

Education of Artistically Talented Students from Selected Socio-Economic and Culturally Diverse Backgrounds

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Education of Artistically Talented Students from Selected Culturally Diverse Backgrounds

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess accommodations for gifted art students of culturally diverse backgrounds, to see how socio-economic class and culture influence identification and opportunities for gifted art students, and to identify similarities and differences among gifted art students. I conducted and analyzed interviews with five art teachers and five artistically talented students around a large southwestern urban center. Teacher interviews indicated all art teachers had experience teaching diverse students. Teachers defined artistic talent a natural ability, and looked at the student's product. Teachers recommended students to community art classes. Teachers varied in support, some having more than enough resources, others saying they need smaller class sizes, or they want to take students to artists' studios. Results from student interviews revealed that all students were self-motivated to do art everyday; some were also motivated after a big life event, such as a bout of depression or family member's death. Students thought of art as something relatable, defining art vaguely. All students reported having future plans with art in college or their free time. Participants had supportive/encouraging art teachers and parents and had art materials readily available. Because of the need to prepare for growing diversity, art teachers

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may benefit by gaining a better understanding of artistically talented students of diverse backgrounds.

Keywords

Multiculturalism, Artistically Talented/Gifted, Art Education

Introduction/Research Questions

Last year, I taught an art enrichment class to middle school students at an inner-city collegiate academy in a large southwestern urban center. I noticed a few students in my class who didn't seem to be sufficiently challenged; it was frustrating and difficult to keep them involved. These students were very enthusiastic about art but hadn't had an opportunity to explore their interests because art was not a mandatory part of the curriculum. Because of a lack of funding and limited access to supplies, the class was restricted to drawing and watercolor painting. I advised my students to participate in the Children's Art Workshop, which is a series of classes taught by undergraduates in the art education program at Arizona State University every Saturday for three hours. Realistically, I knew some students wouldn't be able to attend due to lack of transportation and because of work responsibilities.

When I thought about my own school experiences, I recalled that when I was growing up, my mom was able to stay home and teach my brothers and me until we were old enough to go to school. She saw that I was interested in art and encouraged it. I had piles of art supplies at my fingertips and was taken to afterschool art programs where teachers could give me individualized attention. We even moved from a rural school district to one of the most affluent districts in our state where I was offered an abundance of art classes. There were no budget restrictions and all of our facilities were new. It was certainly a supportive environment where I could receive as advanced training as I was interested in or able to achieve.

Similarly, Bloom (1985) emphasized the importance of a "supportive environment and intensive training" (p. 34) for gifted students. But I wondered what happens with the students who have the intense drive to master art but don't have the opportunity to achieve their full potential because of their learning environment? Thus, my research questions were: 1) What are the strengths and weaknesses of accommodations for gifted art students of culturally diverse backgrounds in public high schools; 2) How do socio-economic class and culture influence identification and opportunities for gifted high school art stu-

dents; and 3) What are the similarities and differences among gifted art students in high school?

Survey of Literature

There is much debate around the methods and parameters of defining a “gifted” student. The Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 defined gifted students as “those identified by professionally qualified persons who, by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance” (Clark & Zimmerman, 1998, p. 748). Clark and Zimmerman (1998) described various perspectives of researchers in terms of their definitions of giftedness in art, including “not relying on copying;” using “original ideas, inventions, or innovations;” “displaying advanced skills in producing;” exhibiting “high levels of motivation, intensity, perseverance, or problem-solving skills,” or possessing a “passionate dedication” (p. 748). Clark and Zimmerman (1998) also considered the effect of culture on talent; for example, a culture might “place less value on arts education” (p. 749), and “students may have little exposure...and few opportunities” (p. 749).

