



Investigating the Experiences of Special School Visual Arts Teachers: An Illustration of Phenomenological Methods and Analysis

by Cheung On Tam

Abstract

This paper reports on a recent hermeneutic phenomenological study aimed at understanding the experiences of special school teachers in Hong Kong, and specifically visual arts teachers tasked with teaching students with intellectual disabilities. Illustrating the use of a phenomenological research method, the paper outlines the methodology and procedure followed in respect of determining the source of data, conducting phenomenological interviews, and formulating themes. The themes that emerged from the interviews were examined in conjunction with the stories told by the teachers. The special school visual arts teachers who participated in this study have strong emotional and personal connections with their students. In relation to performing their teaching role, the teachers had experienced problems of various kinds, with many of these problems unique to the special school settings. In an effort to tackle these problems and improve their teaching, these teachers engaged in reflection and explored a variety of ways to enhance their students' learning. Despite the practical learning problems their students experience, the teachers maintained that studying visual arts is beneficial to their students' whole-person development. The paper concludes with a critical reflection on the nature of teaching visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities.

Background

Prior to the mid-1990s, discourse in the field of the art education of students with disabilities was dominated by the concept of “ableism”, emphasizing the physical and functional limitations of disabled persons and how these “problems” could be overcome in the teaching context (Eisenhauer, 2007). For example, some of the common learning difficulties demonstrated by students with intellectual disabilities were identified as: concrete rather than abstract thinking, poor short-term memory, attention to irrelevant details, and poor reasoning skills (Gerber, 2006). Accordingly, a vast body of literature evolved exploring ways in which teachers could help students with intellectual disabilities to learn visual arts. Hume (1998), for instance, offered a list of supportive teaching practices: breaking down tasks into separate

steps, removing all possible distractions, allowing more time, providing a choice of materials and media, and using non-verbal affirmation.

However, in more recent discourse, there has been a shift in orientation from viewing disability in terms of personal or medical limitations to seeing its attributes as socially, culturally or politically constructed (Bolt, 2012; Penketh, 2014). Wexler (2011) also notes that the medical model of explaining disability has given way to perceiving disability as a “subject of study comparable in critique and analysis to ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in its lived and constructed realities” (p. 55).

Besides familiarizing myself with the discourse on the notion of disability and the education of those affected, as a teacher educator in the visual arts field it was also

vital that, before embarking on any serious writing or research in the area, I gain an understanding of classroom interactions and the lived experiences of special school teachers. The present study was thus designed to address the following research question: What is it like to teach visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities? Since the study was focused on acquiring an interpretative understanding of the meaning of the experience, a hermeneutic phenomenological research methodology was selected as conducive to producing “rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively” (Smith, 1997, p. 80).

This study was conducted in the educational context of Hong Kong. In general, education of students with special needs is delivered either in mainstream schools with a modified curriculum and additional support or through placement in special schools. In September 2009, the Hong Kong Education Bureau adopted a new three-year senior secondary and four-year undergraduate academic system. To align with this change, it is stated that students with intellectual disabilities from special schools are entitled, in the case of visual arts, to be educated within the same curriculum framework as mainstream students (Curriculum Development Council, 2009). In the new senior secondary curriculum, visual arts is one of the elective subjects available to special school students. Previously, special school visual arts curricula had been largely school-based, and teachers had adapted the mainstream school curriculum and devised teaching and learning activities catering to the needs of their own students. In addition to addressing the dearth of research in the new curricular context, I trust that the insights generated by this study will be instrumental in promoting understanding of teaching experiences in various contexts and, in the process, serve to inform current teaching practice.

Methodology

Theoretical framework

The method we choose to use to conduct research not only affects the outcome of the investigation, but also reflects how we see the world. Phenomenology is the philosophical as well as the methodological framework selected for this study. A 20th century philosophical movement, phenomenology evolved in opposition to the reliance of the natural scientific worldview on positivist methods and theories. In contrast to positivism, phenomenology insists on the “priority of significance to fact, relation to substance, and understanding to knowledge” (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 5). In qualitative research, a phenomenological methodology is used to study questions of human experience and meaning in a wide variety of human science disciplines, and in particular psychology, sociology, education, and health care.

