‘Australian Secondary Visual Arts Teachers Perceptions and Experiences of Supporting Students with Disability’

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ABSTRACT

Current research suggests an entrenched, and fragmented approach to teaching students with disability (SWD), due to inadequate teacher training in practical methods and workable knowledge. Literature suggests that societal norms and discourse are governed between three prevailing models of disability; medical, social, and biopsychosocial models of disability, affecting the attitudes and approach to how SWD are taught. There are negative consequences for students who enter the visual arts classroom and encounter teachers with misconstrued perceptions of disability and diminished capability with respect to the provision of quality education practice. This outcome is misaligned with teacher professional standards, art education curriculum and legislated entitlements for every Australian child to experience best-practice education in secondary schools. The proposed research responds to this problem and aims to engage with experienced secondary Visual Art teachers in Western Australia who will be asked to synthesise their professional knowledge around this problem; how working with SWD has varied over time and what they perceive as good practice for this group. This study will employ a qualitative, tri-paradigmatic framework in combination with arts-based methods because arts teachers have both crafted their models of practice with SWD and also because they are visually literate enabling richer data framing through visual strategies than words alone allow. Arts-based Education Research (ABER) is a participatory, non-traditional research practice that can capture discursive data from participants by virtue of rich visualisation strategies and dialogic exchange. The participants in this study are highly visually literate, enabling confirmation that the ABER visualisations of their experience are authentic and accurate.

Background

Value of the Arts

Leading scholars of education believe that one of the values of the arts is that it assists us in making sense of and share representations of meaning and ourselves. Eisner (2002) listed 'ten life lessons' and human qualities that students could take from the arts; including knowledge of inclusion, self-esteem and creativity. The complex nature of arts learning, with its need for students to reason, enquire and conceptualise, assists students in their development of critical thinking (Perkins, 1994; Efland 2002; Eisner, 2002;). Additionally, authentic arts education has evolved into a curriculum that gives all Australian children access to:

- access to quality arts education K-10
- experience a safe inclusive learning environment in which to develop capabilities in arts making and responding (the building blocks of creative practice)
- Develop arts literacies and capabilities for life beyond school.

Exclusion phenomena

Chambers and Forlin (2021), noted that up to the 1980s, Australian (SWD) did not have a legal entitlement to an education at all, and therefore, policy framing and particularly the terminologies used in relation to disability were scant and prejudicial; a SWD was viewed as an 'optional placement' and schools were under no obligation to accept students who fit the profile (Forlin, 2005). Similarly, the pedagogical practices utilised in the education of SWD were marginalised and often seen as irrelevant when looking at broader pedagogical value, academic achievement, and societal purpose.

Archaic perceptions from the 1970s still exist in some schools today and placement in an art classroom is sometimes seen as a segue to mainstream learning to 'see' if SWD are 'able' to cope in subjects deemed to have low status and degrees of difficulty (Schiller, 1999 as cited in Begeske,2003). Morris et. Al. (2016) noted that past research related to inclusive classroom practice in visual arts classrooms evidenced attitudes that were framed around policy and legislation compliance, not best-practice teaching methods. How secondary art teachers assist

SWD to target areas they considered hindered, or blocked progress toward achieving artistic potential was absent from the literature. Similarly, research investigating the artistic strength and creative ability of SWD was minimal.

Policy and Legislation

Since the 1980s, inclusive policy and legislation have drawn on international declarations such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). In Australia, the Disability Discrimination Act *1992* (DDA), and the Disability Standards for Education (2008) assisted Australian schools in designing inclusive regulations and policies. However, interpretations differed from state to state and predominantly centred around a student's 'right to learn' and 'be in a classroom' setting. In secondary schools, there was neither clarity on how teachers were to educate SWD nor how they were required to adjust their pedagogical practice to meet the needs of each student (Cavendish, 2020).