Clark (1993) suggested using multiple tests as criteria to determine giftedness: “intensity or desire to create art and to participate in a specialized program; aesthetic perception; perceptual skills; sensitivity to visual phenomena; cognitive complexity, or the kind of intelligence needed in order for the artist to know “what to do;” examination of a portfolio; and nominations by self, parent, teacher, peer, or others” (p. 78). De Leon et. al. (1997) advocated for identification that is comprised of “parents, teachers, artists, and administrators” (p. 19) to be “sensitive to the cultural, linguistic, ethnic differences, and ethnic identity inherent in their community” (p. 19). Zimmerman (1994) also stated that assessment should be flexible and personally constructed because European-American values such as “individuality rather than collective art making, originality and uniqueness rather than traditional cultural patterns, permanence of art objects rather than temporariness, and abstract forms rather than meanings derived from cultural contexts, dominate the [traditional] classroom” (p. 99). Further, Gaztambide-Fernandez, Saifer, and Desai (2013) suggested that any process of selection produces an exclusion of students “without prior training and exposure to the arts” and students whose culture is different from the dominant culture (p. 130).

Moreover, some researchers have suggested a wide range of curricula for artistically gifted students. Clark and Zimmerman (1986), for example, recommended presenting content in greater depth to gifted art students, and they ad-

ditionally recommended that students should experience the real work of artists. Parents of gifted art students should seek to find a teacher who can “continuously challenge their [students’] abilities to learn” (p. 121). Similarly, De Leon, et al., (1997) suggested that students should “explain publicly processes that led them to arrive at product solutions” (p. 18).

Furthermore, Clark and Zimmerman (1986) also suggested programs including “magnet schools, summer institutes, and locally supported district programs” (p. 115). Often, universities will have programs for middle to high school students that are often taught by undergraduates studying art education. The Children’s Art Workshop at Arizona State University is one such program. De Leon, Argus-Calvo, and Medina (1997) highlighted how few programs have been established for gifted art students in rural areas. Additionally, art museums might offer art courses, for example Visions Teen Program (2015) at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, where forty high school students work with “teachers and professional guest artists and speakers...side-by-side in workshops, lectures and discussions” (para. 2) and students talk to the curators and the artists in their studio and gallery settings.

Research Design/Theoretical Framework

This was a qualitative research study, which is an “approach to exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 44). It involved emerging questions, data collection in the participants’ own settings, data analysis, and the researcher analyzing and comparing results to literature and interpreting the meaning of the data. I would write down first reactions and obtained audio-recorded interviews asking open-ended questions intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants. I searched for patterns and themes from the perspective of the participants, and then attempted to understand and explain the patterns and themes. Then I examined, contrasted, and compared evolving ideas by pulling out repeated/frequent words in order to understand main ideas from each teacher and student response. I additionally surveyed key ideas, emerging themes, and informational patterns such as frequent and essential words, sayings, or ideas. I internally compared and analyzed interviews within the study and then externally compared them with other research studies or literature that were similar to my own study. All of my findings were “exploratory, incomplete, and are a working hypothesis” (Stokrocki, 1997, p. 33). My findings were also limited because my interpretations of these events could be very different from others’ interpretations.

The sample consisted of five full-time high school art teachers in various school districts with a variety of ethnic cultures. I asked the teachers to recommend their most gifted/talented art students from diverse cultural backgrounds who would be willing to participate in my study. The students' races varied, with one student being half Native American (Pima) and half Honduran, two students being African-American, one student being Chicano (born in the U.S. but Mexican and Guatemalan background), and one student being Filipino. I collected data through 20 to 45-minute-long interviews. I interviewed each teacher and student once in a face-to-face setting, and I recorded the interview with my computer. Then, I transcribed the information. Three of the teachers were men and two women; two of the students were young men while three were young women. I interviewed the students and teachers using general questions as well as interviewing the students about samples of their artwork they had created.

Finally, this study was conducted with a combination of a constructivist worldview as well as a transformative viewpoint. Marshall (1998) noted that "constructivism emphasizes the experience of the learner as integral to the making of meaning and problem-solving" (p. 41). The goal of my research is "to rely as much as possible on the participants' views" to "construct the meaning of a situation" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). This study is also transformative, as it includes groups of racial and ethnic minorities and has an agenda to confront social oppression, specifically in the art education community, such as potential inequality and oppression of students of culturally diverse backgrounds. So as to not further marginalize this group of participants, I tried to be as inclusive as possible "creating insights and findings collaboratively" (Creswell, 2014, p.8).