Although the philosophical origin of phenomenology makes a phenomenological research method more of an attitude than a method (van Manen, 1990/1997), procedurally phenomenology is as systematic, rigorous and capable of producing meaningful results as any other established research method. According to Moran (2000), phenomenology is “a *radical* way of doing philosophy, a *practice* rather than a system” (p. 4). Phenomenological research seeks to understand the lived meaning of events or phenomena as experienced by people in particular situations. Naturalistic and empathic in nature, phenomenological descriptions, whether of unique experiences or experiences in general, are most likely to be descriptions of experiences of the same category (Moss & Keen, 1981/1989) – such as the experiences of visual arts teachers teaching students with an intellectual disability. In essence, “What is sought by ... phenomenology is a rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 5).

Phenomenological research is not aimed at confirming theoretical hypotheses or corroborating existing theories, but at letting the phenomena investigated speak for themselves. Phenomenologists claim that, if we want to understand experience, we have to go to the experience itself, as reflected in the Husserlian maxim “back to the things themselves” (Husserl as quoted in van Manen, 1990/1997, p. 31). As a qualitative research approach, phenomenology is thus used to illuminate the lived meanings of human experience from a first person point of view (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008). As defined by van Manen (1990/1997, pp. 180–181), hermeneutic phenomenology is a descriptive (i.e., phenomenological) methodology, since it is attentive to how things reveal themselves, and also an interpretative (i.e., hermeneutic) methodology, because it takes into account that, while all the facets of lived experience already have meaning attached to them, these different aspects need to be interpreted in order for the meaning of the experience of the phenomenon to be accurately captured in words. Hermeneutic phenomenology was deemed particularly suitable for the current study since it would allow the researcher to understand the experience of teaching visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities from the perspective given voice by the teachers themselves.

Another feature of phenomenological research is the suspension by the researcher of his or her prejudgments, assumptions and pre-existing theoretical understanding: what is called the “natural attitude” (Husserl, 1952/1989, p. 411). Referred to as the epoché or “bracketing”, in transcendental phenomenology this measure implies the setting aside of common-sense attitudes and personal preconceptions in order to prevent them from imposing themselves on the researcher’s attentiveness to what the phenomenon of experience under investigation itself reveals (Moustakas, 1994). In existential and hermeneutic

phenomenological terms, “bracketing” may be described as a process of probing self-reflection that attitudinally “slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. xiii). From the point of view of hermeneutic phenomenology, it would be self-deceptive to suggest that it is possible to free ourselves from all our biases, ingrained as they are in our everyday world view and thinking, and, with a “pure”, suppositionless attitude, engage with the phenomenon being studied. After all, it is from the perspective of our preconceptions that we first become familiar with the phenomenon. Nevertheless, my role in this study was to interpret the experiences of visual arts teachers themselves and to make their own voices heard.

Participants

The participants in this study were visual arts teachers currently teaching in special schools for students with

intellectual disabilities. Of the ten teachers selected to participate, six were female and four male. (See Table 1). Four of the teachers were invited to participate while they were enrolled in a professional development programme. The remainder were teachers whom the researcher had come to know while they were studying for their first degrees in education.

These ten teachers were selected for this study for the following reasons:

- (1) they had experience of teaching visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities;
- (2) they were able to give rich descriptive accounts of such experiences;
- (3) they consented to participate in the interviews, and
- (4) they believed that the outcome of this study could contribute to the improvement of their practice.

