

Creativity

and the Autistic Student

**Supporting Strengths
to Develop Skills and
Deepen Knowledge**

Carrie C. Snow

Contents

Acknowledgments

v

Preface

vii

Development of My Understandings About Autism and Education	vii
Observations from Sustained Relationships	x
Language Usage of Personal Descriptors	x
Overview of This Book	xi

1. The Relevance of Revising Interpretations of Autism and Creativity in Education Contexts

1

Inclusion and a New Diversity	2
Common Conceptions About Autism	4
A Strengths-Based Understanding of Autism	9
Special Interests, Creativity, and Identity Formation	12
Creativity as a Human Commonality	13
Toward Recognition, Acknowledgment, and Support of Creativity in Autistic Students	15

2. Aligning Autism and Creativity Through Scholarship and Autobiography

19

Accounts of the Extraordinary	20
Creative Capacity Demonstrated Through Autism Scholarship	24
Creative Capacity as Demonstrated in Autism Autobiography	33
The Alignment in Sum	44

3. Autism, Creativity, and the Arts	47
A Finer Grained Conception of Creativity	48
Autistic Artists and Why They Engage with the Arts	49
Prospects for Skill and Ability Building Through the Arts	71
4. Educators' Role in Cultivating Creative Learning in Autistic Students	73
Teaching for a Creative Age	74
Laying a Foundation for Creativity and Inclusion	75
Providing Systems of Support	76
Offering Appropriate Challenges	81
Channeling and Developing Interests in Constructive Ways	86
Enabling Means of Expression	90
5. Preparing for Creativity in Modernity and Beyond	95
Educating for a Creative Culture	97
Diversity as Creativity	98
Disability as Creativity	99
Schools and Teachers as Creative Catalysts	101
Appendix: Notes on Methodology	105
The Data Sources	105
Participant Consent, Email Dialoguing, Verification	106
Identification of Themes, Organization, and Analysis	108
References	109
About the Author	116

Preface

I have written *Creativity and the Autistic Student* for those preparing to become teachers, those who currently teach, and those who administrate in elementary and secondary schools. This book bears relevance for educators who are specialists (e.g., special education, art), as well as those who are generalists. My focus is on certain key qualities of education that commonly are cited by autistic people as significant to their development of fulfilling lives, healthy identities, promising careers and vocations, and creativity in general. These key qualities can be applied flexibly to support the creative development of autistic students in K–12 classrooms and schools, whether they are public or private, inclusive or specialized. Yet this book is grounded on the principles of inclusion, for I believe that the potential for the most democratic and equitable educational experiences is encountered in classrooms that represent an array of abilities, experiences, and ways of being. I recognize that inclusion is not an easy route, and is one that relies on the coordination and cooperation of teachers, families, administrators, and students.

DEVELOPMENT OF MY UNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT AUTISM AND EDUCATION

Spanning more than 15 years, my work in the field of special education has included tutoring, mentoring, classroom teaching, educational research, student teaching supervision, and teacher education. My perspective likewise is tempered by parenting two young children who are growing up in a different age than that in which I first began my career. In the 1990s, students deemed in need of special education typically were taught in self-contained classrooms or specialized schools, yet mainstreaming was becoming a model that some schools used. Often, mainstreaming meant that students deemed in need of special education spent part of their day in a general education classroom, but most of the day in their self-contained classroom. Often it meant that they spent no time in general education classrooms, but joined general education peers for lunch and recess. This model was inching toward what is now referred to

as inclusion, where the idea is that students with individualized education plans are integrated with their general education peers, sharing classes on a full-time basis. While clear strides have been made, there is still a lot of work to be done in efforts to create inclusive, equitable learning experiences for all youth. Yet I remain optimistic that we will continue to build on the progress we have made thus far. I need only to contrast my own childhood school experiences with those of my children to realize that although there is much yet to do, inclusive practices have given youth of varying abilities the chance to get to know one another. As a child growing up in the 1980s, if there were autistic students in my school, I did not know it. While common practice then was to segregate students deemed in need of special education from their general education peers (to be taught in portable classrooms outside of the main building), the reality was that there was little interfacing between “us” and “them.” This structure of segregation offered no possibility for either group to get to know the other in any genuine way.