Findings

The teachers interviewed for this study had many experiences teaching students of diverse backgrounds. For example, one teacher was placed in a school in which the student population was 99.9% Native American. The teachers reported that they had learned to respect other cultures and advised by sharing, "you want to know your students so you can teach them and incorporate their culture and not be offensive" (Teacher #2, personal communication, February 24, 2016). They learned to teach more challenging lessons to artistically gifted students. The teachers focused on individualized teaching to cope with such wide ranges of artistic and cultural backgrounds, changing instruction with each student. They identified lots of students who were gifted in different ways (for example "motivation and puts in hard work" "practice," or "work ethic"). The teachers also had sufficient financial support either from the community or administration to challenge and encourage gifted art students.

There were also many weaknesses in accommodations. Teacher training programs did not teach much on diversity (artistic or cultural), but teachers learned about diversity through teaching. Teachers also reported that their current school, policies regarding appropriate gifted education services were often not carried out due to the schools not offering specialized services. The teachers identified some gifted students as having “natural” or an innate ability, which may ignore environmental factors. The teachers desired more field trips, more time, more external art shows, and more opportunities to meet with colleagues to challenge art students. The rural students I interviewed were disadvantaged, having no afterschool art programs available.

Identification and opportunities of gifted art students varied. Three of the art teachers defined an artistically gifted art student as a student with natural ability. Two of the teachers claimed they identified artistically gifted students by their product, and another two identified gifted students and those who deviated from the lesson example or looked up new techniques. Opportunities for gifted high school art students were limited in three schools, with only two of the schools having a specialized program available for gifted art students, offering AP art courses, and two offering a specialized program only in elementary school. Unfortunately, three of the teachers said no art programs were available to recommend to their gifted art students for after school, although the other two teachers recommended volunteering at local community art centers and free local art programs to their students. Responses showed that two of the schools offered art clubs and two of the teachers recommended summer programs to students. Socio-economic status may limit student opportunities, but it was difficult to conclude this from my study because I did not ask the students about their socio-economic background. Rural students were again at a disadvantage because there were no available programs nearby. Teachers handled gifted art students differently than other students in the classroom by recommending more challenging or complicated artworks with more “open-ended, flexible assignments,” and also allowed students to be more self-directed (Teacher #2, personal communication, February 24, 2016).

The student participants claimed many differences. The students represented a wide variety of races, and the study represented both genders. Some students claimed they thought of themselves as gifted, especially after receiving an award, while others did not. One student exclaimed “After I got this [first place ribbon], I’d say yes [she felt gifted], just because I... didn’t realize that I was, you know, really good at it [photography]” (Student #3, personal communication, February 29, 2016). The students had a variety of favorite materials to use, from pencil to pens, cameras, and paints. Some reported feeling aggravated while doing art, and some felt “relaxed” (Student #5, personal communication,

March 4, 2016). A student described his art making this way: “It’s frustrating sometimes, but it does make me happy” (Student #1, personal communication, February 17, 2016).

Further, student participants were similar in a few ways. All of the students were 17 years old, and some students became more motivated to do art after a sad life event. About this, one student explained, “Well, my dad passed away a couple years ago and so after he died I started doing more art. It kept me focused off of that and brought something more positive” (Student #2, personal communication, February 24, 2016). Additionally, three students claimed they were self-motivated to do art, while two students stated that sometimes they were motivated and other times they were not. All students’ parents and art teachers were supportive and encouraging and thought they were sufficiently challenged in art class, especially through criticism. Parents supported them, with four students noting specifically their mothers’ encouragement by displaying and asking about their artwork. Student #3 exclaimed: “My mom makes sure I have time to shoot [photographs] during the day” (Student #3, personal communication, February 29, 2016) and another discussed, “She [his mom] loves it [his artwork] and always hangs it up” (Student #4, personal communication, March 2, 2016). Most participants had art materials available to them at home. Most students thought art was an expression of feelings, and most of them liked their work because of the meaning (either to themselves and/or others). All of the students did art every day. Some reported being perfectionists. Most students felt “happy,” “joy,” and “good” while they did art. Most planned to do art as a hobby or minor in art in college. Majority preferred a hands-on teaching style and listening to music while they did art.