Table 1. Background Information of the Participants

| Teacher ¹ | Gender | Age range | Teaching experience in special schools (years) | Students' level of intellectual disabilities | Special education training |
|----------------------|--------|-----------|--|--|----------------------------|
| Margaret | F | 20 – 30 | 5 | Profound | Yes |
| Charlotte | F | 30 – 40 | 10 | Moderate | Yes |
| Nelson | M | 20 – 30 | 1 | Moderate | No |
| Laura | F | 20 – 30 | 1 | Moderate | No |
| Chloe | F | 20 – 30 | 2 | Mild | Yes |
| Flora | F | 20 – 30 | 3 | Mild | No |
| Shawn | M | 20 – 30 | 1 | Mild | No |
| Simon | M | 40 – 50 | 19 | Mild | Yes |
| Stephen | M | 30 – 40 | 11 | Mild | Yes |
| Tina | F | 50 – 60 | 18 | Mild | Yes |

¹ All the names of teachers and students appearing in this paper are pseudonyms

Classroom Observations

To gain an initial understanding of what a visual arts class looks like in a special school, I had observed four teachers' classroom teaching on one occasion in each case before proceeding to conduct the interviews with them. Although the interview remained the main source of data for this study, the observation allowed me to understand the school context and gain a sense of the actual behaviours of the students. The observation also helped me to prepare questions to ask for elaboration or clarification during the interview.

Interviews

Engaging participants in conversational interviews is “an almost inevitable procedure for attaining a rigorous and significant description of the world of everyday human experience as it is lived and described by specific individuals in specific circumstances” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 28). In the phenomenological

interview, the emphasis is on the dialogue established between the researcher and the participant around the interviewee's description, as clarified and elaborated at the request of the interviewer if and when required, of his or her experience of the focal phenomenon. The dialogic nature of the phenomenological interview has the effect of placing the researcher and the participant in a more equal position, co-working to reconstruct the experience. The interviews conducted in the course of the present study were thus “a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (van Manen, 1990/1997, p. 66).

The individual interviews with the teachers were all conducted in Cantonese¹. Each participant was inter-

¹ The Chinese dialect spoken by most Hong Kong people.

viewed individually once, with the interviews taking place in the schools where the participants respectively teach. At the start of each interview, I briefly explained the study and asked questions about the participants' educational backgrounds and their teaching careers. The participants were asked to: (1) describe how they came to be teaching in a special school; (2) reflect on their personal experiences of teaching visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities; (3) single out particular experiences that they themselves would like to talk about, and (4) describe these experiences and what they meant to them personally.

I began the first round of interviews with four of the teachers. These four interviews were interpreted and preliminary themes were identified. The interviews with the remaining six teachers were conducted with these themes forming the basis for the conversations. From the transcripts of the initial four interviews, I discovered that the participants regarded their early experiences of working in special schools as the most influential and memorable. When I interviewed the other six teachers, I therefore focused more specifically on their own early experiences of teaching visual arts in special schools.

Data Interpretation

The data generated by phenomenological interviews are descriptive and empirical in nature, and comprise authentic experiential accounts, portraits or "stories" narrated from the point of view of the experience as actually lived *prereflectively*, and as such prior to the forming of theories, conceptualizations or explanations with regard to it. The data are empirical in the sense that they are based on direct experience and were obtained by following systematic procedures. As the researcher, I personally conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed all the interviews. Since the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, transcribing the interviews involved not only transcription, but also translation.

For the data interpretation, I adopted the "line by line" approach described by van Manen (1990/1997). To begin, I broke down the entire transcript into separate sentences, with each sentence relating to a particular aspect of the narrated experience of teaching visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities. Sentences that carried similar meanings or that recurred were then grouped together. A single statement was formulated to capture the central common meaning or theme of each group of sentences. The aim of a thematic statement is to capture the essential meaning of an aspect of lived experience in a few words. Later these statements are fleshed out into phenomenological descriptions. Once all the major themes had been identified, I re-read the transcript and either revised the phrasing of the themes or reallocated the thematic statements to other themes. This process of moving interpretatively from the part back to the whole – a process referred to as the hermeneutic circle – was repeated several times. The

same interpretative procedure was followed with each of the ten interview transcripts. The significance of this process is, most crucially, that it transforms the lived experience into "a symbolic form that creates by its very discursive nature a conversational relation" (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 111).

