Linking the Nature of Secondary School Students who are Highly Artistic with Curriculum Needs and Instructional Practice

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Abstract

This exploratory qualitative investigation examined the nature of 7 secondary school students who are highly artistic to link visual arts programs that best accommodate their learning needs. Instrumentation for data collection included 1 questionnaire, 3 in-depth semistructured one-on-one interviews, artwork documents, observations, and field notes. Findings related to creativity, motivation, social and emotional perspectives, and cognitive processes supported the significance and benefits of visual arts in student growth. Results identified the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, risk-taking, meeting challenges, transferability of skills, extending local and world connections, and environmental and societal concerns. Through artwork production and insight into their needs, students conveyed valuable suggestions for programming enhancements and visual arts classroom settings. These findings are meaningful for educators and curriculum developers as they distinguish the importance of diversified and differentiated learning opportunities in engaging students who are highly artistic to meet their optimal potential, and suggest implications for educational practice.

Sporadic research since the early 1900s, along with the midcentury change in research trends that emphasized testing in creativity and intelligence (Clark & Zimmerman, 2001), reinforce the importance of addressing the programming needs and implementation of the visual arts curriculum for students who are highly artistic. Clark and Zimmerman (2001) stated that “just as students who are below average must have their learning needs met, artistically talented students need to be challenged and to have their needs met” (p. 326). To meet the educational needs of students who are highly artistic, an understanding of their personality characteristics is important for both the design and delivery of the visual arts curriculum. Cukierkorn (2008) believed that by knowing their persona, opportunities for student growth can be informed.

A lack of consensus in identifying learners who are gifted in art (Cukierkorn, 2008) has resulted in neglect for the programming needs of students who are highly artistic (Salome, 1974;

Zimmerman, 1985). Treffinger (2004) emphasized that students who are talented are often left behind in school programs and believed that these students require instruction paced beyond that of the regular classroom. According to Treffinger, there are often few differences in curriculum and instruction for students who are gifted, causing these students to seek enrichment programs outside of the school setting. These arrangements, stated Salome (1974), “cannot take the place of a school program in which a tradition of creative activity is established from kindergarten through grade twelve” (p. 18).

For many students, the implications of the often disregarded value of visual arts (Efland, 2002; Silvers, 2003) for teaching and learning forms the basis of numerous issues that extend into the classroom environment (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005), further increasing the complications for delivering enriched curriculum and for the production of significant studio work. As society often views art as something to do in one’s spare time, it is frequently regarded as a leisure activity or as something to be considered during one’s retirement. Efland (2002) stated, “Although the arts are prized as cultural capital, they are not accorded the importance in education given to those subjects that might lead to economically productive lives” (p. 7). He built on this fact in noting the lack of awareness of the role art plays in cognitive development. These perceptions of art further complicate the delivery of appropriate programming for students who are highly artistic.

At the secondary school level, the perceived lack of importance and the lesser value placed on visual arts when compared to other subject disciplines gives rise to implications for teaching and learning through declining support (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). The increasing demands placed on schools by government and society perpetuate the laissez-faire attitude towards visual arts, resulting in large and multilevel classes, scarce resources, unsuitable facilities (Woods & O’Shannessy, 2002), low teacher morale (Rooney, 2004), and inappropriate student placement as observed through personal teaching experience. Eisner (2002b) added to this by bringing to the forefront the concept of core subjects. The marginalization of subjects not part of the core reflects the high value placed on test scores, which in turn places focus on the subject areas of concern for standardized testing. Rooney (2004) stated that “with mandatory high-stakes testing in place, arts compete with academics for teaching time” (p. 16).

Eisner (2002a) stated the need for student art programming “to foster the growth of artistic intelligence” (p. 43) while assisting students to develop their uniqueness. This supports the belief of Clark & Zimmerman (2001) that the curriculum for students who are highly artistic must extend beyond that of the average child. For these students, opportunities for personal expression in creating works of art gives meaning to their creations as their ability to conceptualize their work increases. Through the application of acquired knowledge from symbol processing and the sociocultural environment nurtured during the study of visual arts, Efland (2002) pointed out that “individuals construct their own understandings” (p. 79). He expanded this theory of cognition by stating that “meaning is found when learners integrate knowledge into their lifeworlds” (p. 81). By becoming aware of the cognitive and social communicative strengths and emotional perspectives of visual arts, as combined with the individual proficiencies of the student who is highly artistic, teachers can improve instruction and teaching environments so as to better meet subject-specific learning needs.