Emerging Questions/Comparative Analysis

How do varied cultures value art differently compared to European-American art standards? Do certain cultures find perfectionism important? How do cultural perspectives impact composition, having a plan, methods of exploring and thinking, realism, or feelings expressed? European-American cultures, for example, might value “individuality rather than collective art making, originality and uniqueness rather than traditional cultural patterns, permanence of art objects rather than temporariness, and abstract forms rather than meanings derived from cultural contexts” (Zimmerman, 1994, p. 99). Dominant white traditional ways of expression and evaluation can be restrictive to culturally diverse students. Teachers should be “sensitive to the cultural, linguistic, ethnic differences, and ethnic identity inherent in their community” (Chan, Chan, & Chau, 2009, p. 21). For example, after Stokrocki (1992) had taught in a Navajo community for

some time, she ultimately suggested that it is important to understand the artwork that is valued in the community: “many grandmothers weave, grandfathers make sand paintings, fathers form silver, mothers do beadwork” (Stokrocki, 1992, p. 3). She also explained how instruction should be different; for example, “time is much slower on the reservation...things happen when the time is ripe” and “they [Navajo students] do not like to compete publicly in class” (Stokrocki, 1992, pp. 2-3). Further, she urged that teachers should be able to identify and explain the different cultural/tribal perspectives that their students might use.

Confoundingly, it is difficult for teachers to learn different cultural perspectives because there is no one set of “cultural” characteristics; beliefs and behaviors can be dynamic and varied among individuals of the same culture. Surely, art teachers “cannot expect to have in-depth knowledge about the many different cultures in their communities...[and] all cultures throughout the U.S.” (Zimmerman, 1990, p. 48). However, Irwin, et al., (2009) put the idea of multiculturalism another way: “Instead of...one constant set of culture, beliefs, values, and behaviors,” cultures are “constantly changing and shifting to reflect the narratives of individuals” (p. 61). Further, Stokrocki (1994) asserted that “one cannot characterize ‘the Navajo way’ as one stereotypic set of ideas. Their culture is dynamic and changing very fast” (p. 67).

Ballengee-Morris (2001) said unfortunately some people think culture to be “some static, esoteric entity...outside of an individual’s lived experience,” (p.7), and argued instead that cultural identity is “aspects of one’s age; gender and sexuality; social and economic class (education, job, family position); exceptionality (giftedness, differently abled, health); geographic location (rural, suburban, urban, as well as north, south, east, west, or central); religion; political status; language; ethnicity; and racial designation” (p.7). Culture is changing rapidly today, in a globalized world in which “virtual networks facilitate modern mobility via television, radio, film, and computer technology. For these reasons, the challenges of multiculturalism become important for all peoples” (Ballengee-Morris, 2015, p.7). Thinking about culture in a more holistic way might better serve students of diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, Armstrong (2011) exclaimed that culture is a vague concept. He defined culture as “the behavior patterns, symbols, institutions, values and other human-made components of society” (Armstrong, 2011, p. 72). Additionally, Armstrong (2011) described how culture might be construed as “concrete or abstract, and value...culture may include subcultural or microcultural groups, such as college students, miners, or southerners; ethnic groups, such as African Americans, Polish Americans, American Indians, or Jewish Americans” (p. 72). It is equally difficult for instructors to treat everyone the same and still reach all of the culturally diverse students.

Implications for Practice

Many implications can be drawn from this research, especially for high school art teachers. More students might benefit if art teachers widened their perception of what artistically gifted students look like. The art teachers in this study used the words “talent,” positive “work habits,” “motivated,” “practiced/well rehearsed/exposed,” and “deviate from the lesson by looking up new techniques” to define a gifted art student. Teachers assuming that artistically gifted students will be constantly motivated is problematic, though. Artists should be given time so they can find inspiration for their art spontaneously. A student explained, “Sometimes I’m just like I don’t want to do anything. Like I don’t know what to do. But then the students get motivated and inspired in “random places” (Student #1, personal correspondence, February 17, 2016). Teachers need to give students time to think through their artistic ideas or talk to others about their ideas. Art teachers also defined an artistically gifted student as a student with natural ability, which omits how experience and training play a role in giftedness as well. Child development might be a mix of nature and nurture arguments as all parents and teachers supported the student and supplied art materials. Although there might not be one “correct” definition of what a gifted student looks like, as an art educator, it is important to keep an open mind and think about possible personal biases and artistic preferences and also consider the experiences students have had in getting to where they are.

