

Using art therapy to explore researcher identity as a prelude to dysgraphia study: An autoethnography

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Abstract

This autoethnography explores the first author's researcher identity as a prelude to further doctoral studies on dysgraphia (a writing disorder). Researcher narrative was unearthed via phenomenological, reflexive, art-based inquiry processes and journaling – resulting in the production of a multi-layered identity box. The work amplified a metaphoric and dynamic interplay of intersectional lived experiences as an art therapist, parent, and educator. The results indicate that researcher identity is a complex, molten, and ephemeral concept more accurately characterised as identities. The study evidences the possibilities and benefits of using qualitative, art-based methodologies for the generation of new knowledge.

Keywords

Researcher identity, dysgraphia, phenomenology, autoethnography, art therapy, intersectionality

Introduction

Art therapy is an expanding field with scope beyond its current purview of clinical relevance (Mei et al., 2021). This includes my own work as a teacher as I, the first author, practice within an intersecting space where art therapy and education converge. This interdisciplinary approach began years ago, after I trained as a creative arts therapist and graduated with a master's qualification in art therapy from an Australian university. I undertook study while concurrently working as an art teacher within a local primary school. Since my art therapy training, as depicted by Shima (2021), art therapy has been fused within my bones. I cannot separate the parts of me that are now forever saturated in art therapy ways of working and being. To elaborate, the art therapy program, which included intensive group therapy, theoretical components, and practicum placement, was formative. While I only officially practised as an art therapist on occasion, the philosophy, skills, and techniques I learnt during my art therapy studies established the basis of my teaching work. For example, I appreciate the role of art-making as a method of inquiry, the value of deep listening and attunement, the centrality of empathy, and the benefits of multiple perspectives and personal story (Dewey, 2005; Grynberg et al., 1999). These are examples of what can be found in the intersecting spaces between education and art therapy.

To be clear, an art therapy approach to teaching is not therapy or art therapy. Rather, it is learning. This approach to teaching was facilitated through the creative process as an invitation to work with various art modalities and art materials (Eisner, 2008; Wallas, 1926). Importantly, this method lent itself to revealing inner stirrings, thoughts, different views of

reality, new knowledge, or a surprising outcome. The fusing of art therapy with education has resulted in knowledge or understanding about self, relationships, processes, materials, and the world. As I write the next phase of my life I, once again, draw on my art therapy work within the field of education. Yet this time, I step into doctoral studies, supported by the co-authors as professional supervisors, to welcome the creative process to explore my researcher identity, knowing that art-making can provide a portal to such insights (Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 1998, 2008). By researcher identity, I mean the ways in which my own lived experiences and positioning in the world have shaped my views and beliefs, and the ways in which this unique lens might influence, enrich, or impede upcoming research within the field of academia (Adams, 2021; Cunningham & Carmichael, 2018; Gravett, 2021; Harvey, 2013; Norton & Early, 2011). I turn to Gravett (2021) to advise the path forward.

Gravett (2021) challenges the adoption of a traditional doctoral route that takes a linear, stratified, and predetermined pathway. She admonishes this trajectory, claiming that it makes for a product-orientated end point. Instead, she proposes that studies within a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program might be more fulfilling when one imagines the research space as an opportunity to grow. Gravett (2021) believes research can be better conceived of metaphorically as 'rhizomatic' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988), where "the botanical concept of the rhizome offers something new to educational researchers: an opening, an irruption, that can be used to reconsider learning and change" (Gravett, 2021, p.4). Upon this advice, I place aside preconceived notions about academic research and set out to identify the contextual borderlands for myself. I intend to use art methods and play while remaining open to the unknown. However, I am prepared to undertake this self-exploration, having trodden this path previously within my art therapy education. It is familiar to me, albeit a challenging route to traverse.

My investigation into researcher identity draws on the philosophical and methodological structure of phenomenology, which values and embraces subjectivity and personal experience as a source of knowledge (Heiddegar, 1962; Moran, 2002). Phenomenology is both a theory and method for exploring conscious thought and action to find meaning (Kupers, 2011; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Through a phenomenological and autoethnographic inquiry, I hope to discover rhizomatic formations and the dynamic interplay of my lived experiences. Reflexivity is a necessary ingredient in such pursuits (Finlay, 2002a).