As my oldest child navigates public school as a kindergartner, I witness what she learns about what autism means in the context of her inclusive classroom. Her impression that an autistic classmate, who is a very strong math student, “knows more than the rest of us,” shores up my optimism that the quality of life in school for autistic youth is beginning to change for the better. Just as important is the reality that the quality of life in school for neurotypical students (such as my daughter) likewise is changing for the better. With integration, neurotypical students benefit from getting to know autistic youth and learning from the strengths and qualities they contribute to the classroom community. Each of my roles has contributed to my understanding of the systems that support and hinder the success of autistic students in schools. Throughout my immersion in the field of special education, I have always been especially drawn to the perspectives of students. They offer fresh ideas that bring currency, relevance, and heart to issues that are typically dominated by educational professionals. Whether they realize it or not, students are unique experts who can give richly, namely by providing insights into facets of their educational experiences that worked or failed to work for them. I found this to be the case during a previous study that directly influenced my interest in undertaking this current project.

In the fall of 2007, I began data collection in two high schools (one public, one private) in a large U.S. city. I set out to work with three students with Asperger syndrome (AS) in an effort to understand from their perspectives what schooling meant to them. Over the course of 6 months, I observed the students in various classroom contexts, walked with them between classes, and traversed the city searching for dry, warm places to sit and talk about their school-based lives. I found that their experiences were often in contrast to common stories conveyed about AS. Of

particular interest to me was the finding that the students engaged in a number of creative strategies in their efforts to make sense of their social and academic worlds.

However, my interest in the relationship between autism and creativity can be traced back even further and perhaps has its earliest roots in my experience as a classroom teacher. Five years prior to the 2007 study, and in the same city, I was a teacher working with upper elementary autistic students. These youth revealed, in their actions, words, goals, and dreams, the many ways in which they defied the stereotypes I had come to know as hallmarks of their classification. While they were supposed to represent flat or “stiff” emotionality (Myles & Simpson, 2001, p. 2), these students were perhaps the most emotionally expressive people I had ever met in my life. This emotionality was evident, for instance, in the way one boy inflected his voice when reading to the class, emulating each character with varying pitch and tonality. It was likewise evident in the depth of laughter that many of the students expressed when something was funny. One student ran away or hid under a desk when he felt fearful, anxious, or otherwise overwhelmed. Another often stormed in anger to retreat behind the curtain of the “quiet space” we had set up in the classroom for times when students needed a break. Their feelings were very much out in the open, and anything but stiff.

Furthermore, although the social impairment of my autistic students had been delineated (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), I noticed their sense of loyalty to one another, as if they were siblings. Like siblings, there were tensions and plenty of instances of arguing and fighting, sometimes even to violent ends. But despite these growing pains, the students were close. Permanently etched in my memory is a vision of my class huddled together on the evening of their elementary school graduation. In that quiet moment, they communicated a strong sense of connectedness and seemed to pay honor to the years they had grown up together, shaped one another, supported one another. And now, with collective apprehension and excitement, they were letting go of one another. About to disperse to different middle schools throughout the city, they held tight one last time to the familiarity they had grown to count on.

While I always noticed attributes in my students that strayed quite far from those outlined in professional diagnostic manuals and popular media alike, the sense of imagination and creativity that the students demonstrated on a daily basis resonated with me deeply. Although not always the case, many of their interests were centered on artistic, creative endeavors such as playing an instrument or drawing. Some expressed creativity by attending to personal style such as putting together outfits that set them apart in a unique way from their peers. As is true for all students, I noticed that when my students referenced their creative interests, new learning became relevant and meaningful. It was a process of making

new use of “old” material, of constructing novelty from a wellspring of tried-and-true knowledge. This forging of the old with the new was a process in which each student engaged, and it struck me that in this way each demonstrated creative capacity on a daily basis. The fact that these students were regularly engaging in creativity is not surprising except that the overwhelming message (in scholarship and popular media) about autistic people is that, above all, their supposed rigidity and preference for familiarity reigns over any interest they may have in novelty.

OBSERVATIONS FROM SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIPS

Today, I remain in contact with some of my former students and research participants who are now adults pursuing college degrees and looking for jobs. Some have contributed to this book, in the form of new data that I share in Chapter 3. The sustained nature of the relationships I have with these individuals has been gratifying and has allowed me to bear witness to their negotiation of numerous influences and, through these negotiations, to their construction of identities and fulfilling lives for themselves. As they have entered early adulthood, it has been revealing to see how many of these individuals have carved paths that revolve around their creative endeavors, including illustration, theater performance, and music. This reality suggests the very crucial role that creative expression has played in their successful navigation through childhood and adolescence to reach young adulthood with a positive sense of self in place.