Theoretical Framework

As a subject area, visual arts hold endless potential to enrich the process of schooling and the personal development of an individual. This potential lends itself to the combination of two

curriculum orientations: cognitive processes development and personal relevance, which frame the teaching of visual arts. Eisner (2003) wrote of the need of education to develop distinctive forms of thinking through flexible and qualitative learning that can assist children in all aspects of their lives as opposed to thinking that solely measure outcomes. Since facts and theories constantly change, stressing content acquisition alone does not benefit a student in developing the skills necessary to deal with future problems and issues. The ability of visual arts programs to develop problem-solving skills (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Schram 1997) advances the development of higher order thinking skills (Efland, 2002; Rooney, 2004). Through problem finding and identification (Runco, 2003) balanced with problem-solving tasks that have a variety of solutions, students are given opportunities for creative growth. Eisner (1985) stated, "The curriculum is not to emphasize content, but process. Teaching is not to impart, but to help students learn to inquire" (p. 62). Runco (2003) added to this in his belief that inquiry through personally meaningful construction provides an individual with the understanding needed to think creatively. These views emphasize the importance of student engagement and their active roles in inquiry-based learning. Ultimately, it is the process of task engagement that holds the key to learning rather than sole emphasis on the final product.

The concept of engaging students to evoke a sense of commitment for enhanced learning, and the importance of motivation in relation to self-selected projects is recognized by Delcourt (1993). Often, the thematic choices available to students in visual arts programs provide opportunities for student engagement in personally relevant tasks. When students are able to select studio projects that are authentic, educational experiences become more meaningful and motivating, and greater learning is more likely to occur. Eisner (1985) indicated that this interactive process between student aptitudes and the environment develops their interests and intelligence. He believed it is the consideration of multiple options that enables students to think divergently and grow as individuals. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) discussed the complex traits of creative individuals enabling their ability to integrate different domains of knowledge, and flexibly moving between "two opposite ways of thinking: the convergent and the divergent" (p. 60). Thus, for the student who is highly artistic "whose thinking is fluent, flexible, and original" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 60), meaningful opportunities are necessary to facilitate their learning and development.

The unique role of visual arts in student education provides valuable experiences for individual learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Numerous benefits from engaging in visual arts programs enter into all realms of the educational process and extend far beyond the walls of any one classroom. Stiegelbauer (2002) brought to our attention the scientific studies emphasizing "the role of the arts as foundational to human nature" (p. 1). She presented concepts from noted academics, scientists, and philosophers describing the relationship between cognitive and transformational processes that give meaning to human understanding, contribute to cultural functioning, and link "expression through the arts to deeper growth and developmental learning" (p. 1). Eisner (1998) extended these relationships by bringing to light the needed dispositions that are cultivated through students engaged in the process of creating art as a survival mechanism for our contemporary environment. Eisner believed that through art instruction, the dispositional outcomes of imagining possibilities, exploring ambiguity, taking adequate time to pursue resolutions, and accepting and recognizing multiple perspectives help enable students to function positively and act as contributing members of society.

The development of intelligence through personal relevance is balanced by developing the cognitive processes of students to help them learn. When students are given opportunities to strengthen their thinking processes, they become better equipped to cope with problems that may

arise throughout their lives (Eisner, 1985). Eisner (1985) emphasized the importance of using problem-centered curriculum in the school along with a rich variety of instructional tasks and teaching strategies to nurture these skills. This skill development leads to the transferability of learning and coincides with the integration of new facts to enhance knowledge. Thus, through the discipline of visual arts, cognitive growth can flourish.

The processes of creativity, self-direction, and complex thinking as a result of arts-based practices in teaching and learning were reported by Rooney (2004). He suggested that the cross-disciplinary nature of an arts-based learning environment can help students develop deep, high-order thinking skills such as comprehension, interpretation, and problem solving. This suggestion is further supported by Efland (2002) who believed that by interpreting symbols and understanding abstract ideas, students develop higher thinking levels through visual problem solving. In his view, conceptual thinking follows from the ability of an individual to construct meaning through various forms of representation. Eisner (as cited in Rooney, 2004) stated that “the arts allow representation of ideas that are not otherwise easy to process...Processing of information and communicating about it lead to new learning” (p. 9). Consequently, the view of learners actively engaged in constructing meaning challenges educational programs to meet their needs and to provide the best learning opportunities for students engaged in arts-based curriculum.