Reflexivity is a complex process of continual internal debates on one's own position, actions and decisions, and other critical self-evaluations that have ethical and social repercussions (Berger, 2015; D'Cruz et al., 2007; Finlay, 2002b). "Reflexivity compels us to confront the choices we make regarding the research question, the people we involve in the research process, and the multiple identities that we bring and create in the research setting" (Koopman et al., 2020, p.1). It leads to trusting one's own judgement (Cunningham & Carmichael, 2018) and to understanding how one might "'show up' in a space" (Roland & Jones, 2020, p.8). Consequently, engaging in a process of reflexivity will allow me to understand or fashion my positioning within a culture of research (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2008; Koopman et al., 2020; Secules et al., 2021). Exploring my researcher identity will be a fundamental aspect of my research work (Harvey, 2013).

Background

The direct impetus for entering doctoral study was my personal interest in understanding human experiences, an insight I discovered during art therapy studies on intrapersonal

learning. The research topic slowly emerged from this position as I solidified an intention to explore the lived experiences of dysgraphia, a *developmental writing disorder* (Chung et al., 2020). This first manifested when I noticed my son (14) experiencing writing difficulties at a very early age, eventually being diagnosed with dysgraphia. Dysgraphia is a significant learning disorder that affects writing (Asselborn et al., 2020; Döhla & Heim, 2016; Drotár & Dobeš, 2020; Eyo & Nkanga, 2020). However, a universally accepted definition of dysgraphia does not exist, creating some confusion about its exact meaning (Chung et al., 2020). While the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.) (DSM-V) classifies disorders with impairment in written expression under the general umbrella of *specific learning disorders* (SLDs), it has removed the word dysgraphia from its latest iteration (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For clarity, the term ‘dysgraphia’, herein, refers to all writing difficulties, including difficulty with handwriting, typing, spelling, ideation, planning, composition and/or editing (Kalenjuk et al., 2022). As writing is a necessary feature of daily classroom instruction, writing difficulties can cause severe mental anguish for children with dysgraphia (Chung et al., 2020; Hen-Herbst & Rosenblum, 2019). This is further compounded by co-occurring diagnosed conditions, resulting in long-term consequences for mental health, social development, employment opportunities, or vocational studies (Chung et al., 2020; Galaz et al., 2020; McCloskey & Rapp, 2017).

As an experienced art therapist, classroom teacher, lecturer, and parent of a child with dysgraphia, I maintain a unique position in terms of the research topic. I have been both an insider and outsider of these scholastic spaces (Ellis et al., 2011; Thomson & Gunter, 2011), affording differing and sometimes converging perspectives and sensibilities (Adams, 2021). Navigating these vying and intersecting identities and interests has brought me to this research milieu. Additionally, I have gained poignant insights about dysgraphia from my son, who has been my most important teacher on this topic. Due to his influence as a beholder of unique insights on dysgraphia, it is anticipated that I will invite children with dysgraphia as research participants in ensuing studies. Further, I expect to use an art-based research approach to support this work with children. Moreover, it is important that I first walk this path of art-making as a form of inquiry before welcoming others on this route. This work will also consolidate my own position before exploring the views of research participants (Norton & Early, 2011). However, the provocation for this paper centred on using my art therapy training to explore my researcher identity. Thus, the research question asks: What is my researcher identity?

Conceptual framework

To answer this research question, I have devised a conceptual framework that brings together four key theoretical ideas: (1) phenomenology, (2) art therapy, (3) metaphor, and (4) intersectionality. These theoretical concepts open possibilities for reflexivity and reflection and are the multi-foci lens through which this research has been framed.

Phenomenology

Most notably, this work is underpinned by phenomenology, a philosophical position that preserves and validates human experience as a source of knowledge (Moran, 2002). Phenomenology is interested in the *lifeworld* or *lived experiences* of subjectivity through active consciousness (Pascal et al., 2011; Seamon, 2000), with a key idea being that human consciousness, or thought, is always directed towards an action, feeling or object in the world, defined as *intentionality* (Dowling & Cooney, 2012; Mingers, 2001; van Manen & van

Manen, 2021). The research undertaken herein, through art-making and journaling, attempts to capture this intentionality by way of studying emergent themes as they appear in consciousness (Pascal et al., 2011). This process can lead to a meaning-making experience (Dewey, 2005; Heidegger, 1962).