While pedagogical diversity training is now compulsory in Western Australia and teachers are required to comply with Standard 1.6 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017), which mandates inclusion outcomes for students, findings indicate that the professional learning for teachers is primarily based on 'awareness' of SWD-inclusive rights, physical and behavioural characteristics, and terminologies (Fink, 2019). Paris et al. (2018) noted that Western Australian pre-service teachers still perceive SWD instruction as problematic, hindering their responsibilities with respect to the AITSL standard around inclusion for students generally. This disconnect between policy and practice renders SWD vulnerable to neglect or overt disadvantage and fails to equip teachers to meet their obligations.

==Three models of disability==

Faced with changing perceptions of the rights of SWD to be included in mainstream schooling training was introduced both in the initial teacher education phase and on an ongoing basis across the teacher lifecycle. Studies by both Tamakloe, (2018) and Morina,(2020) have subsequently found that the way a teacher perceives student disability often oscillates between the following medical and social models (Figure 2). This does suggest that depending on the type of model the training, professional development and personal experience that teacher is exposed to affects their self efficacy to succeed in teaching SWD. MacFarlane (2013) found that developing teachers' inclusive practice capability is essential to the success (Baek et al, 2024) of changing perceptions based on misinformation or archaic belief systems.

Medical Model

As early as the 1800s, societal attitudes toward disability were based on a bio-medical model known as the medical model of disability (Mackleprang and Salsgiver, 2009, Horgan, 2019), which saw disability viewed as an abnormality that required the provision of resources aligned with community support, and governance. According to Zacs (2023), the main purpose of this model was to segregate people into 'normal' and 'abnormal' categories, relegating the person with a disability into a life of under resourcing, lack of personal rights and opportunities. This in turn led sectors to sequester them into 'deficits-based diagnostic and therapeutic' models of special classrooms, programs and facilities that society deemed suitabled for those assumed 'inferior' because of their disabilities. (Zac,2023)

Social Model

The British *Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation* (UPIAS 1976) as cited in Finkelstein (2004), responsively framed the social model of disability to counteract segregation and to encourage inclusion. Designed to counteract the marginalization felt by people who have (or are perceived to have) 'impairments', the model tried to show a distinction between societiel created disadvantage through exclusion and the specific mind and body traits of individuals. Noted in Lawson (2020), in 1981, Disabled People's International (DPI) drew a distinction 'the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment' and the

'loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community due to physical and social barriers'. Since the 80s, there has been several iterations on the UPIAS social model, which according to Grue (2015) has caused inconsistencies and confusion due to the fact that the model has been used as a label without explanation as to its definition and criteria. However, Lawson states that the social model gave people of disability a voice and a political position around human rights. It assisted in providing the discourse some definitions, promoted equality and inclusion and gave those who were affected by societys' actions a feeling of solidarity. To this day, the social model is used by community groups and organisations as the grassroots term of reference on working in the field of disability.

Biopsychosocial model

The World Health Organisation then designed the International Classification of *Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF), which focused on biological, psychological, and societal factors of a person's disability (Catro,2017, Engel,1977, WHO, 2007). The new biopsychosocial model, according to the ICF, was an integration of the social and medical models of disability. This model also highlights the environments ((societal attitudes, systems and structures) in which the person interacts in, together with their context.

Conceptualised by Engel in 1977, a persons medical needs can only be addressed if all three factors are considered. Clanchy et al.(2022) notes that the use of multidimensional models for evaluating disability, particularly children and adolescents who have complex care needs is beneficial. In Australia, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) goals are based around a biopsychosocial framework in supporting independence, social and economic participation of individuals with disability (NDIS,2014), which includes school environments and SWD.