Artistically Talented Students

There is much controversy in interpreting the term “artistically talented” and association of the term to individual students (Clark & Zimmerman, 2001). Throughout the literature on art ability however, there is consensus regarding personal attributes that contribute to the student’s talent and its development. In this study, the student who is artistically talented was identified as a student whose performance in creating artistic works is consistently exceptional in both technical ability and originality.

According to Sternberg and Lubart (1993), interacting resources integrate to form creative giftedness. These authors suggest that creative individuals develop from a blending of intellectual processes and styles, knowledge, personality, motivation, and an environmental context. This blending is characterized by personal attributes found in students who are artistically talented. Some of these attributes include divergent thinking (Stalker, 1981; Sternberg & Lubart, 1993), enhanced insight processes (Richards, Gipe, & Duffy, 1992; Sternberg & Lubart, 1993), complex information processing (Stalker, 1981), a self-governing intellectual style (Sternberg & Lubart, 1993), problem definition skills (Sternberg & Lubart, 1993), problem-solving ability (Stalker, 1981), tolerance of ambiguity (Sternberg & Lubart, 1993), risk-taking (Eisner, 1998; Richards et al., 1992; Sternberg & Lubart, 1993), perseverance, and high motivational levels (Hyllegard, 2000; Stalker, 1981; Sternberg & Lubart, 1993).

Richards et al. (1992) stated that “to an extent, artistic and creative ability also depends upon environmental factors such as school or family context” (p. 6). Sternberg and Lubart (1993) supported the influence of surroundings, reward systems, and the evaluative criteria that have a bearing on the development of creativity. Hyllegard (2000) investigated “parental attribution of artistic ability in talented children” (p. 159) and discussed practice theory as a method of influencing creative achievements. His findings concluded that an increased level of family-encouraged practice time resulted in high levels of achievement and accomplishment in the arts. Although this theory has limitations, the concept of accumulative guidance and encouragement to develop artistic abilities in students is important for educators in developing programming.

In terms of programming, Richards et al. (1992) drew attention to the unique socialization needs of some students who are highly artistic since these students can at times appear overly reserved, withdrawn, and exhibit anxieties. Related to this is their internal pressure to attain a high level of achievement. Richards et al. further explained that the attributes that contribute toward these students' highly artistic abilities are the same attributes that may lead to inner conflicts. In addition, Eisner (2002a) raised concerns regarding subjectivity in assessing artwork. Evaluative processes vary and the resulting evaluation may potentially camouflage the identification of students who are highly artistic and their subsequent inclusion in enhanced programs.

Methodology and Research Design

Naturalistic inquiry methods were used within the bounded system of a multiple case format to delve into the 'nature' of students who are highly artistic. Nature, in this investigation, referred to the traits of an individual that define who that individual is in relation to being highly artistic. Prior to their agreement for study participation, participants understood the meaning of the term nature through a discussion session which was also reviewed prior to collecting data. During exploration of the participants' views, data were collected to reach an understanding of the link between their nature on learning and the interrelationships among preferred modes of learning, personal expression, character development, and benefits of visual arts to determine their program needs. The participants were also given the opportunity to express their beliefs in relation to personal strengths, values, process outcomes, the place visual arts took in their lives, and their participation in visual arts as a contributing influence on their nature.

The participants for this study were selected from the results of the Artistic Ability Identification Checklist Instrument (see Appendix). Ranging in age from 16 to 17 years, the seven participants were enrolled in grades 11 and 12 university-bound programming. The one male in Grade 11 was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate program, which parallels the Grade 12 program. The second male and five females were in Grade 12. By including students from two secondary schools in southcentral Ontario, multiple perspectives provided in-depth insight into the students' perceived value of art education and their understanding of the effects that visual arts education had on them. Based on the Ontario Ministry of Education (2000) curriculum-grades 11 and 12, Grade 11 studio activities give students the opportunity to focus on the exploration of subject matter, artwork evaluation, and historical cultural contexts, while in Grade 12 students take a personal approach in creating a body of work. Prior to these programs, all participants took open courses in grades 9 and 10 designed by the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training (1999), which provided the students an overview of the subject area.