Art therapy

Art-based research is used within the field of art therapy to frame art-making as a form of inquiry (Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 1998). Art-based endeavours activate the creative process, a space occupied by artists as they fashion art materials into form (Wallas, 1926). Art-making can externalise internal chaos into order through an art product and make parts of the self both visible and tangible (Ehrenzweig, 1967).

Metaphor

The production of art can create opportunities for interpretation through the metaphors that emerge from the art-making (Cattanach, 1999; Cunningham & Carmichael, 2018; Gersie, 1997; Moon & Lachman-Chapin, 2001). These metaphors can be used to inspire narratives captured through journal writing (Cunningham & Carmichael, 2018; Edwards, 2021; Gersie, 1997). The narratives add structure, voice and meaning through a process of ekphrasis or transmediation, and communicate these hidden and discovered parts of self (Salmoose & Elleström, 2019).

Intersectionality

Locating the ways that competing and converging identities manifest and interconnect in my story will be a key focus (Adams, 2021; Finlay, 2008; Harvey, 2013). The convergence of identities is known as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), which involves unearthing ideas and practices that suggest there are symbiotic relationships between different identity markers, for example class, race, gender, ability, sexuality, and ethnicity (Adams, 2021). These aspects cannot be considered separately, but rather as interconnected ideas through the recognition of their interfacing and compounding effects within identity formation (Collins, 2013). This is especially relevant when traversing identity markers with lenses of privilege and disadvantage. Unpacking the intersecting factors requires a reflective and reflexive approach (Cunningham & Carmichael, 2018; Finlay, 2008).

Conceptual framework for self-study

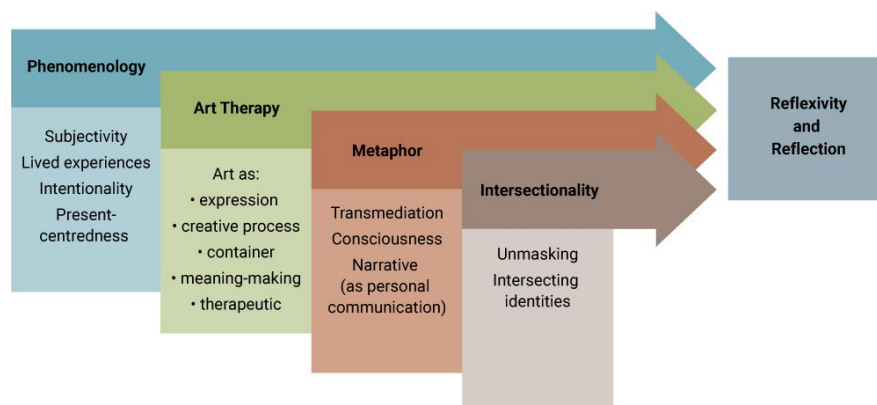


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for autoethnographic self-study.

Method

I undertake this inquiry through autoethnography, as personal (auto) stories can illuminate cultural (ethno) understandings (Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnographic tales promote empathy and understanding about difference and others (Adams, 2021; Ellis et al., 2011; Harvey, 2013; Koopman et al., 2020; Poerwandari, 2021). To support this work, the phenomenological method of art therapy (Betensky, 1995) will be applied. This is an art-based method that offers clear intention and structure for studio work (the place where art-making happens). Exploring phenomena (in this case, researcher identity) can be achieved in the art studio using a range of modalities. It involves four sequences: pre-art play, the process of artwork, phenomenological intuiting, and the ‘What do you see?’ procedure (Betensky, 1995, pp.14–25). The phenomenological method of art therapy emphasises the central role of the art-maker. During the studio work, art-making is coupled with phenomenological intuiting, or noticing, to elicit themes upon which to draw. In this way, the art-making process enables an exploration of the imagination and invites flexibility (Allen, 1995; Betensky, 1995).

Data generation

(One) Pre-art play

To story my development, I have included journal extracts with authentic voice (indented texts below). When working within the creative method, it is important to trust the process, as it is not possible to control the outcomes (Ehrenzweig, 1967; McNiff, 1998; Wallas, 1926). The creative process entails non-linear progressions of emotional heights and slumps that may be experienced as confronting, challenging, or surprising, and usually lead to creative and insightful artworks (Botella et al., 2018). When I first entered the art studio, I had to remind myself about this aspect:

Once again, as I attempt to control my painting through the words and vivid imagery that are conjured in my mind’s eye, my artistic skill falls short, and my artwork fails to resemble the promises held within. Not once has my art mirrored the portraits of my imagination, but I know better. I have learnt to trust the process and I am doing that now.