Identified gaps

The literature review underpinning this study reveals a gap in understanding how secondary art teachers frame their pedagogical practices related to teaching with SWD. Studies indicate teacher unpreparedness and lack of knowledge around differentiated methodologies, leading to frustration and feelings of inadequacy arising from minimal or cursory training. Inservice professional development (PD) focuses more on policy awareness, development of an inclusive mindset, and understanding of societal perceptions of SWD than quality educational outcomes for SWD. Overall, there are many variables limiting the type of inclusive teacher training available, and few of them are deemed productive (Cara, 2007; Paris et al, 2018, Flink 2019, Chambers and Forlin, (2021), Edwards 2022).

Significance

This study is significant in several ways:

- This study will synthesize experienced arts educators' perceptions of recurrent challenges (and successes) associated with supporting SWD in the secondary arts classroom. Their perceptions of teaching strategies and pedagogical practices that have worked well and those that have not, will be distilled and analysed thematically. The findings of the research could benefit Inservice and future arts educators who are looking for practice improvement based on workable solutions developed by experienced teachers and this in turn may be beneficial for their future students.
- Arts-based education research practice is well established and is increasing in profile internationally because it offers the education researcher scope to collect, analyse and conceptualise insights into phenomena and experiences that are relevant in contemporary life in ways that are accessible to new audiences. The approach has been underutilised in education research in Western Australia and the study therefore contributes to this methodological gap.

- The quality of arts education in primary years for all children varies markedly due many schools requiring their generalist classroom teachers K-6 to include it in their weekly curriculum. In secondary schools, arts specialists are employed to ensure students are provided with a good range and standard of arts techniques and processes within the subjects' program. However, SWD routinely experience diminished educational experiences that fail to meet their needs to deliver their entitlement to quality educational outcomes. This has implications for Australia's standing internationally when referenced to the UN-SDGs and for our GDP/financial standing.

- As much as one third of all children in public education are known to have additional needs. An estimated 1 in 10 school students in Australia have a disability. Since education models have changed substantially since the 80s, in 2018, 70.8% of students with disability were in regular classes in a mainstream school (AIHW, 2024). The number of children impacted by this problem is, therefore, significant, and it is appropriate for education researchers to respond to this challenge.

Research Aims and Questions

The research will:

- Investigate secondary art teachers' perceptions and attitudes in relation to the affordances and challenges of inclusion of SWD in secondary visual arts education settings.

- Explore experienced teacher perceptions of effective pedagogical practices in supporting SWD in secondary visual arts education contexts in arts making and responding.

- Synthesize experienced art educator perceptions of the profile capabilities, knowledge, strengths and skills that SWD possess and bring to the secondary visual arts education classroom.

In meeting these objectives, the research will utilise two related questions:

Question 1: What do experienced visual arts educators understand about the needs and capabilities of secondary school students with disability?

Question 2: What strategies do experienced visual arts teachers perceive best support students with disability in achieving their potential?

Methodology

This Qualitative Inquiry draws on aspects of Habermas' (1971) tri-paradigmatic framework, as re-interpreted by Aoki (1978) and Pearce (1992) in combination with arts-based education research practices. Habermas (1971) developed a tri-paradigmatic framework comprising three intersecting paradigm orientations relevant to education, each with distinct goals but similar values. These are *Empirical-Analytic, Interpretive-Hermeneutic* and Critical-Theoretic orientation. Pearce (1992) went further conceptualising education practice generally, and the visual arts teacher specifically, as an 'educational carpenter' noting their unique work environment called for action, objectivity (with subjective themes) and critical (pedagogical) knowledge. Pearce noted the arts educator builds pedagogical content knowledge (knowledge of the discipline, knowledge of teaching, and knowledge of teaching the discipline (Shulman, 1986) through arts making and responding practices drawing on a variety of arts languages, word and image-based formats.

Siegesmund et al, (2017) noted Arts-based research had recently gained an increasing popularity within qualitative inquiry. "It is applied in various disciplines, including health, psychology, education, and anthropology. Arts-based research uses artistic forms and expressions to explore, understand, represent, and even challenge human experiences." Chilton and Leavy (2014) as exponents of arts-based research practices

argued that Arts languages allow complex ideas to be conceptualised and analysed in visual formats enabling deeper understanding beyond what words will allow.