Themes

What emerged strongly from the interviews was that the special school visual arts teachers who participated in this study are emotionally and personally deeply connected to their students. They know their students well and have become capable of making meaning of their behaviour. The teachers had experienced many difficulties and, in particular, often felt helpless in the face of the challenges confronting both themselves and their students. In order to deal effectively with these challenging teaching situations, the teachers engaged in a reflective teaching approach and explored a variety of ways in which to enhance their students' learning. The teachers maintained that studying visual arts is particularly beneficial to their students' whole-person development. The following are some of the essential themes identified, elaborated by representative extracts from the interview transcripts in the teachers' words.

Feeling helpless regarding both the students and themselves

For the teachers involved in this study, experiencing feelings of frustration, helplessness and disappointment is part of their everyday reality. They have to attempt to teach people who do not appear, think or behave like themselves. Very often the teachers compared their students with those in mainstream schools and viewed them as "other". This sense of the "otherness" of their students had been particularly strong when they first started working in a special school. Shawn's school is situated in a busy district. I could hear the noise of the heavy traffic when I interviewed him in the art room, which is rather small and filled with old wooden tables. Recalling his experience as a newly qualified teacher, Shawn described feeling a considerable degree of shock on first being confronted by the reality of his students' condition. He said:

Some [of the students] couldn't even tell the difference between red, yellow and blue. They couldn't even hold a pen; their hand muscles were too weak. Some had weak mouth muscles and they couldn't stop slobbering. ... I didn't expect that kind of situation.

Nelson works in a school for students with moderate intellectual disability. The set up of his art room is very similar to that of a mainstream school. Students sit in groups of three or four. Nelson described an incident that took place in his classroom that he had never expected from a secondary school student:

When I first joined the school, I found these students very different from people I know or the students that I taught during my teaching practice. ... A student of mine, he jumped up and just ... involuntarily urinated in the classroom. I was at a loss as to what to do. ... The same student did that twice in the visual arts classroom.

When describing their students' helplessness, some of the teachers commented that they felt the helplessness in themselves. What these teachers were experiencing was their own inability to effect any improvement in their students' learning or skills, let alone to change the cause of the difficulties they experienced or the course of their lives. Shawn was dispirited by his students' failures, and this had had a detrimental effect on his self-esteem. He accordingly began to question whether it was he himself or his method of teaching that was causing the problem. Shawn remembered that:

I saw Marcus twice a week. Basically I had to hold his hand to do the work. It was me rather than him working. I didn't know what I was doing. I couldn't teach him anything at all. ... I couldn't see any improvement. It's the same every lesson, whether it's drawing or hand-work. It's very frustrating. ... Was my teaching no good? Was my instruction not clear? Even though I demonstrated to my students, one by one, face to face, all they could do was to stare at me.

Margaret teaches students with profound intellectual disability. There are only four to five students in her class. Two of the students are seated in wheelchairs, while one walks with crutches. There is also a teaching assistant in the classroom for most of the time. Owing to the precarious physical health of the students in her school, Margaret needed to deal with their deaths on a regular basis. She became frustrated about the loss of her students. The emotional impact on Margaret was so great that, for a time, she had cynically regarded her work as not meaningful and thought that there was no point in putting much effort into nurturing her students. She said:

The most frustrating thing is that, sometimes when I tried my best to nurture them [students] ... they would have accidents. ... There was one student who suffered from encephalitis; he died when he came back here. There's another student who had a cancer relapse. And there's another one who died of some minor physical injury. After going through all these several times, I began to ask myself whether I should be making all these efforts to teach them. What is the point of seeing my students sitting in a classroom and doing something they are not interested in?