Once I allowed the process to unravel, I began to relax:

As I play with the materials they speak to me, and a familiar narrative emerges. It is not as I imagine but I am surprised by what is now reflected at me. By accident, wet ink had spilled onto the sketchbook, which drew me into a playful finger dance across the page. It reminded me that art, like life, is messy, and creativity a risky and surprising endeavour.

I focused on modes of drawing and collage to activate the creative process and to organise internal thoughts and experiences (Allen, 1995; Kaplan, 2000). As I reflected on the topic of dysgraphia, I thought about my own position in relation to writing:

My stained fingertips have left fingerprint markings on the parchment and these inky blotches have seeped into the pages underneath. The stained ink presents as a

metaphor for my love of writing, seeded in early childhood and growing deeper into my late adult years. My unique fingerprint markings remind me that writing itself is part of my identity.

(Two) The process of artwork

During this stage, I tinkered with eclectic art materials akin to a bricoleuse, a sobriquet with French origins meaning “making do with what is at hand” (Daniels, 2022, p.131). This experimentation led to a spontaneous idea about making an identity box. I consciously collected brown cardboard, recycled pieces for their earthy quality, as well as for their symbol of sustainability. In my mind’s eye, I thought about creating a series of identity boxes to reflect my own pluralistic identities. As I worked with the materials, I began to feel overwhelmed:

My stomach is tight, and my shoulders are hunched. I am sitting here in frustration that I cannot produce a beautiful box. Just one. Just one symbol of my childhood, or whatever comes to be. Instead, I create a hideous-looking piece that I desperately want to cover up with magazine pictures of flowers or erase it and start again. All that has surfaced is pain, doubt, fear, and anxiety. I cannot do this. It is so hard.

After a series of failures and disappointments, I tried to cover my unsatisfactory work with pentimento results. Pentimento is of Italian origins: “*pentirsi,*’ means to repent or change your mind – something artists [for example, during the Renaissance era] often did as they created a new painting by painting atop a previous image on the canvas” (Clark, 2017, p.232). To eschew the growing sense of dissatisfaction, I focused on trying to relax and immersed myself back into the art-making. An escalation of these unpleasant feelings evoked despair, which is characteristic of the creative process (Allen, 1995; Botella et al., 2018). This feeling quickly passed once it was recognised.

Unexpectedly, I began to fashion one enormous identity box. I perceived this as metaphorically characterising pluralistic identities. The smaller boxes diminished into an infused cityscape. Over time, I developed the cityscape, adding a range of materials with each conjuring memories or revealing new ideas.



Figure 2. Kalenjuc, E., *A cardboard cityscape*, 2020. 630 × 400 × 430mm (figure 2a.); 430 × 630 × 400mm (figure 2b.); 400 × 630 × 430mm (figure 2c.).

(Three) Phenomenological intuiting

As I worked, ideas continued to surface through Betensky’s (1995) third stage of phenomenological intuiting. This resulted in carefully looking at the initial box construction,

an urban edifice with its skyscraper-like design, layered with patterned paper, feathers, seashells, and other found objects. Themes of *travel* and *place* evoked a visceral response.

As I look at the final product I focus on the materials, heavily dominated by paper and cardboard as organic and recycled. I enjoy the metaphoric quality of the authenticity and rawness these represent whilst also recognising the vulnerability.

This stage required focused observation through a process of zooming in and out so that an overall picture, as well as details, could be considered. I looked carefully at the artwork from different angles and perspectives, taking photos and annotating these images in my journal. When I studied the final product, several other themes emerged, for example *colonisation*.

Sitting within the layers was an impression of an empty white pen box. It signals both my unknowingness of dysgraphia and its emerging imprinting on my life and research moving forward. The whiteness is striking to me as I think about the impact of colonisation.

(Four) 'What do you see?' procedure

Betensky's (1995) final sequence, the 'What do you see?' procedure, involves description so that the externalised artwork can be connected to inner experience. As I contemplated my own history and connection to writing, memories of my schooling days flooded my journal:

...limits were placed on my role as a woman within the confines of the Catholic Church tradition, and social norms, as I attended a Catholic primary school and later a Catholic ladies' college. It was only in my later years as a classroom teacher that I had discovered my own, obvious, unconscious bias – I had assumed that girls were better writers.

And of course, tidy writing was valued in my primary school through the conventionality of the pen licence.

