the sunshine. I started the conversation by reminding them we would be talking about whether art making assists them in communicating their written ideas. They sat very still and none of them spoke. I tried again. "So I noticed that all of you knew what kind of a learner you are. Where does that knowledge come from?" Fred began to talk of his individual tests. Mary talked of her tactile style. I had successfully engaged them to open up once again. I introduced the question again, phrased slightly

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different, “So when you are doing a project in the classroom or you have to write a paper and you get to do art with it, does that art process help?” Elaine engaged by stating, “If you write the summary after you do the artwork, that will help because if you close your eyes you can think step by step of what you did.” Gary agreed by nodding. Mary also agreed and continued by saying that by including art with writing, it is much like taking medicine with a spoon full of sugar. This statement made me smile. Mary likes analogies. In my mind I was thinking the same thing, doesn’t a little bit of sugar added help anything that is unpleasant?

Our conversation moved on to dyslexia and what it meant to each of the students. Elaine stated that dyslexia is different for everybody. Spelling is hard for her because she mixes up her letter sounds. She said, “Each subject I struggle a little in because I have to spell in all of my classes. Even math has spelling in it, spelling with numbers.” I asked if any of them visualized what they were trying to spell. They said unanimously “No.” I found it interesting that they didn’t correlate visualization with the spelling of words, yet in their interviews found the art process provided assistance to communicate their words in written form. On the other hand, the spelling was not a part of the process we were exploring and would continue to be a struggle for them. How could they visualize the correct spelling of the words if, in their heads, they saw the words as images? The students continued to talk about spelling words. Mary told everyone that she flips her letters and numbers, sometimes writing the whole word backwards. This is called mirroring when a whole word is written as if seen in a mirror. Gary said that art is easier than spelling or writing because he can express his emotions in his work. Mary agreed and stepped in to say that the reason the art process is helpful

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is that it lends itself to self-expression. At one point, Mary stated that she often imagines the spelling doesn't matter and writes it how she sees it. Fred concluded that he thought of creativity as a means for the artist to create a different outlook on life. If he looked at a picture and then closed his eyes and visualized the words, he usually began to write. I concluded the group discussion with one last question, "how might you use this idea that art making can help your written communication in the future?" Fred responded by saying, "When I can't think of writing something, I could doodle something that I might be able to write."

### **Conclusion**

This study attempted to explore the benefits of the artistic process in assisting students with dyslexia in communicating their ideas. Along with the student interviews and a group discussion, each student participated in the written and visual process. In my mind, the findings were divided into distinct different outcomes. In analyzing each set of descriptive writings, there was little evidence to suggest the artistic process assisted students with dyslexia communicate their ideas. However, the answers from the interview and group discussion demonstrate that the students felt the artistic process did in fact assist them in communicating their ideas.

Overall, I found that the students had better organized their thoughts and used more descriptive words in the first set of writings. The second set of paragraphs was inconsistent in the amount of descriptive words used and the overall theme. The change in their descriptive words from the first to the second writing, in my mind, are not substantial enough to demonstrate that art making resulted in the students communicating their ideas in writing more clearly. My assumption prior to this study was

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that the students' artwork would reveal detail relevant to the descriptive words in their second writing, which it did not.

Nevertheless, after reviewing the interviews with the students, I feel that they believe the art making session was essential in assisting them to communicate ideas in written words. In every interview, each student stated in several answers that by seeing the visual or pictures, they were better able to understand what they were attempting to communicate. Furthermore, their discovery of the potential relevance of the artistic process in communicating ideas is the first step needed for them to fully grasp the possible significance this artistic process has to offer as a potential strategy to lessen their disability.

CHAPTER 5  
REFLECTION

**The Relationship**

Through this study, I have attempted to highlight the voices of the students who have participated in an exploration of the artistic process and the role of that process in assisting students to communicate their ideas in writing. My intention was to provide an understanding of dyslexia, its relationship with artistic expression, and the possible strategy art making has to offer students with dyslexia in communicating their ideas. Existing research on the potential benefits of art for children with dyslexia is humble and limited and does not offer consideration in the connection for communicating ideas. There is however, impressive literature on the challenges these children face with their language based difficulties and the importance of art making as a visual expressive process.