Knowing their students well and making meaning of their behaviour

Teaching students with special needs to a large extent involves becoming familiar with them. Special school teachers have various responsibilities in addition to their teaching. Often they have to take on the responsibilities of counselling, caretaking or even parenting (a number of special school students are orphans). The bonding between teachers and students in special schools is exceptionally close and strong. Teachers' decisions are navigated by their beliefs and expectations regarding their students (Ruppar, Gaffney, & Dymond, 2015; Woodcock, 2014). In most cases, productive teaching will therefore not take place until the teachers have come to know their students well. To achieve this, a lengthy period of mutual discovery was needed by both the teachers and the students. Charlotte reflected that a close relationship with students is the key to gaining their respect and attention for learning. She mentioned that:

They [the students] really care about whether they know me or not. If the relationship isn't good, they will simply ignore me. ... It took me a whole year to establish that relationship with the class I am now teaching. In schools like this, it's not just about establishing the relationship with the students of a class, but [with] students of the whole school.

Very often, the relationship between the teacher and the student can be so close that even the blink of an eye or a cry from the student is sufficient for the teacher to know what the student is attempting to convey. In order for special school teachers to understand their students, it is important that they be alert to the communicative function of subtle as well as challenging behaviours (Taylor & Oliver, 2008). Flora believed that a special school teacher's ability to attach meanings to students' sounds, gestures and facial expressions developed over a long period of trial and error. She described it as a very natural process, pointing out that she herself had thus not needed actively to acquire this skill:

I just automatically know what they want to say ... after I've been with them for so long.

During my visit to the special schools, I was originally doubtful about, but later amazed by, the precision of such a subtle form of communication. I discovered that this is common practice for communicating with non-verbal students with severe intellectual disability. The following illustrative interaction occurred during my observation of Margaret's lesson:

Margaret wanted to invite Ping (one of her students who has a severe intellectual disability) to decide on the content for her Chinese character design. Ping could choose between a phrase from a daily conversation, a few words

describing herself, or a four-character proverb for the design. Margaret painstakingly asked Ping to make a choice and Ping also tried hard to respond by yelling out some sound. To me, Ping was making some meaningless sound, but Margaret, by narrowing down the answers one by one, could precisely identify that what Ping wanted to write about was her mother. When Margaret finally got what Ping meant, Ping nodded strongly with a loud scream.

Being reflective and responsive with regard to their teaching and the students' learning

In attempting to resolve the problems they were facing, the first step many of the teachers took was to ponder over their unsuccessful teaching experiences. The first question that came to mind was, predictably, "Who is responsible: I or the students?" The next questions were: "Who needs to change? Who is able to change?" All the teachers in this study actively sought ways to overcome the problems confronting them by modifying not only their teaching practices and approach, but also their expectations. For instance, upon reflection, Margaret realized that what she had been teaching her students had been too demanding. She knew that she needed to start from scratch with the basics. She said:

I have to reorganize my teaching strategy all the time. ... In my first year I taught art criticism to a class that was relatively weak, and for the whole lesson it seemed I was only talking to myself. I would ask a question and then answer it myself. ... I realized I needed to change [her own approach]. In the second lesson, I began to involve them in doing something related to the artwork. It was a drawing exercise.

This kind of reflection resulting from the processes of trial and error is particularly common and significant for teachers in special schools. The teachers in this study were more than reflective: they were responsive and made immediate decisions to adapt to the needs of their students. The role of the teacher in this context is therefore essentially situational, constantly changing, and dependent largely on the feedback of the students. Stephen joined a special school on graduating from a teacher programme and received in-service training in teaching students with special needs some years later. Now he has a small class of fewer than ten students aged around 16 and 17. His art room is furnished with a row of individual working desks along the window and four large tables in the centre. Stephen mentioned that sometimes the lesson did not progress as planned, and that he then had to change what he was doing and improvise by making use of what was happening at the time. Perhaps this is what Schön (1991) describes as "reflection-in-action" – a kind of thinking on one's feet and responding to the uniqueness of the child and the situation. Stephen said:

Although a teaching plan or design is devised beforehand, if that does not correspond to the students' capabilities, I'd have to modify that instantly on the spot. ... On one occasion, I taught my students to draw a sunflower, but they drew the petals in a very pointed shape. I therefore asked them to put two fingers on the paper and draw a line around them, and the curved shape began to come out.