To the extent that my sample of five teachers are representative of others, my study shows that many art teachers look at the product in order to identify artistically gifted students. In an art world that has mostly been dominated by European-American artwork, this is expected. But focusing on the product might be culturally exclusive and might ignore contemporary artistic practices. Diverse methods and strategies to observe student achievement in a variety of situations might be beneficial because students differ in “interests, learning styles, learning rates, motivation, work habits, and personalities as well as their ethnicity, sex, and social class” (Zimmerman, 1992, p. 15). Erickson and Clover (2004) recounted how the Hopi culture views a “failed” product: “Sometimes pots don’t turn out, but there is always some use for them and another opportunity to create anew...[broken] pots become the shards to use in future firings. Everything is used and reused” (Erickson & Clover, 2004, p. 28). Although the product is important, teachers need to stress process and learning as well.

As a result of my study, a few important teaching strategies for artistically gifted students emerged. In the classroom, art teachers stressed individualized teaching to cope with a wide variety of art skills. For example, one teacher said he “can just change my hats, change my way of instruction” (Teacher #4,

personal communication, March 2, 2016) with each student. Two teachers indicated that they taught more open-ended lessons for artistically gifted students, allowing them to explore and allowing flexibility, while two others stated they allowed students to work more on their own and be self-directed. Additionally, some teachers asked students more questions instead of telling them all of the answers. My study also suggests that students need encouragement from their art teacher, but constructive criticism is an important aspect of encouragement as well. One student explained that her teacher “always pushed me to at least try new things and try my best at them” (Student #1, personal communication, February 17, 2016).

Another finding that might be of interest to art teachers were the habits and preferences of the gifted art students. Some students claimed to like their art because of what it meant to others as well as themselves. Some of the students used representation of ideas and meaning in their artwork, so that might also be good to stress when planning lessons. Art teachers can assign lessons that focus on the meaning of the artwork. One student asserted that “Art should be an expression of what you feel. I try to display my depression and anxiety in almost all of my pieces” (Student #1, personal communication, February 17, 2016). Students also seemed to prefer an environment where they were allowed to talk to friends and listen to music. Most preferred a hands-on learning style, and they enjoyed class when the art teacher talked them through a demonstration.

Further, it might be helpful to explain some aspects of the artistic process to all students in order to avoid students getting discouraged and quitting art, as many students do in middle school. Although the students interviewed for this study reported happy and relaxing therapeutic feelings while doing art, many of them reported feeling frustrated as well. One student explained, “I don’t know how to put my thoughts onto this canvas” (Student #1, personal communication, February 17, 2016). Talking about the frustration (including not knowing where to start, another struggle mentioned by the students) that can be experienced while doing art and how to persevere, overcome, and learn from the frustrating part might encourage more students to stick with art. Although two students indicated that they planned their artwork in a sketchbook or on graph paper, two other students preferred unplanned, spontaneous art. Giving students time to plan artworks might not be beneficial to all students in a classroom. My study shows high levels of parental involvement in encouraging and supporting a gifted art student. All of the students in my study had parental support, four of them specifically from their mother. The students said their family framed or displayed their art around the house, one even boasting about their child’s art to strangers at the supermarket. The student explained embar-

rassingly, “She’ll [her mom] be at the store and she’ll be like ‘Want to see her [ceramic] hippo’” (Student #2, personal communication, February 29, 2016). Most students reported that their parents asked about their artworks, although one student mentioned that the discussion of artwork was superficial. All students had materials available to them at home. Art teachers can use this information to benefit their students by getting parents involved in their students’ art classes and by mentioning how simply displaying their student’s art, asking about it, and providing simple materials (pens, pencils, paper, paint brushes), would really help in supporting and encouraging their child.