Children with dyslexia face two special challenges during the years from birth to adolescence: mastering the basic brain functions that underlie reading, writing and other academic skills; and developing a healthy self-concept and strong and resilient character that comes from it. (Brock and Eide, 2011, p. 205)

My research recognizes the unique learning styles of children diagnosed with dyslexia. There are many facets of dyslexia as demonstrated by the student responses presented in the previous chapter. In examining the participating students' interviews, auditory, visual and kinesthetic learning styles were mentioned by the students of their strengths. What weren't mentioned were the weaknesses of each student that affect their learning. Weak auditory processing, short term memory deficit affecting word recall, reversals of letters, dysgraphia affecting the written formation of words, and attention deficit disorder (ADD) affecting their ability to focus are weaknesses of these students. These

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weaknesses influence their ability in comprehension and fluency in reading and in their writing skills.

In the interview process, each student was personally aware of his or her strengths and how it assisted in learning. As I have already discussed, LaFrance (1997) explained teaching to those strengths is an invaluable aid for teachers of children with dyslexia. She states that by using those strengths to teach “the language as it is,” (p. 176), educators are empowering the students with the knowledge and tools to benefit themselves. While I cannot say whether the students will use their awareness of the artistic process in assisting in their communication of ideas in the future, it is evident that they perceived a positive influence the art making had on their writing process.

I have asked myself over the years of teaching art to students with dyslexia what is it that attracts these students to the art room like a magnet? I have seen many children come into the art room with broken spirits from the failure experienced through their academic life. Most are unwilling to try for fear that it may lead to more failure. As time goes by, I begin to observe a change in them and I discover comedians, musicians, computer whizzes, storytellers and many talented artists. For many of these creative students the art room is the hub of the school. While experiencing failure in other areas of school, art provides the experience of exploring their strengths, rebuilding their self-confidence and expressing themselves in a language that for many comes natural to them, creating through their hands. I feel that because many of them shine in the arts and success in the arts has liberal boundaries, it becomes a path of least resistance. Art making offers the students a venue to express their anxieties and struggles in a non-verbal, non-threatening method. In my view, once they surrender to

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their creative being, it can be the beginning to change their self-doubt and alter their outlook on learning. I believe at that point, the art room becomes a safe place where they can learn to believe, trust and take pride in their artistic capabilities.

As students' confidence flourishes, their desire to explore and take risks continues to grow. I have observed that confidence trickle into their lives in all directions. With newfound confidence, they become able to tackle their problems in other academic areas with perseverance and a never give up attitude.

My opinions were confirmed while observing the participating students create their artwork, it was obvious the students took pleasure in the creative process of art. They were frank and sincere while talking about their enjoyment of art making. Moreover, they did not hesitate to engage in the second writing session, even though the writing process was difficult for them. Once I asked questions in the interview process about the connection between the art and writing processes the students were able to recognize a potential link. In our group discussion, all of the students agreed that the artistic process gave them a "visual image" in their minds to assist in writing the second written assignment. As we discussed that link, they used phrases such as: picture in my mind, I could see it so I could write it, I visualized the steps, I drew it and it gave me a better picture of the words and I could translate it better into words. Clearly, in my mind, the students had grasped the importance the artistic process has in assisting their formation of written ideas. The visual and tactile approach that art making offers provided the students a chance to use their strengths to make those personal connections in their writing. Furthermore, I feel the positive result of the art making lies

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in the students' awareness and use of their visual strengths, obtained by the students through the artistic process that may assist their learning in other subjects.