Teaching students with intellectual disabilities is, in essence, a process that requires constant reflection and accommodation to the students' needs. The significance of reflection for teachers in special schools lies in the fact that it is difficult for them, especially when new to a class, to anticipate the students' response. It is only by being reflective and constantly reassessing the situation that the teachers can accurately attune their teaching to the students' learning progress.

Working between students' capability and incapability

In teaching visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities, making refinements and adjustments is a routine practice. Teachers have to find out and accept what their students can and cannot do. This realization and acceptance may take a fairly long time to develop. After many years, Stephen realized that:

It's not the students who need to adapt to us, but the other way round... I used to blame the students for not being attentive or not trying their best. ... But when I found out that they were in reality incapable of doing that, I thought it's my responsibility to adjust the curriculum to suit them, or to give them more support so that they can do better.

This change in mentality is very important in helping to alleviate the frustrations of the teachers as well as to improve their teaching. However, striking a balance between what teachers should and should not expect from their students can be more difficult. If nothing is expected of students and every piece of work they do falls within their comfort zone, how will they ever learn? Even though Chloe had worked with students with an intellectual disability for only two years, she already knew that it was important to have some expectations of them. She expressed her attitude in this regard as follows:

Don't think that they can't achieve anything, and therefore expect nothing from them. ... [Having expectations of them] can drive them. But lots of preparation is needed and the teachers need to guide them. It can be done. If we are willing to do more, they will progress.

The teachers emphasized that what was expected of the students should be reasonable. It is only when the

teachers are engaged in that unique teacher-student interaction that they can know what would constitute a reasonable expectation in the case of each of their students. Shawn advised that the teacher should focus on what the students can do instead of what they cannot do. He said:

If we look from a different viewpoint, they are capable. For example – think “He can recognize red and yellow” instead of “He can’t recognize black and white”. [So, focus on what they can do?] Yes, and amplify what they can do.

It is this working between what students are capable and incapable of doing that typifies the experience of visual arts teachers in special schools. What usually stands out first for them is what students cannot do; when they see beyond this and begin to recognize what their students can do, they are able to feel more optimistic about their students’ potential and begin the real teaching. Working between students’ capability and incapability may be understood in terms of Vygotsky’s (1930-1934/1978) concept of the “zone of proximal development” (p. 86). While teachers should therefore be aware of what their students are incapable of, their focus should optimally be on helping them to achieve the next level of what they are capable of.

Students’ needing more time to learn when there is less time to live

Time is key for special school teachers in getting to know their students and discover what each is capable and incapable of achieving. What the teachers who took part in this study frequently found the most frustrating was not seeing the students making any progress. In this regard, Chloe confirmed that allowing for more time for the students to demonstrate progress could help:

We can’t look at it in the short term. We need to wait for a very long time. ... We probably won’t be able to see any progress in the year ahead, but perhaps three years later, or even longer, we will see their progress. Though it’s slower than that of normal students, we will [in due course] know they have been learning.

Even though special school visual arts teachers are not under the same pressure as mainstream school teachers to rush through the curriculum content, they need to grab the time when their students can focus. Since the attention span of students with intellectual disabilities is extremely short, its duration is very “precious” for teachers. Laura teaches students with mild intellectual disability. Her art lessons mostly take place in a standard classroom, and the learning activities are also similar to those of mainstream schools. However, she said:

The time that my students can focus is not long. I have to teach as much as is possible during

this short period of time. After these precious moments, the students will need some rest or to do something else. One of my students always asks, “Why should we stay at this for such a long time?” If I don’t change to something else, he will lose his temper or drift away.