Figure 1: *Habermas' (1971) tri-paradigmatic framework looking at the 'unique knowledge of art teachers'.*
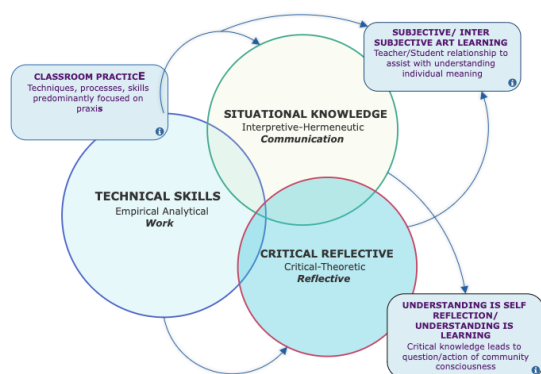
Methods

This study will utilise semi-structured interviews in accordance with thematic analysis and results synthesis drawing on ABER practices. (Viega, 2016). Experienced secondary visual arts educators will be invited to reflect on and share past teaching experiences drawn from the entirety of their former career positions framed around teaching SWD. They will share perceptions of what they believe is essential knowledge and what is not in the provision of inclusive arts education practice. ABER methodology used to examine the relationship between 'discipline-centredness' (Pearce 1992) (art), empowerment (disability) and praxis learning (arts education), will allow for interpretations of teaching narratives where in-depth, honest data on participatory methodology around SWD visual learning is essential (Leavy, 2020). ''Art is a way of knowing and communicating'' (Allan, 1995 as cited in Leavy 2019, pg. 24) which in turn creates rich and visual narratives based on human experience (Leavy 2019).

Narrative vignettes (Little stories) conveyed through visual metaphors (symbolic representations) will not only carry the teaching practices of participants but will also assist them in voicing individual, complex, and unique experiences without fear of judgment that they may have faced in the workplace. The use of visual metaphor in ABER allows the psychological qualities of experience to be expressed without literal or realistic representation thus preserving the anonymity of the source. Badenhorst et al (2023) notes that ABER assists us in acknowledging our connections to not only our students but our colleagues. It assists us in exploring the 'formal institution space' in which to integrate "empathetic knowledge that is effective in communicating emotional aspects of social life" (Chilton & Leavy, 2020. P.407).

Sample Selection

The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) suggest that the length of teaching practice statistically shows that the participants will have invariably worked with students from at least one to three of the four categories of disability. Five experienced secondary art teachers will be recruited using a purposive, homogenous approach, initially emailing professional art education networks. The main criteria for inclusion in the study is that participants must identify as currently being a secondary art specialist or having taught in a secondary visual arts course for more than five years and is based in Western Australia. Collaboration with teachers with this skill set will enable the process to conform to quality ABER criteria listed by Chilton and Leavy (2020), Leavy (2020) and cited in Paris et al (2022).

Data Collection

The questionnaire will be designed to reveal knowledge of the complexities of inclusion outcomes when teaching SWD. Upon completion of the first stage, Semi-structured interviews will explore their experiences and perceptions of their efficacy in supporting SWD across the duration of their past career positions A focus on practices that worked and those that didn't will frame the 10-point schedule of open-ended questions.

Data Analysis

The ==questionnaire== and interview data will be initially coded thematically establishing a relationship with the literature, policy materials, curriculum requirements and AITSL obligations. Drawing on established arts based education research methods fragments from the interviews will be transposed from word to image formats. Next narrative vignettes (little stories) will be reassembled from the visual fragments using metaphor and abstraction. These arts-based strategies will be familiar to the art teacher participants, and they will be invited to confirm or refine the visualisations of experience, drawing on their own high visual literacy and arts training. In this way, a dialogue about their experiences will be established throughout the analyse of the data.