### **Moving forward**

I believe that empowering students with dyslexia with self-awareness of their personal learning styles and strengths as well as how to use them to their benefit will positively affect their learning. However, how do educators use this information to influence students in learning? Which brings me to another question, what motivates a student to learn? Success? Pleasure? Reward? Their personal perception plays a critical role in the success of their learning. If students believe that art making helps them with their writing, they are more likely to try. By trying, they begin to put aside their fear of failure and become ready to learn. That readiness turns into motivation and pride as they more easily forgive their mistakes and begin to feel success. For a student with dyslexia motivation is crucial to begin any difficult task, especially if failure has been felt often. In remembering a conversation I had with my twenty-two year old dyslexic daughter, this idea was evident in her commitment to her personal goals. She was talking about meeting another older man diagnosed with dyslexia who was amazed at her perseverance in getting into the Coast Guard. Test taking is hard for students diagnosed with dyslexia. She told him "You have to own [dyslexia]." It is a part of who she is and she knows dyslexia is with her for life. She still becomes frustrated when her dyslexia stands in her way of doing what she wants, but instead of giving up, she becomes determined, remembering the strategies and tools that work best for her and her "never give up" attitude kicks in. A discovery of personal strengths and passions provides students with dyslexia a means to find self-worth, perseverance, and

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confidence in themselves. Art can be this passion for many of them if they embrace their dyslexia and the creative strengths that come with it allowing them to discover their potential, their motivation and pride.

I return to my question what can educators do with this information? And how does it affect the methods of teaching dyslexic children? It is well known in the educational field of dyslexia that a teaching method that includes explicit, systematic, sequential, repetitious instruction is most successful in teaching children with dyslexia. Berninger & Wolf (2009) states all children with dyslexia need specific, intense, structured, sequential, language-based instruction. Art in most school settings is considered an enhancement of curriculum not an essential part of it. If beyond this study, students with dyslexia do indeed believe that art making assists in communicating their ideas, that knowledge could restructure the methods of teaching; It would offer another technique in teaching children with dyslexia throughout all classrooms advancing art as a vital component to curriculum.

In moving forward in thought, future research might consider conducting a longer case study with a larger pool of participants. My study was drawn from a small group of participants in a short period of time. Drawing on a greater amount of students would present a wider variety of learning styles. Also, conducting a longer study that allows for multiple settings for an extended time of the visual and writing processes might lead to an enhanced understanding from the students, which in turn could potentially guide them to active practice in their studies.

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. How do you think you learn best?
2. Is writing hard for you? Why or why not?
3. How do you feel when you write?
4. Did you enjoy the writing portion? Why or why not?
5. When using the prompt, was it hard to think of descriptive words?
  - a. On the first writing? Why or why not?
  - b. On the second writing? Why or why not?
  - c. Was there anything that felt different between the two writings?
6. Do you think a time limit makes a difference in your writing? Why or why not?
7. How do you feel when you create art?
8. Did you enjoy the art making portion? Why or why not?
9. When thinking of the prompt, was it hard to create your project?
10. Do you think the art making helped you express your ideas better? Why or why not?

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Allison Lynn Echanove was born in Boise, Idaho on July 21, 1960. She lived in Boise with her family where she received her elementary and secondary education. In 1979 she moved to Moscow, Idaho where she attended the University of Idaho, ultimately graduating in 1983 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree. She moved to Seattle, Washington with her husband and daughter in 1990. She began work on her Degree of Masters of Art Education in 2010 while teaching art at a private school for children with dyslexia in the metropolitan area of Seattle. Her masters research explores the role art has in assisting children with dyslexia in expressing their written language. Working as an art teacher in a school geared specifically to meeting the needs of these children, Allison understand the benefits art has to offer those children in emotional and social growth. As the art teacher, she coordinates the annual Arts Festival and Auction Class projects each year. She is a member of the National Art Education Association and the International Dyslexia Association. In January of 2011 her article *Art: A Means to Success* was published in Washington Branch of the International Dyslexia Association newsletter. In her free time Allison enjoys painting oil landscapes. She continues to show her work in the Seattle area.