Over a 3-month period, the methodological instruments used included one closed and open-ended questionnaire, three in-depth semistructured one-on-one interviews, two observations, fieldnotes, and supporting student artwork documents. These instruments were designed to complement and build on each other and provided thorough insight into the participants' nature and programming needs required to accommodate and nurture their distinctive personality traits.

Using content analysis as the method of data interpretation allowed for associations among the questionnaire, audio-taped interviews, and observation data. Due to the in-depth nature of the transcribed interviews, member checking was used for validation of the interview data before it was coded and analyzed. Each consecutive data collection instrument led to a deeper, more complex understanding of the participants. The validity of the findings resulted through triangulation of the collected data.

Ability Identification of Participants

Included in this study is a representative group of participants who are highly artistic. However, the difficulty in identifying students who are highly artistic is a common concern among those involved in research endeavours and in selecting students for enrichment or gifted programs (Clark & Zimmerman, 2001; Salome, 1974; Stalker, 1981). The inadequacies of testing procedures for identification of students who are highly artistic have been ongoing since the early 1900s and often involve the testing of art-related behaviours such as creativity or personality (Clark & Zimmerman, 2001). This problem is further confounded by the consideration of technical skills versus creative approaches in the production of artwork and the visible manifestations that result from the complex thinking processes required to produce the work.

Based on the literature relevant to this identification process and the inadequacies of testing procedures for students who are highly artistic (Clark & Zimmerman, 2001), a newly created checklist was developed to identify students with high artistic ability. The Art Ability Identification Checklist Instrument (see Appendix) was designed as an “adaptation[s] of the work-sample technique...for the judging of work samples collected from assigning the same art task to a group of students” (Clark & Zimmerman, 2001, p. 326). This instrument evaluated five levels of characteristics progressing from low through high, and included three categories for both technical and creative components. Although the investigative process of producing high-quality artwork is only one attribute of students who are highly artistic, the final outcome is a defining characteristic that sets them apart from other students with lesser ability.

Results

The students who are highly artistic in this study expressed very strong beliefs regarding three specific factors: the opportunities provided through engagement in a visual arts program, the required structure of the classroom environment, and the accompanying social setting that would best meet their learning needs for individual growth and development. Also revealed were common personality characteristics and similar systematic approaches to the production of artwork. Their hardworking, focused, and committed approaches to learning fostered the ability to meet challenges, take risks, develop production strategies, and problem-solve. The participants indicated that through developing and practicing these skills during the creative process, they were enabled to readily transfer these skills to various aspects of their lives.

Participants adopted a creative learning approach when working in other domains. Visual arts facilitated development of their critical thinking skills and enhanced their ability to analyze and observe. Other skills acquired included time management, working independently, and concentration skills. Assisting peers and demonstrating artistic procedures provided experience with leadership and instructional roles. The participants also noted research, listening, presentation skills, and fine motor development as learning outcomes.

Participants had definite views as to how the classroom environment should be structured. Open rooms with lots of space, windows, availability of supplies with materials beyond the basics, and a relaxed, studio-style atmosphere that allowed talking and listening to music were important for the participants' creativity to flourish. One participant described this atmosphere as having “an element of peace.” They preferred having the option to use drafting and large group tables and easels to accommodate those with different learning styles. Programming-related suggestions included more options for studio work, media exploration, and in-depth, exciting approaches to written components of the program, as well as current versions of computer software. Of special interest was the suggestion of having a classroom that was never constant.

Continuous change was considered to be inspirational, leading to a creative atmosphere for thinking about and producing art.

The data repeatedly reflected personal expression as important criteria for learning. Views were unanimous that the creative process facilitates the outcome of producing meaningful artwork to communicate messages. Participants spoke of this process as providing incentive for developing their unique expressions of creativity. They persisted in achieving artistic perfection until they believed that their message would be understood by the viewer. This group of students held high expectations of themselves. They desired to produce quality work and accepted nothing less. The participants strove for a high level of technical facility and believed time spent planning and experimenting was essential.

The opportunity for self-expression was important for the participants' state of being. As one participant stated, "In a culture so determined to hide emotions, visual arts gives students the ability to express themselves. Without visual arts as an outlet, I fear that I would not be as healthy emotionally as I am." Engaging in art and looking at the world in new ways enabled them to feel good about themselves, helped them develop self-confidence when interacting with people, made them happier, and added excitement to their lives.