I was so proud of my pen licence; a rite of passage reserved for Grade 4 students. As I reflect upon this practice now, I see with clarity the cruelty of it. I feel for those who could not satisfy the writing standards required to achieve this pithy, pathetic prize. It is another way to ostracise an already marginalised community of learners. I think of my son and wonder how he would have internalised this failing.

Results

An emergence and construction of themes surfaced through the artworks, including *feminism*, *travel*, *migration*, and *parenthood*. Imbued within these were also perceptions of *cultural infusion*, *colonialism*, and *nature*. I reflected on the art materials, symbolism, themes, and memories in my journal.

I think back to my bias towards the notion that girls were better writers, which rapidly changed when I participated in a two-year, team-teaching partnership with a male colleague who did not hold such assumptions.

I was immersed in a classroom culture that valued writing. I saw, perhaps for the first time, that boys could write – pages upon pages. It was a wonderful, joyful space to practise teaching.

In my early teaching years, I taught English in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, for several months, from childcare to kindergarten to elementary school to marking high-school English papers. Later in my career, I worked in British Columbia, Canada, for a year. These experiences afforded an immersion in different cultures which facilitated new perspectives, ways of living, and working, which have strongly influenced my artwork.

In 1998, I returned from Taiwan to Melbourne to secure local teaching work. Within a few years, I changed from generalist, to art teaching, to training as an art therapist. In the final stages of my master's qualification, I underwent practicum placement in an Indigenous community in Ltyentye Apurte, Central Australia (Grynberg et al., 1999). This community resided on Arrernte land near Mparntwe (Alice Springs). My role was to facilitate a major art project. I spent most of my time in the gallery (Keringke Arts, 2022) with the local Australian Indigenous artists:

The gallery was also the art studio and central hub for artistic creation and community connection. I sat with the artists for hours as they spoke in Eastern Arrernte languages and communicated through original artworks. It was a privilege to watch as they brushed iconic markings onto canvas and tiles. Their connection to their home, as a meaningful place, was palpable. The Indigenous elders taught me the value of listening. Few words were exchanged with remarkably profound communication.

In 2016, I moved to Canada for twelve months to teach in a rural elementary school with predominantly First Nation populations. This included working with Tsilhqot'in, Shuswap, and Métis communities of the Cariboo Chilcotin region (Kunkel, 2014). There I witnessed huge disparities in educational outcomes across the school, particularly in writing. In general, writing was a slow and cumbersome activity for many of the students.

Writing was not easy for any of the children. It was effortless teaching writing to motivated children wrapped in privilege and advantage. Working with communities that continue to suffer from intergenerational trauma has been a very challenging experience to negotiate. I reach out to the children to locate where to start our work together.

Working with First Nation Canadians, I reflected on the impact of colonisation and the extent to which writing was valued within different communities. Was writing a predominantly Western practice? I thought about my own colonial indoctrination and the ways in which these concepts and practices have pervaded my thinking.

In my work with the Grade 6 Canadian children, I selected memoirs to focus on giving their stories a personalised voice.

I saw the children flourish when the handwriting barrier was removed. I enlisted First Nation liaison teachers to scribe whilst each child narrated, and later the children would type their own words. It was important that all the children contributed and owned their story. The final pieces were published so the children could keep a copy

of the class narratives, as proof that they were writers and maybe, one day, they might start to believe it too.

As I reflected on the students' learning and their formative years, ideas swelled about my own upbringing, influencing forces, and intergenerational dowry. My grandparents and parents both lived an Italian way of life outside of Italy with some level of cultural disconnection. As a child of immigrants living in Australia, I have also straddled this cultural dichotomy, living a hybrid Italian-Australian lifestyle. This cultural dissonance has afforded me differing perspectives from an early age, possibly leading to my challenging assumptions when I was as young as four years old. For example, at Sunday lunch, I noticed the women and girls leave the dining table to clean up, while the men could relax to play a card game, Briscola. This grated against my own gendered standpoint as I contemplated the inequity of the roles in which women were expected to perform.

As I reposition myself as a parent with a new and emerging generational stature, I appreciate distinct perspectives tightly sharpened by a gendered lens. I have deep empathy for parents, notably mothers, who have children with dysgraphia. As a teacher with a parental eye, I appreciate multiple perspectives as I look from within and outside. This aspect has been represented in my art composition by small openings, akin to windows, with thresholds and channels inside the final product. The openings symbolise opportunities and aspirations, and ways to move between, or expand, to close, or to extend lived spaces. These spaces that perforate the artwork represent the fluid nature of identity, and ways it can be stagnant, transfigured, or refashioned.