My interest in the relationship between autism and creativity has led me beyond my former students to the work of other, more well-known autistic people, many of whom I reference and feature in this book. These individuals evidence new ways of perceiving and interpreting the world, often through creative processes such as poetry and painting. Sometimes these perceptions and interpretations are revealed through gestures or speech. Through a variety of creative expression, these people have contributed to a strengths-based understanding of autism.

LANGUAGE USAGE OF PERSONAL DESCRIPTORS

The strengths-based interpretation that so many autistic people (and their allies) have cultivated is reflected in a recent linguistic shift. Many people who are active in autism self-advocacy communities have led the way in shifting the language from person-first to identity-first (i.e., from “person with autism” to “autistic person”) as an act of self-acceptance. In light of this development, I have come to understand autism as a lens through which one experiences life in a way similar to temperament. For example,

a primary disposition of extroversion filters one's life experiences and perceptions holistically, as does one of primary introversion (see Cain, 2012). The people who are featured in this book attest to this reality. They show how the neurological wiring that manifests broadly as "autism" offers both new angles and distinct tensions through which to understand human experience in its diversity. In this book, I align with autism advocacy communities and adopt the usage of identity-first language, referring to those featured in this book as "autistic people." I make this decision in regard to autism distinctly, since autism advocacy groups have made such a concerted appeal for adopting identity-first language. When referring to disability in general, however, I continue to use person-first language.

I realize that the change in vernacular to identity-first brings discomfort for many people who remain tied to person-first language. This is understandable: Person-first language came in response to oppressive language that defined people in terms of their supposed disabilities. The move to person-first language was undoubtedly a critical step in shifting the focus from the disability to the person. However, person-first language can have the effect of distancing the disability from the person, where the disability can feel like an add-on feature to a person's life as opposed to an integral and important part of the person's identity. With regard to autism, I make the shift from person-first to identity-first language as a way to support the strides that many autistic people have made in deciding how they are represented in the world. I also make the choice in acknowledgment that for many individuals autism is a source of pride.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

The chapters that follow highlight some of the many contributions autistic people have made to a young yet evolving understanding of autism and creativity. There are a few instances (in Chapter 4) where I likewise reference my own experience as a classroom teacher of autistic elementary students, yet overwhelmingly the book is guided by the ideas set forth by the various autistic people herein represented. These contributions are given for the particular purpose of enhancing the quality of life in school for autistic youth. In the process of reinterpreting the relationship between autism and creativity, I weave creativity scholarship throughout the book and highlight its relevance for educational application.

In Chapter 1, I address the reason for undertaking a project of revising interpretations of autism and creativity for educational contexts. I lay out the foundations for the book, including a discussion of strengths-based conceptions of autism, the use of a Disability Studies stance, and an alignment with a neurodiversity perspective. Chapter 1 also contains a brief overview of how autistic students fit into the new diversity of

contemporary inclusive classrooms, provides a discussion about common meanings of autism, and puts forth the conception that creativity is a quality common to all people.

Chapter 2 aligns autism with creativity through an exploration and analysis of creative ability in autistic people as gleaned through autism scholarship and autism autobiography. The chapter begins with a discussion and critique of the common framing of autism as indicative of exceptionality, a position that contrasts the common, deficit perspective outlined in Chapter 1. The discussion points to the need for narratives and interpretations that align autistic people as capable of the sort of everyday creativity that all people engage in on a regular basis. The exemplars shared in Chapter 2 shed light on a variety of everyday forms of creativity demonstrated by autistic people. Analysis of the body of autobiographical work is focused around several issues that the authors identify as significant to the educational lives of autistic people.

In Chapter 3, I turn to artistic forms of creativity as demonstrated by several autistic individuals. Here, the focal points are the skills, abilities, and qualities cultivated by engagement in arts-based creative work. These focal points structure the discussion of the artistic work represented in the chapter, and artists' insights illuminate how creative work enriches the quality of their lives in multiple ways.

Chapter 4 builds on the insights and ideas presented in Chapters 2 and 3. This chapter, addressed to educators, suggests a variety of strategies and practices to provide educational experiences that can help autistic students join their peers in developing their creative potential.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss teaching for creativity in the current era and visions for a future that invites and thrives on the creative contributions of neurodiverse citizens.

What I have witnessed through my sustained relationships with autistic people, and discovered through research, is significantly disconnected from the common belief that autistic individuals are marked by an inability to imagine and create. In this book, I attempt to make sense of this disconnection. My understanding of what autism means, then, continues to evolve in this project. While my former students represent a luminous spark in my life as an educator, their insights and actions continue to propel the tilling of new soil. Writing this book is a way to honor the students who were truly my first teachers with regard to autism.