Implications for Further Research

This study is limited because the population sample was so specific and all of the schools were located in one area of a state. Results might be different for different schools around the state, and especially in other states, as well as different countries around the world. It might be interesting to replicate this study in different states and countries to see how other places teach art to culturally diverse students. In each chosen school, the student population had a high percentage of culturally diverse backgrounds. My findings on teachers’ identification processes and how they relate to students’ cultural backgrounds might be different in schools that are less diverse with a smaller percentage of students of diverse backgrounds. Practice and unequal access to opportunities has an effect on giftedness, so my findings might have been different if I had chosen schools with a high percentage of Caucasian students of high economic class, for example. In my study, socio-economics mattered less and location (rural versus urban) mattered more. But socio-economics might have proven to impact student opportunities if I had included a well-off school. My results might have been drastically different if research was done in schools that don’t have an art program at all.

Another exploration could be on the trend in motivation in my study: depression, death in the family, and feeling alone. For example, one student explained, “I channel all my anger, sadness, and loneliness into art” and described, “When I started to get more into art I was like well I’m always going to see the world like everything’s bad, but if I start to put good things into it [the world], maybe I’ll get back to how I was before [the depression]” (Student #1, personal communication, February 17, 2016). The students used art as therapy, one student explaining that “It’s calming and relaxing and it gets things out that you can’t really say” (Student #5, personal communication, March 4, 2016). Additionally, one teacher also recognized the therapeutic side of art: “They [his students] didn’t know it was therapy. They just knew it was a way to escape all

kinds of crazy personal issues” (Teacher #1, personal communication, February, 17, 2016). A researcher could explore whether using art for therapy is common in gifted art students of culturally diverse backgrounds or how Caucasian students’ motivations to do art might be different compared to students of diverse backgrounds.

Future research might also explore parental support of their children’s choice in an art career compared to parents who push their children away from an art career, and if culture is a factor in parental support. Some of the students chose to do art in the future as a hobby or a minor, and I can definitely see these students being successful in the art world. Studies could be done to figure out how to get more parental support for their students who are interested in pursuing art. Another interesting finding was that four of the five students I interviewed reported specifically that their mothers supported them. It would be interesting to see if there might be a difference in support with regards to mothers and fathers. This study was limited because I did not ask students if they were from a single-parent home, which might also have influenced my findings.

Another related analysis from my study revealed that there was a difference in male students and female students in terms of their plans to pursue an art career. The three female students stated that in the future they would pursue art careers (whether majoring in graphic design, minoring in art education, or establishing a portrait photography business on the side of her career), while the two male students desired a career in engineering and construction. These choices and plans might suggest prejudice or stereotypes in what is expected of men and women in society, specifically in jobs. S.T.E.M. [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math] might be more common with men, where society might stress job security and a high socio-economic expectation for men. This expectation might not be a focus for women, who might find it more acceptable to choose art careers that many times have lower salaries and might have riskier job security. My study is limited because it only covered five students, so future research in this area is necessary.

Conclusions

The population of teachers is becoming more white, while the diversity of students all around the country is growing (Young, 2016). It is the responsibility of the art teacher to connect to students and help them grow, and to do that, it is important to understand the background of students. Multiculturalism cannot be ignored although it may be challenging, especially with different agendas

being pushed on art teachers, with class sizes increasing, and with art teachers having very little time to spare (Young, 2016). Along with diversity, gifted art students cannot be ignored. As a teacher, it is really difficult to teach such a wide range of students in one classroom and push each student to their fullest potential. And there are so many factors that might influence opportunities for gifted students, such as socio-economics, location, and availability of programs. It is important to stay current and to always keep learning, challenging one's own teaching and perspectives and changing in order to benefit the students the most. As Gay (2004) indicated, "Educational equity and excellence for all children in the U.S. are unattainable without the incorporation of cultural diversity in all aspects of the educational enterprise" (p. 37). Young (2013) also stated that "Art teachers across the U.S. should more deeply explore the interconnections of self-identification, art, culture, and ethnicity" (p. 51). The responsibility should rest not only on art teachers, but also should expand to policy makers in the schools, universities, communities, and the nation.

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