My own parenting experience has not been one of solitude as I have shared this role with my husband. Therefore, many of the experiences represented in the artwork were influenced by his involvement, and influences, such as his Ukrainian cultural heritage. The concept of parenthood within the artwork exists as interconnected and interwoven features within the narratives. The obscurity and ubiquity of my husband's presence is represented by the sturdy quality of the boxes. The boxes serve as a backdrop and provide a structural quality that underpins the entire project.

The notion of motherhood, per se, does not appear within the artwork as markedly as other themes. When I relook at the final product in search of maternal leitmotifs, it is the metaphor of glue that stands out. Motherhood is the aspect that binds all the other intersecting themes and experiences. In other words, my role as a mother of a child with dysgraphia is the catalyst for this inquiry, which holds the work together. The maternal aspects cannot be viewed in isolation without the artwork falling apart.

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to locate my researcher identity, drawing on my art therapy training. Through a phenomenological processes of art-making and journaling, I have drawn out key themes that reflect the authenticity and spontaneity of consciousness (Seamon, 2000; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The research has also enabled me to give voice to personal experience through the act of telling (Ellis et al., 2011; Pretorius & Cutri, 2019; Wall, 2008). The following section opens a discussion to address the research question: What is my researcher identity?

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1989) posits intersectionality as a way of understanding the potentially compounding nature of prejudice, based on intersecting identity markers. She emphasises that intersectionality creates further layers of complexity and nuanced social identities that can lead to a better understanding of multifaceted discriminatory consequences (Crenshaw, 1989; 2017). The metaphorical quality of the final artwork signalled this infusion of identities. For example, the many smaller boxes used to construct the artwork led to an amalgamation of these parts into a new edifice, an urban landscape with interwoven rural intimations. Each smaller box, while originally intended to represent one aspect of self, melted away and became transformed into a new construction. This notion suggests that identity can be constructed – or, by extension, deconstructed or reconstructed – in new and unexpected ways.

Positionality

Building on intersectionality, positionality also attempts to explore aspects of self in relation to others (Adams, 2021). Exploring positionality provides “an opportunity for researchers to interrogate their own motivations, worldviews, beliefs and embodied components of the research process” (Secules et al., 2021, p.20). I noted that my own positionality in relation to any compounding effect of potential discrimination was offset by the same protective forces that could also oppress. For example, the contradiction of being born into an Italian, patriarchal and Westernised world as a female was both oppressive and protective. In other words, the layers of privilege that shroud whiteness, heteronormativity, Catholicism, and patriarchy paradoxically reduced the potential impact of discrimination afforded to me for being the daughter of low-socioeconomic migrant workers. This reflects the complicated nature of intersecting identities that create tensions and contradictions. It emphasises the hidden nature of privilege and oppression, entangled within the social structures.

Able-bodied researcher

Furthermore, being an able-bodied and competent writer has implications for my researcher identity when considering dysgraphia (Svendby, 2021). My experience with dysgraphia began with my son, and thus I have a vested interest in his care and education. However, I do not have dysgraphia myself, which raises an ethical dilemma about my role in speaking on behalf of this community (Branfield, 1998). Moreover, I must ask myself, will I understand? (Koopman et al., 2020). Ryan and Runswick-Cole (2008), however, advocate for the rights of mothers of children with disabilities to engage in academia, arguing that mothers of children with disabilities maintain a liminal positionality “because they are often not disabled and yet they can experience forms of disablism” (p.199). Nonetheless, sensitivity to this matter is required and navigating the research space does evoke concern or anxiety about the best approach.

Researcher anxiety

Roulston and Shelton (2015, p.7) explore researchers’ experiences of anxiety, guilt, responsibility, and privilege as students ask themselves, “who-am-I-to-do-this-work?” Anxiety was also evoked in perceiving the rawness of the final art product, which left me with some degree of artistic dissatisfaction. It reflects the early-stage researcher status, where researcher acumen may be realised through years of development and supported by effective

supervisory mentorship (Lee, 2007). While aesthetics in this instance was not the point, I feel that my artistic capacity and potential is far greater than what was produced. I can and will do better, but time cannot force such a process. For now, I must be patient and accept my own limitations while still holding onto aspirations.

