



**University  
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

**Notice of the Final Oral Examination  
for the Degree of Master of Arts**

of

**KERRY-LYNN WEATHERHEAD**

BSc (University of Victoria, 2007)

**“Exploring the Experiences of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder  
Participating in a Therapeutic Social Group”**

School of Child and Youth Care

Wednesday, August 2, 2017

10:00 a.m.

Human & Social Development Building  
Room A211

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Jennifer White, School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Daniel Scott, School of Child and Youth Care, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Michael Hayes, Department of Geography, University of Victoria

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Wendy Myrvold, Department of Computer Science, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a therapeutic social group. Using a social constructionist theoretical framework and drawing on disability theories, the study examined how participants' experiences were co-constructed through relationships, language and socio-political factors. A generic qualitative research paradigm was used with particular attention paid to social constructionist methodology. Video recordings and field notes were collected over three sessions during an established therapeutic social group at a community organization with five children ages 10-13, and two adult group facilitators. Verbatim transcripts were analyzed using an inductive process that took into account and acknowledged the co-construction of the information. Salient themes were identified based on multiple readings of the data, analyzing and re-analyzing how the experiences of children in the group are constructed. The research emphasizes the strengths and skills exhibited by the children, their strong friendships with one another and how they construct their identities. The study also examines how the highly structured learning environment produced an artificial quality to "real world" experiences and questions what "normal" social skills are. The research highlights how both children and facilitators assume deficits and explores the label of autism from a socio-political lens. The study contributes to the research on lived experiences of children with autism, including insights into how practitioners can work *with* children rather than providing services *to* them.