A big factor in determining the approach and learning strategies employed by the participants was found to be their extremely high motivational level to enhance learning and improve achievement levels. This was indicated by internal factors, external factors, and the intrinsic motivation that compelled them to create. A genuine interest in art, artistic endeavours being part of their lifestyle, their need to learn and communicate, and the desire to improve and perfect their skills were factors that enticed the participants to produce artwork.

Environmental factors of family and school affected the development of the participants. These influences, their interests, and their artistic inspirations were found to evolve from immediate and extended family members, encouraging teachers, arts related excursions, and for all were a consistent part of their growth from childhood into young adulthood. These sources in turn affected their social and emotional well-being and their learning approaches to other scholastic endeavours.

Art experiences for four of the five female participants began in preschool, while for the remaining three participants, their art interest was sparked during senior elementary school. Of particular significance is the sex difference toward art interest influences. The five female participants received encouragement from either one or both parents, while the two male participants relayed the school environment and their teacher as influential in the decision to pursue their art interest. Once this interest was established, all participants received family encouragement to nurture their art interest.

All participants portrayed confidence in describing their characteristics and appeared to have a good sense of who they are as individuals. They exhibited self-assurance when speaking of their personality strengths beyond their artistic capabilities, named an academic area of skill, and spoke of their intellectual abilities as they related to memory, curiosity, creativity, and their love of learning. Three participants spoke about the variance in their sensitivity and emotional reactions depending upon the social situation in which they were engaged while interacting with others. Additional perspectives regarding their nature included being eccentric, artistic, creative, kind, happy, quiet, and shy.

All participants spoke adamantly about the benefits of engaging in visual arts experiences beyond the development and acquisition of artistic skills, and professed the enhancements in the academic, social, and emotional aspects of their lives. Of importance were the transferable skills

acquired through visual arts being applied to other subject areas, social situations, and their world beyond the classroom. They indicated that they experienced cognitive stimulation from attempting new processes and recognized that learning is accomplished through many stages of experimentation and evaluation. As a result, participants frequently described critical thinking and problem-solving common occurrences.

Two students stated that classroom relationships had an effect on their learning. They emphasized the importance of peer congeniality in the classroom, along with sincere consideration of others, so as not to compromise working ability. One concern, noted by all participants, was the difficult task of maintaining focus within the classroom during visual arts experiences in the lower grades because of the negligent work ethic of students who did not want to be there. This lack of seriousness was considered detrimental for an individual's learning and program flow. All participants believed it is important to have effective and approachable art teachers who listen, are responsive, and help their students. However, the participants expressed the fine line between having too much or not enough direction from the teacher. Although participants welcomed constructive suggestions, they still wanted the final say as to the direction their art would take and did not want to be concerned with evaluation processes or grades interfering with this direction. As one participant stated, "Visual arts in order to qualify as an educational experience must adhere to certain guidelines; however, I find these guidelines tend to limit my ability to express myself, especially if I am confined to a teacher's definition of art."

Participants said that visual arts learning experiences helped them become more creative and also deal more effectively with deadlines in other classes. The transfer of skills to other parts of one's life enabled them to be more open-minded and better able to adapt to what transpired from day to day. Through opportunities for reflection, more insight and a deeper understanding of oneself resulted. Art participation also helped to relieve anxiety and stress from everyday occurrences. However, because art can sometimes be stressful in meeting project deadlines, three participants believed they could better handle other stress laden situations.

One important benefit of participation in school visual arts programs was the opportunity to explore different art forms without the costs of community programs. In this way, one could find areas they liked for further exploration prior to paying for courses. Participants also believed it was beneficial for a person to create things regardless of whether they were decorative or functional. They felt that learning how to create in and of itself was important, as in developing creativity it could also lead to a career or job acquisition. Other noted benefits of visual arts involvement include improved colour coordination, knowing how to tweak home decorating, and having more fun with makeup.

In terms of programming, the participants felt that previously completed theory and history writing assignments were not helpful, and believed these tasks should be constructed to provide more interest, excitement, and involvement for the students. Participants recommended more variety with media as opposed to mainly drawing and painting activities for studio work, along with in-depth help from teachers in developing critiquing skills during the creative process. They expressed an interest in opportunities to explore and produce art in a variety of different settings, rather than having limited field trips to art galleries and museums, so as to enable students to produce artwork for authenticity.