Relational ethics

Other ethical dilemmas also evoke researcher anxiety. For example, when depicting personal histories, relational ethics, which implicate self and others within the autoethnography, can be challenging to manage (Edwards, 2021; Ellis et al., 2011; Méndez, 2013). Some of my work and family experiences, conjured during the art-making and journaling, required curation herein due to relational ethical considerations. This may have compromised the authenticity of my work. While there is validity in maintaining healthy boundaries within research, concealment and protection of self and others might also be exercised by participants during impending research (Koopman et al., 2020). These boundaries will be respected despite the possible consequences.

Ethical research

Significantly, conducting this autoethnographic account will assist in delineating my own experiences of dysgraphia from those of my research participants. However, Wall (2008) touches on the impossibility of objectivity in research but emphasises the value of reflexivity in clarifying one's own positioning to facilitate bias reduction (Poerwandari, 2021). For example, my familiarity with dysgraphia through parental and teacher roles may result in dismissing aspects of research as dull or boring (Koopman et al., 2020). This will require deliberate mapping of my own views, and a level of ethical mindfulness (MacNaughton et al., 2001; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Warin, 2011). Ethical mindfulness is the "awareness of risks and balances, a sensitivity to the day-to-day and ongoing nature of ethical dilemmas within the research relationship" (Warin, 2011, p.809). Warin (2011) suggests that only a process of ongoing reflexivity can foster ethical mindfulness and can be a path to maintaining trust between researchers and participants.

Listening and the child's voice

Finally, when I reflect on my experience in Central Australia, I recall the ways in which the Indigenous locals conveyed their stories (Grynberg et al., 1999). Aboriginal "paintings mediate temporality, layers of cultural design and iconographic references to sites, people, spirits, natural and cosmological phenomena and the language of... forebears" (Lovell & Wallace, 2019, p.100). The Aboriginal Elders and artists indicated that artwork itself communicated personal and collective voices. The articulation of historical, personal, and cultural identities differed from my own Westernised ways. Through observing and deep listening (West et al., 2012), I was able to attune to the views and ways of others. This privileging of the Indigenous voice can give rise to possibilities for new learning, respect, and empathy. I reflect on the ways in which a child's voice might be privileged in my research, thus amplified. Disability advocates also push for disability voices to be amplified (Branfield, 1998). The path forward is complex, compelling, and apparent.

Conclusion

What is my researcher identity?

Through an art-based autoethnographic study underpinned by phenomenological philosophy and methodology, I have been able to draw out aspects of my emerging researcher identity. It is both fundamental to my work and shapes the future research I will be doing on the topic of dysgraphia. An existing and molten researcher identity has surfaced through navigating symbiotic relationships and interconnecting parts of self. While I have referred to a singular researcher identity, this is not accurate, as my researcher identity has been fused by the intersecting identities that have danced in unison and syncopation, embodying the lived histories that have carried me to this present moment. It reflects the rhizomatic and organic growth that is fluid and evolving.

My researcher identity also connects to the idea that tales of lived experiences are worth preserving. Through storying, subjectivity can be a valued source of knowledge as individuals' lived experiences differ in detail and nuance. It seems increasingly evident to me that students with dysgraphia may benefit from exploring their own identity, primarily for themselves but also to exercise their educational rights. These lived experiences or narratives can inform research communities so that there are shared understandings of what it might be like to live with a specific learning disability in writing. To this end, privileging the student with dysgraphia and their voice through art-based processes can be a powerful learning contribution to the research and educative practice spaces. However, ongoing reflexivity during research should be considered as foundational and ethical practice.

Acknowledgements

The first author is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP). The authors would like to thank Dr Lynette Pretorius, Dr Gerry Katz, and Mr Braden Palmer for helpful discussions during the preparation of this manuscript. The authors would also like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations, the traditional custodians of the Australian land on which this work was undertaken. Additionally, the authors express respect and gratitude for the Eastern Arrente people of the Ltyentye Apurte community referenced herein.

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Published: December 2022

Issue: Vol.17, No.2

Word count: 5330

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Cite this article:

Kalenjuk, E., Subban, P., Laletas, S., & Wilson, S. (2022). Using art therapy to explore researcher identity as a prelude to dysgraphia study: An autoethnography. *JoCAT*, 17(2). <https://www.jocat-online.org/a-22-kalenjuk>