For students with intellectual disabilities, time is an important dimension of learning. Often, the difficulties displayed by students are directly or indirectly linked to health problems or even to a life-threatening medical condition. Time is especially precious for some of the students, since their health conditions, and sometimes their intellectual abilities, are deteriorating day by day. For these students, it is ironic that they need more time than others to learn but have less time than others to live. Margaret, in referring to the medical condition of one of her students, commented that her student was already fortunate in even having the chance possibly to live for two years longer than expected. She said:

His life is going to be really short. I don’t know whether he can do it next time ... he could die suddenly. [So their lives are not very stable? They might die within a month? Or a year?] Well, not as serious as that. Their average life expectancy is 18 to 20. And he’s currently 18.

Because of the short life expectancy of some of the students, the teachers sometimes came to regret their decisions, while the students were still alive, to teach or not to teach them something. Chloe, for instance, deeply regretted not having given one of her students additional opportunities to learn how to draw before he went blind. She blamed herself for not having been more alert to the severity of her student’s medical condition. She said:

This student ... he couldn’t see. [So he’s visually impaired? Is he completely blind?] No, he’s not completely blind. When I first met him last year, he could still see a bit. ... It’s a pity that I didn’t seize [the chance]. This year his eyesight has deteriorated a lot, so now he’s almost completely blind.

Recognizing the beneficial effect of studying visual arts

The therapeutic nature of visual arts activities is well documented in the field literature (e.g., Furniss, 2008; Malchiodi, 2003; Ruben, 2001; Wexler, 2011). Even though engaging their students in visual arts activities is relatively time-consuming, most of the teachers in this study were determined to provide such valuable learning opportunities. Margaret, who is very keen on allowing her students to participate in both art making and art appreciation, argued that the most important lesson the students could learn from visual arts is not the art knowledge or the techniques, but a taste of how

enjoyable life can be. She expressed this fervently:

I think the most important thing is to let them have the memories of their lives. And the development of their interest. ... It's really meaningful. ... I am not simply teaching a student, I am building up ... with the student ... some meanings for life. Since the students are physically disabled or live very short lives, I am not teaching them the knowledge in books or any techniques. I am teaching them how to enjoy their lives and make their lives more colourful. So this isn't solely a teaching role.

This is another story from Laura:

I have a student who is good at drawing. She likes to draw whatever she has done and what she likes, for example, the animation she has watched or the experience of visiting the supermarket with her mother. She has something like a visual diary to tell her stories and she likes to show it to teachers. This has helped her reinforce her visual memory and [so to] learn more quickly in other subjects.

Indeed, many of the teachers who participated in this study perceive the process of learning visual arts as far more important than the outcome. Simon is one of them. He believes that studying visual arts can allow students to gain a sense of achievement, since it is a subject in which there are no right or wrong answers. As long as the students try, they will achieve something. In this regard, he commented:

The most important thing is that the students enjoy the art-making process ... [it's] not so much about the outcome ... allow them to enjoy the colourfulness ... and let them think that they can actually achieve something, regardless of how simple it is, so that they are satisfied, happy and have a sense of achievement.

Critical Reflection

This study has provided me with an opportunity to re-examine some of my beliefs about practices involved in teaching visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities. Through a renewed understanding of the experience of the teachers who participated in this study, I would like to reflect critically on the educational aim, the curriculum planning and the philosophy underlying the teaching of visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities.

Recognizing the disability of their students typifies the experiences of visual arts teachers in special schools. When a teacher, being an “able” person, encounters a “disabled” student, the first thing he or she does is to

recognize that they are different in certain respects. Irrespective of whether the attributes of disability are, as propounded in contemporary academic discourse, socially, culturally or politically constructed, special school teachers have to face the difference they make. In real life situations, teachers need to deal with the learning difficulties resulting from these differences. The teachers' way of talking and thinking about their students with intellectual disability is still very much influenced by the medical model emphasizing their inherent limitations. However, the more I listen to the experience of the teachers, the more I think that it is from such a recognition of their students' differences and limitations that teachers begin to reflect on, ponder and envisage possible ways to deal with the problems posed. It is from this recognition that the way in which the teachers see their students develops from one of sympathy to one of empathy.