Discussion

The interrelationships among the emerged themes of preferred modes of learning, personal expression, character development, and benefits of visual arts demonstrate the cognitive learning

and creativity that transpired from the participants' engagement in visual arts programs. The data relayed that as the participants expressed their thoughts and beliefs during the stages of the creative process, their learning was facilitated and their individual growth was nurtured. Shared views towards the outcomes of engaging in visual arts and common personal attributes were evident with a high level of consistency.

Although occurring at different ages, interview data suggested that participant art interest was encouraged by their families and nurtured by their continual involvement with the creative process. This encouragement and involvement corroborates the findings of Hyllegard (2000) who discussed the relationship established between the amount of skill practice and the level of achievement attained by children engaged in artistic endeavours. According to Hyllegard, this encouraged, frequent, intentional amount of practice, also a characteristic of the participants, reflects a high level of intrinsic motivation to produce quality work. Through the deliberate guidance and support of their families, these participants persevered to develop artistic skillfulness.

Sex differences were apparent among the participants. Female participants started art activities in preschool and were encouraged at a younger age to continue these activities by their families more so than their male counterparts. However, once the art interest was established by the male participants, recognition, acceptance, encouragement, and financial assistance were also given by their family members. Even with these sex differences, the home environment of all the participants was receptive of their art interests.

Although family reaction to career paths was also subject to sex differences, the stronger subjectivity appeared to be towards societal values. While one female participant was not supported in her interest towards an art-related career, one male participant was encouraged to attend an international art institution. Efland (2002) debated the influence of the existing, intertwined, public controversy between the value of art and art as a substantial career, and presented the positive outcomes of artistic engagement, outcomes also expressed by the participants. The contrasting views of these two families reflect the conflicting societal values when pursuing a postsecondary art career rather than a career that is viewed to bring higher earnings and prestige.

Both immediate and extended family members were found to have an impact on the developing nature of all participants. Combined with the classroom structure and program content of their academic environment, participants interacted within the creative process, incorporating experiences from their family environment to cultivate and characterize their personality. Art engagement was part of the participants' lifestyle both at home and at school, and it was usual for their families to be involved outside of the school setting. These interacting resources of home and school, according to Sternberg and Lubart (1993), are reflected in student creativity levels, direct the thinking of the participants, and contribute to the development of their artistic skill and nature.

Although the work habits of the participants indicated a high level of intrinsic motivation, the desire for individual expression became evident as the primary motivational source for artistic productivity. The participants revealed that during the creative process they would define new problems, divert their thinking, and change direction if necessary to communicate the message in their work. They were not discouraged by unforeseen challenges and accepted them as part of the process. The data clearly illustrated that all participants exhibited the personal attributes of perseverance and problem-solving ability. Cukierkorn (2008) named these two attributes as definitive characteristics of students who are artistically talented.

The artwork discussion interview indicated that the participants were not averse to taking risks. They spoke of their trial-and-error method and how often a miscalculation could mean starting over, depending on the fragility of the media used or the visible results. The process of risk-taking alongside that of failure to achieve creative success is promoted by Sternberg (2000). This corroborates the earlier statements of Sternberg and Lubart (1993) and Eisner (1998) that attend to the attribute of risk-taking ability for students who are highly artistic.

Throughout the data involving the creative process, the attributes of participant self-confidence and individualism were very strong. The positive outlet provided by engagement in visual arts experiences went beyond the product itself, and there was informative discussion on striving to be your best. The surprising finding in this area was the reaction of two of the participants who, although both sometimes wanted guidance and mentorship during the stages of their work, felt that at times the advice given by the instructor countered their goals. Their statements reflected the inhibiting factor felt within as to their individual approach to their work.

Preferential modes of learning were evident throughout the data. The participants were very cognizant of and frequently mentioned the ability of visual arts experiences enabling varied processes from which they developed strategies that could be transferred to other life situations. They expressed being encouraged to think in unique ways and to use critical thinking and analytical skills. Through meeting the expectations of visual arts projects, outcomes from the discretion of the student to produce work in a creative and unique way differentiates students who are highly artistic from those students working at an average or satisfactory level in the classroom. This differentiation is consistent with the beliefs of Sternberg and Lubart (1993) who state that enhanced insight processes and the divergent thinking capability are characteristics of students who are highly artistic. The data also illustrated that the development of participant ideas would involve the blending of many intellectual processes. When the opportunities of the process-oriented curriculum of visual arts programs are taken by students who are highly artistic, the higher thinking levels identified by Bloom (1956) are apparent in their project outcomes.