Results Synthesis

The data fragments and narrative vignettes for each of the participants will be analysed to identify shared themes and anomalous experiences. These will be basis for an exhibition of ceramic works in which forms are created, broken and reassembled – echoing the impact of educational experience on SWD. Some artifacts are likely to reflect structural instability and aesthetically challenging forms which are resonant with the poor outcomes SWD often experience. Others may reflect different better outcomes when reconciled with the intended outcomes on contemporary arts education literature. The final form of the exhibition and exegesis will take its shape from the experience, dialogue and creative practice of the researcher and participants working together to visualise and understand the perception of experience.

Comfort provisions and anonymity

The researcher will ensure that each participant is comfortable being represented in a 'visual, metaphorical artifact that encapsulates their lived experiences in teaching SWD. Individually, they will decide on how they want to be represented as an experienced group of secondary art teachers who are (now) recognised as artisans. The culmination of both stages of the research will be utilised within the space, showcasing their lived experiences with SWD. The visual imagery will metaphorically represent unique, illustrative works that show a history of technical skill, situational reflection, and critical knowledge of authentically teaching students with disability. The consent forms will state that it is possible participation may engender discomfort and they will be encouraged to seek professional guidance to address this. There will be provision for de-briefing if participants need to.

Ethics Statement.

After the Milestone One submission, ethics approval will be applied for. National Health and Medical Research Committee (NHMRC 2007) conduct guidelines, responsibilities and codes will be adhered to, as will the Curtin Guidelines for Conducting Research involving Humans. All participants will be given information on the research; with objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits included (Cohen, et al., 2018).

Written permission and consent will be obtained with clear guidelines on health and safety parameters with assurance given on their privacy and confidentiality rights. It will be made clear that participants will only be asked to reflect on previous placements and not current workplace situations.

In the final ABER phase, only the researcher's identity will be transparent. There will be both an instructional process and an exhibition of the resulting visual data and image notetaking. Participants will be given the option of creating pieces beyond the initial vingrettes to include in the exhibition. The anonymity and confidentiality of participants who are current educators will be maintained by way of either a pseudonym or number. All persons will be made aware of the potential risk of how the process and representational imagery that they might choose to use in their work may be identifiable. Additionally, the research will be mindful of copyright, acknowledgement, and imagery distribution, both exhibited artworks and any documented photographs/footage of the researcher working with participants assisting in the making of art.

Data Management Statement

Collection and Storage

　　　　All physical and digital data collected during the study will be stored in accordance with the Curtin University Research Data Management Guidelines (Curtin University, 2021). Physical data (sketches, drawings, maquettes, clay forms and printing materials) will be stored and placed in the researcher's locked studio and gallery space, which will only be accessible to the researcher, supervisors/approved facilitators, and gallery owner. Digital data, such as interview footage, will be stored on a password-protected laptop within password-protected files. These data will then be secured on an approved Curtin R Drive, only being accessible to the researcher and supervisors.

Management and Retainment

　　　　As stipulated by Curtin Research Guidelines, all questionnaire, and interview data will be retained for seven years.. Data which employs and is recognised as arts practice will not be destroyed in accordance with arts-based research principles. Additionally, art drafts/notes and sketches identifying participants in any way will be destroyed after 7 years.

Budget (Figure 1)

 The potential costs for**)** the exhibition will be kept to a minimum as the exhibition of work will be organised at Curtin, potentially in the QuARTer Gallery to enable onlookers to see and view the work.　Transcripts of interviews will require a software subscription for collecting data.　Participants will be responding through art process and art materials (accepted consumables under the Curtin Essential Facilities for Research Students (2021).