I want to ask another fundamental question – what are the aims of teaching visual arts to students with intellectual disabilities? Some teachers in this study contend that what most benefits the students from studying visual arts is not learning outcomes such as the skills and knowledge acquired, but the processes of free expression, emotional reparation and personal fulfilment. While there is a small possibility that students with intellectual disabilities could go on to work in the creative industry, as long as learning visual arts provides students with a means to express themselves freely and stretch out into the world, that would suffice. What the processes of learning visual arts can allow students to experience is a form of self-actualization, which can in turn enhance their confidence, sense of achievement and self-worth. As Wexler (2009) suggested, “children with disabilities need the arts as an alternative means of reaching independence and autonomy, or as a pretext for multidimensional growth” (p. 16). It is important for teachers to consider their curriculum planning and teaching strategies with these aims in mind. Perhaps engagement in tasks is in fact more important than the completion of assignments; perhaps the realization of students' strengths and interests is more important than the achievement of predetermined aims.

Being reflective is one of the key themes discussed in this paper, and this theme actually permeates many of the other themes. It is an important feature of special school teachers' experience. To be an effective special school teacher is, in essence, to be reflective. In special schools, teachers have the autonomy to decide on what to teach and the progress of the lessons. According to Thornton (2005), reflection is “a retrospective response in which thoughts and choices between actions are considered with a view to improving effectiveness in future situations” (p. 172). In the context of this study, being reflective means that the teachers are constantly adjusting and refining the level of difficulty and pace of their lessons to suit the students' needs. By doing so,

teachers monitor and moderate the progress of the lesson in the best interests of the students. Teachers' reflectivity is also manifested in their changing beliefs about their students over time. I argue that all students, whether they are from mainstream or special schools, can derive the most benefit from a reflective teaching approach.

When Stephen pointed out the apparent contradiction that students with intellectual disabilities are different and yet still part of normal society, I began to wonder how a special school teacher should perceive his or her students' disabilities. Should teachers really focus on the "normal" aspects of the students and pretend that they are normal? By "normal", I mean that the abilities of students with intellectual disabilities can be demonstrated as those of a fully "able" child. Or should teachers rather acknowledge the students' inabilities so that they can offer the appropriate help? Woodcock (2014) argues that teaching students with special needs is not about ignoring their weaknesses. Rather, it is about treating them as normal children while acknowledging

their unique characteristics, including their weaknesses. To those teaching students with intellectual disabilities, both their disability and their ability thus need to be visible. This mixed approach of recognizing students' abilities while acknowledging their unique difficulties was the gist of Stephen's view on how special school teachers should see their students. What he was warning against was the misconception that teachers only treat their students as either able or unable. Special school teachers, and especially those who are new, should beware of the potential pitfalls of such dualistic points of view. I thus conclude with this thought from Stephen:

It's very contradictory. On the one hand I have to recognize that they are different from normal people. I should treat them differently. But, at the same time, I have to realize that there are different kinds of people in our society. Even though they are different, they are still part of our society. This is what we as teachers need to acknowledge ... and remind ourselves of constantly.

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About the Author



Cheung On Tam
Associate Professor
Department of Cultural and Creative Arts
Education University of Hong Kong
Tai Po, Hong Kong
E-mail address: cotam@ied.edu.hk

Dr Cheung On Tam graduated as Master of Education in 1996 from the University of Hong Kong and Doctor of Philosophy in 2006 from the University of London, where he was later awarded a Visiting Fellowship in the Institute of Education from May to July 2009. He is currently employed at the Education University of Hong Kong as Associate Professor in the Department of Cultural and Creative Arts.

Co-Editor of the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Arts Education*, Dr Tam has published in the *Canadian Review of Art Education* (2006), the *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* (2008), the *International Journal of Education Through Art* (2010), *Research in Arts Education* (2010), *Research in Learning Technology* (2012), *The International Journal of Arts Education* (2012, 2013) and the *International Journal of Art and Design Education* (in press).

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