One area of incongruity among the participants was the ability of visual arts engagement to further develop social skills. Although most stated that this subject area could facilitate some social skills, the belief was expressed that creating art through school programs was most often an individual experience. Teamwork was believed to be more difficult because each person's idea has to be incorporated into one work of art. Conversely, this belief illustrates the intricacy of such involvement, and when practiced, develops a skill set that can be nurtured in art. It is interesting to note that even though social skills were believed to be less significant by the participants, these were consistently observed in their respective classrooms. Socially, participants were observed helping others, demonstrating media techniques, offering suggestions, engaging in discourse, critiquing and evaluating studio work among peers, working together on cleanup, and sharing materials.

The opportunity for individualism was a frequently named attribute by the participants. During the interviews, the participants exhibited confidence, had definite views towards developing their aesthetic style, and portrayed a sense of purpose for their work. Being able to express the personal aspects of their lives in their own way and at their level of ability was important to them. This thinking reflects the views of Eisner (1985) who emphasized the importance of curriculum being personally relevant. This results in meaningful work for the students, and in turn they are motivated to be involved and stay involved. When students incorporate their mood, thoughts, and events of their lives into their work, Tyler (1975) believed that student learning becomes significant and that this significance encourages further learning. The genuine love and

enjoyment of the participants for this subject area strengthened their commitment to learning and contributed to their high level of motivation and creativity.

Within the benefits from visual arts experiences, participants relayed how they thought about things differently and viewed the world in new ways. They referred to the natural environment and in so doing recognized their deeper awareness of the outdoors. For some, this provided subject matter for their art, and for others it connected the physical characteristics of the natural world with the social environment.

In acknowledging the life-enhancing ability of visual arts experiences towards the quality of life, the participants reflected on numerous physical, emotional, and intellectual benefits within their lives. These included enhanced cognitive abilities, an appreciation of beauty, critical thinking capabilities, an improved perspective towards life, a vivid awareness of surroundings, and a deeper understanding of themselves and of the world. They took pride in figuring things out for themselves and learning on their own. Engagement in visual arts activities was also said to enable the participants to feel relaxed and happy, to have a release, and to provide an opportunity for them to express their emotions. These feelings in turn lend themselves to a healthy way of living, and through the contentment and joy of creating, the participants enriched their lives. These beliefs of the participants reflect a study by Uptis (2003) who found that students develop in meaningful ways due to arts-based activities.

As data collection progressed, the nature of the participants became apparent. Attributes characterized this group of highly artistic students as well-rounded, insightful young adults, invigorated by learning, with the incentive to expand their growth through personal initiative. They were cognizant of their natural environment and aware of others within both the family and community context. Their confidence shone, and their flexible approach to learning and the unknown never subsided. For some of the participants, however, one aspect of their nature caused concern. Five of the seven participants expressed either anxiousness or the feeling of being pressured to do well. Their reasons for internalizing the need to do their best were self-inflicted. The concern here is the fact that this feeling was not only in relation to art but was part of any activities taken to task. After further analysis of the feeling of pressure, it is notable that the two male participants did not experience similar feelings of pressure as did the female participants. Both expressed wanting to do well by choice and were not concerned with the reactions of others towards their work.

The concept of programming flexibility was important to each participant so that individual learning styles could best be facilitated. The students spoke of their desire to learn new things while still having the opportunity to take this learning into a direction that would portray their personality and individual interests. Acquiring in-depth critiquing skills, having effective and approachable teachers, as well as options for a wide range of media and themes were essential aspects necessary to support their learning and foster a higher level of creativity.

Educational Implications

Educators can best meet the learning needs of students when they have an understanding of their persona. Of importance here are the curriculum needs of highly artistic students to direct instructional practices within the secondary school classroom. These findings build on the work of previous researchers who are concerned with identifying and meeting the needs of students who are gifted.

This sample group prefers a challenging curriculum and strives to meet these challenges through a variety of learning processes. They prefer using higher order thinking skills and learn-

ing independently. All stages of thinking identified by Bloom (1956) are incorporated into their studio work production. By applying different levels of understood knowledge, these participants constantly analyze and evaluate their studio work, and synthesize personal views and techniques, historical concepts, and past experiences, and combine these with experimentation to achieve the desired communicative aspects for their work. By providing challenging, complex, problem-centered projects, the needs of highly artistic students can be met.