OfferingExchangeItems	Cost
Arts supplies, panels, paint, clay, ceramic firing and glaze.	$1200
Transcription software (Mac Whisperer subscription) Dragon (voice to text software/part cost)	$100
Conference attendance fees The proposed conference is in WA: WAIER and National: AARE (part)	$500
Exhibition opening and installation of works	$450
Misc.: Printing, travel assist for fieldwork travel, rent of work space	$250
	$2500

Background of the Two Main Disability Models

Medical model thinking 1900s	Social model thinking 1976
Child is faulty	Child is valued
Diagnosis	Strengths and needs defined by self and others
Labelling	Identify barriers and develop solutions
Impairment becomes focus of attention	Outcome based program designed
Assessment, monitoring, programs of therapy imposed	Resources are made available to ordinary services
Segregation and alternative services	Training for parents and professionals
Ordinary needs put on hold	Relationships nurtured
Re-entry if normal enough for permanent inclusion	Diversity welcomed, child is included
Society remains unchanged	Society evolves

Figure 2 (Adapted from Mason M, 2007)

Interview Cycle and ABER Processes

Interviews

| 1:challenges | 2: knowledge |

Thematic coding of data

ABER Processes

Sharing data/ fragments/stories

Visualisation/Sharing of findings

Refinement and confirmation of narratives

Final Visuals

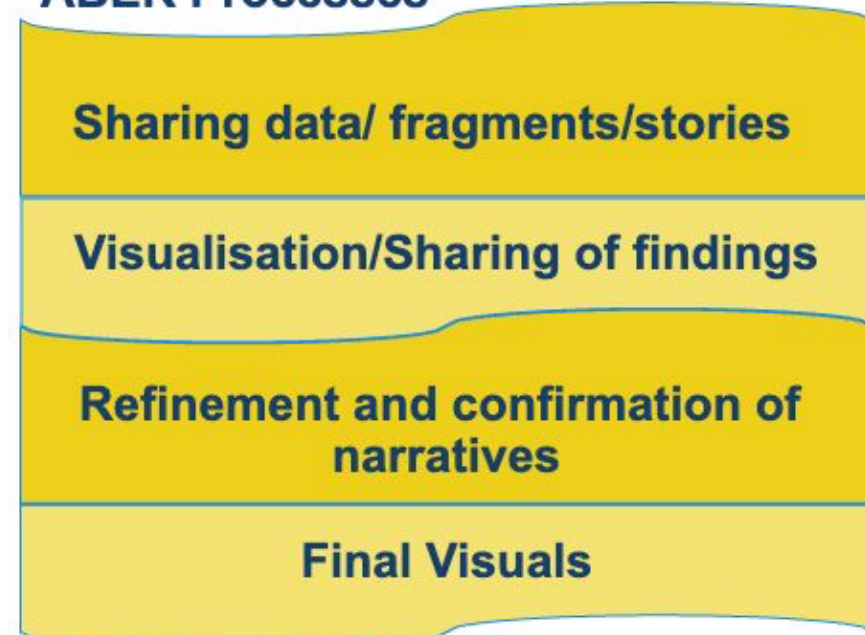**Figure 3: Ongoing participant checking of research processes to ensure the authenticity of artistic output (Leavy, 2020).**

Figure 4: Timeline

YEAR 2024 Activities	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Thesis start and proposal writing		▓	▓									
Literature review/Proposal Writing			▓	▓	▓							
Milestone 1 – June						▓						
Application for Ethics							▓	▓				
Participant recruitment/ Dem. Survey									▓			
Interview cycle 1 and Thematic coding set up										▓		
Interview cycle 2 Thematic coding set up										▓		
Delivery of transcribes/exchange for themes for Vignettes										▓		
ABER Visual strategies /testing/ Interview transcript/scribing/analysis											▓	
ABER experimentation											▓	
Catch up with participants												▓

YEAR 2025 Activities	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	Jun	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Milestone Mid Cand			▓									
ABER Experimentation	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓			
Writing thesis	▓	▓										
Synthesis of artworks			▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓			
Exhibition prep/print/invite									▓	▓		
Refinement of exegesis/last meetings									▓	▓		
Milestone 3-Pre-Submission										▓	▓	
Exhibition											▓	
Review											▓	▓

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