Although at times guidelines and or mentoring are wanted during studio work production, conversely, too much direction is considered detrimental. A balance of independent learning and consultation with peers and teachers should occur and is needed for an exchange of ideas and critiquing. In addition, having to produce work for marks sometimes means altering components of their work to suit someone else, which is disadvantageous. Having a flexible approach in such matters would enable these students to produce artworks unrestrainedly, meet their internal needs, and not impede their motivation.

In-depth project work in which students who are highly artistic are able to incorporate personal views and communicate these ideas to others was preferred. Based on high expectations of themselves, these students desire sufficient time to explore both concepts and media during the creative process to formulate the best approach to attain their goal. The combination of having creative opportunities at school and a supportive home environment were essential for success. Access to high-quality supplies and a relaxed, studio-style atmosphere in the classroom can best facilitate their production strategies and provide individual inspiration. Of concern educationally however, is the pressure the female participants placed upon themselves in meeting personal expectations. The reason for their elevated level of anxiety was unclear as whether it resulted from their art capability and the constant need to produce artwork at a consistently high level, from their individual disposition, or from their sex difference.

A class complement including other students who are focused and genuinely interested in this subject area was important. In some cases, students placed without focus become disruptive and unconstructively affect the learning atmosphere of a creative environment, encumbering the growth of the student who is highly artistic. Engagement in the learning process for students who are highly artistic is affected negatively by these disruptive students. Organizing a class complement of students with comparable outlooks and goals toward visual arts would allow the integration of students with different artistic levels for peer modeling and enable the design of suitable programming that benefits all students.

Individually, more choice in studio program content is warranted for students who are highly artistic. For some, too much time with a specific media did not provide the opportunity to try different techniques, and thus, this was viewed as hindering their development. In addition, opportunities to engage in art activities beyond the traditional art classroom on a frequent basis as well as in-depth, creative approaches to art history beyond artist biographies, time periods, and artistic styles investigation would enhance the meaningfulness of their artistic endeavours.

Although common personality characteristics prevailed, as individuals, each has personal messages to communicate through his or her individual artistic style. Based on this, it is recommended that a balance between student choice and instructor program delivery be employed to accommodate highly artistic students' learning needs to meet curriculum requirements. Presenting students first with a concept and theoretical discussion, the students would then develop an individual artistic response which would enable their personal creative approach and insight to come forth. By having a wide variety of themes, media, and styles of artwork produced in the classroom, an open studio atmosphere would evolve and all students in the class would benefit

from this range of production and discourse regarding the creative process and artistic production outcomes.

Final Thoughts

Although the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the larger population of secondary school students who are highly artistic, the results provide informative insight into the nature of these students and their programming needs. Their attitude and approach to life are strong, and they are accepting of challenges encountered on a daily basis and search for solutions with both perseverance and confidence. Skills learned in visual arts programs are transferred to other areas of their lives, and their increasing environmental and social awareness enhances their perceptions and broadens their perspectives of the world. These learned skills, combined alongside their nature, develop caring, productive, and contributory citizens for the world in which we live today and for the evolving world yet to come.

As a visual arts educator, these findings will be helpful by providing insight to the design and delivery of challenging learning opportunities to meet the needs of students who are highly artistic. Linked to an understanding of their nature and strong visual arts programs, these students will thrive by being given learning opportunities that may not be available to them in other areas of the curriculum.

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Appendix

Artistic Ability Identification Checklist Instrument

Project: A Study of the Nature of the Highly Artistic Student in Visual Arts in
Secondary School

Student Name: _____ **Grade:** _____

Work Sample Evaluator: _____

Art Work Theme/Topic: _____

Realistic or Abstract/Media: _____ Approx. Size: _____

The artwork described above exhibits the following characteristics:

CHARACTERISTIC	No Evidence	Limited	Moderate	Considerable	High
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Technical Components

1. Defined use of materials
2. Exemplary technical achievement
3. Successful application of elements
and principles of design

Creative Components

1. Highly imaginative approach/
experimentation
2. Expressive/thought provoking
content
3. Pushing boundaries with theme,
materials, execution

ADDITIONAL NOTES: