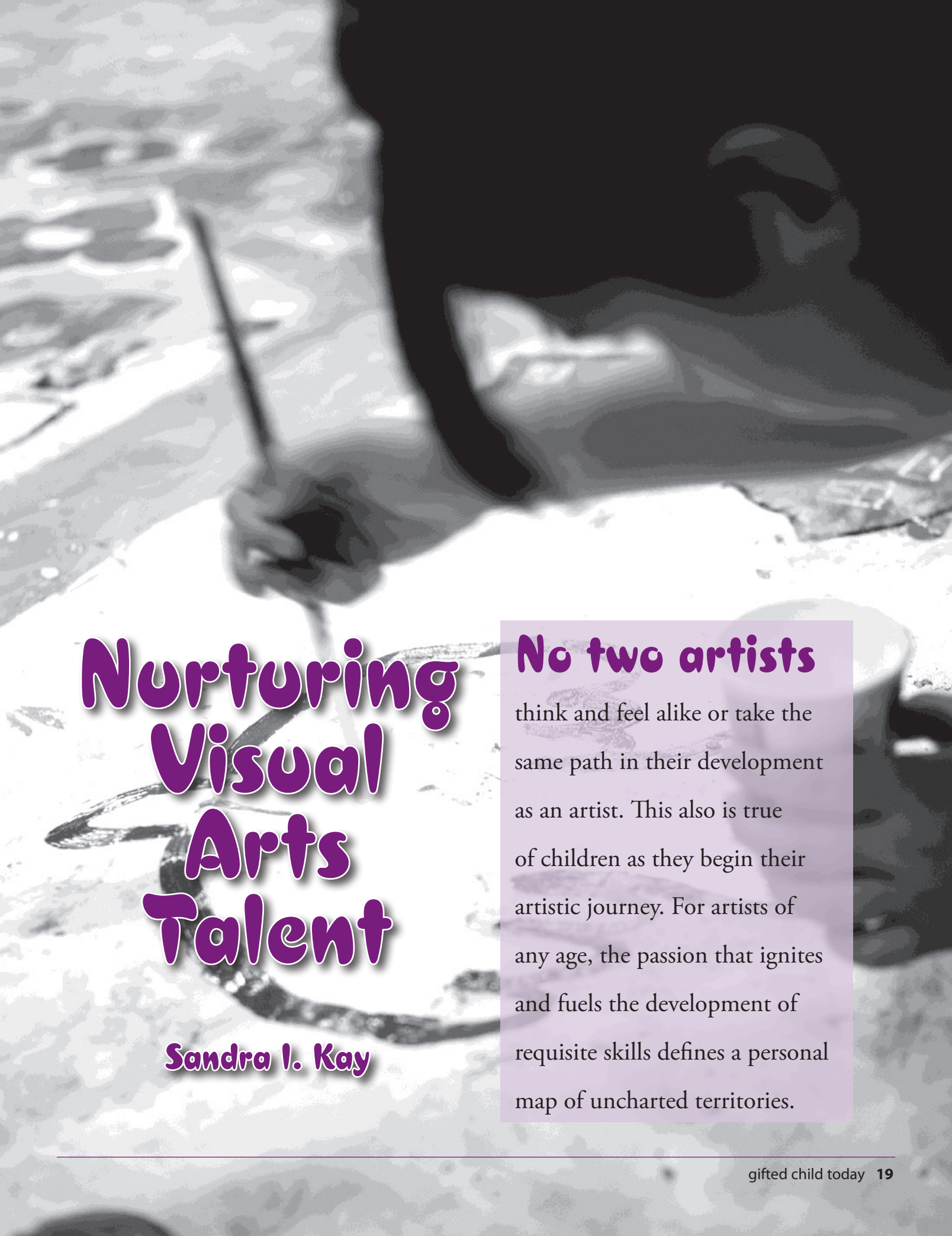

Nurturing Visual Arts Talent

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No two artists think and feel alike or take the same path in their development as an artist. This also is true of children as they begin their artistic journey. For artists of any age, the passion that ignites and fuels the development of requisite skills defines a personal map of uncharted territories.

Significant influences on the making of an artist are, in a scientific sense, unknown. Although retrospective accounts and other biographical research provide rich hypotheses and patterns for rigorous research, there is no proven recipe for talent development in any talent domain. In fact, empirical research on adult artists suggests that a recipe is unlikely (Kay, 1994). Different catalysts affect different learners at different times. With that caveat, there are environmental influences that can assist or impede talent development. Parents, guardians, or educators seeking to encourage artistic talent need to concentrate efforts on developing their own skills as an appreciator, curator, and advocate.

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Some potential ways to assist talent development in the visual arts as an *appreciator* are:

- Most importantly, savor the joy together. Biographical research on artists suggests that artists benefited from the support and encouragement of their families (Bloom, 1985; Carroll, 1994; Pariser, 1987). The value of showing sincere appreciation of your child's artwork is immeasurable.
- Young artists will need dialogue and honest feedback. For example, when a 3-year-old presents you with an indescribable scribble (and waits for you to say something), add specific comments to your excitement, such as "I see you used lots of colors" or "I really like the colors you chose, tell me about this" or "Your lines give me the feeling of fast movements—what else do you want me to see here?" Direct, emotional reaction to the work provides a young artist with information on how successful an idea, thought, or feeling has been communicated.
- Actions speak louder than words. Frame or acquire a sculpture base and professionally display an original work you love prominently in your home. (My friends' daughter has a wall dedicated to her best work over the years that the family endearingly calls "her gallery").

Nurturing artistic development can also take a *curatorial* form:

- Parents show their children how much they value their art when they care for the artwork itself. It is very helpful if an accurate record is made that includes dating the work. Even unfinished explorations can later serve as a record of development. A rotating date stamp (found in office supply stores) helps to efficiently keep track of the order for the work that is produced by stamping the date on the back in a corner.
- Very young artists can be taught to use the stamp on the back of the work completed each week, file the work in a portfolio (a box with a lid or two cardboard rectangles tied or taped together), and select the one or two favorites to display in a frame (plastic, magnetic, or box frames without glass are available). Young children may wish to frequently change the work on display.
- If a child produces sculptures or other three-dimensional structures, digital photographs may offer an alternative means of documentation.
- Another useful strategy is to keep a journal of events, comments, or behaviors that strike you as unusual, meaningful, or relevant anecdotes to your child's artistic development. Journal entries can provide insight into the idiosyncratic nature of a child's development. This will be most useful to the adult artist as he or she looks back on the work of childhood because underlying, lifelong themes often surface when viewing the early work retrospectively (Kay, 1999).
- One also should include a record of contests entered, exhibits, and other achievements or opportunities (classes, pivotal experiences).
- Engaging young artists in these record-keeping activities can develop important organizational as well as critical thinking skills necessary to communicate with others. For example, inviting a child to use a portable sketchbook for visual and verbal (resources, addresses) ideas can occur whenever the child is interested in this adult behavior.

All parents need persistent *advocacy* skills. Advocacy involves pursuing the optimum match between the child and the learning environment. To develop strengths in art related fields, nurturers may need the help of others, especially when no family member is involved in the field and can offer specific advice. Seeking out resources (human and otherwise) requires time and effort but useful opportunities at the appropriate level of challenge are important. Fortunately, there are

many possibilities in most communities or online.

Finding Useful Resources

The prolific making of images (whether they are drawings, paintings, sculptures, or buildings made from building blocks) holds a key to what a parent can do to assist his or her child to develop this talent.

- In order to choose opportunities that will best enhance the young artist's repertoire of experiences, it is important to look and listen attentively to what the child is exploring. Encouraging a child to discuss his own work or what he sees in the work of others may provide some insights. (As an interested observer, your log of these encounters may highlight a theme.)
- Art educators are frequently the most knowledgeable resource available to children with advanced artistic talent. Art educators are familiar with age-appropriate development and exceptionalities. Professional artists, without training in art education, may compare children's work to their own or other professional adult standards. Positive, constructive feedback during an evaluation of the artwork provided by an art educator can be a pivotal experience in itself. The discussion between educator and young artist develops the verbal language that describes the vocabulary and grammatical investigations pursued in the observed examples. Bloom (1985) found that there are three stages of developing expertise and each require different skills from the chosen instructor. The first stage needs a nurturing teacher who cultivates passion for the field.
- A competent art educator also has a pulse on local opportunities, the limitations of the private instructors available in the community, and connections to the next levels of art instruction. This knowledge can provide older students as mentors, greater connections to advanced training, or even a potential letter of recommendation to eliminate age requirements for a class because of the child's unusually advanced accomplishments and seriousness of purpose.

Yet, several factors make it unlikely that artistically gifted students would get this kind of mentoring unless parents initiate contact with the instructor. First of all, many artistically talented children do not perform at the same level of accomplishment at school. The sparse 40-minute class period per week that is the norm in elementary schools or the child's desire to be more like classmates are two good reasons for seeing an enormous difference between work done at home and work done in school. A kindergartner who drew like a middle school student at home demonstrated the skills of a third grader on his school projects. Understanding that disbelief is a logical reaction by an art teacher when schoolwork and work done at home are not congruent should help frame the parent's conversation with the teacher. Had I not videotaped a 6-year-old creating a drawing at home, few would have believed his mother.

Even if art education with a trained professional exists in your schools (a big "if" in some locations), the art program may not be able to address the needs of artistically talented children. National art education policy defines quality art education as providing art experiences that reflect the national standards of a comprehensive art education and is grounded in age-appropriate developmental practices (Davis, 2001). By definition, this is not a good match for a developmentally advanced student. With 40 minutes and 35 students in a class, guided advanced instruction is not a realistic expectation. Unfortunately, opportunities such as contests or competitions that find a student's artwork superior to other students are considered "undesirable," especially at the elementary level (Davis, 2001). The distaste for art instruction in elementary school cited by artists (Bloom, 1985) is easily understood under these circumstances.

Other resources that may challenge and interest the artistically talented student include the following:

- The National PTA sponsors a Reflections contest each year that encourages artistic expression of an annual theme (http://www.pta.org). Everyone is encouraged to participate, each school finds volunteer judges, and top choices are sent on to the state and national competition.
- Children with cultivated social graces in addition to their talent will experience a synergistic effort among school personnel (such as librarians, clerks, and teachers) to locate resources and opportunities for artistic development including exhibit spaces, mentor possibilities, and special events.
- There are many contests (mostly "poster") advertised in local newspapers, other community outlets, and online.
- Interest in drawing, painting, sculpture, or built environments (architecture) can be refueled through visits to a public library or any museum for visual images or some of the high-quality art books written for young children. Museum shops tend to offer outstanding

examples of books for children. Inviting the child to choose a book may be the best way to match learning with current needs or desires.

- Biographies that discuss the childhood of a famous artist are vital for making connections to what the life of an emerging artist might entail.
- Visits to art galleries and museums (online or in person) provide a wealth of other information. However, prints or anything other than an original work of art *cannot* provide most of the technical answers these learners are seeking.
- College art schools in your area may be a great resource. Contact the director/chair of art education training programs to discuss possibilities.
- Summer art programs for children and youth or portfolio development classes for adolescents often are part of the community offerings at art museums; state education departments; or colleges and universities that offer art education degrees. Some of these offerings require applications and portfolio reviews, whereas others just require a fee and early registration.
- An ideal situation for some young artists is an opportunity to meet someone else who works with similar ideas through art. Going to gallery openings, seeking out and interviewing the local instructors of art classes, and getting to know the local arts councils are all good places to begin to search for a good match between a child's interests and a learning opportunity.
- Museum-sponsored art classes tend to offer special classes geared toward serious learners. These actions also provide an introduction to the field. Opportunities to hear responses to one's work are learning moments for the young artist as well.

All of these pursuits are suggestions for art students seeking more stimulation or direct contact with a mentor. Not all students will want outside assistance at all times. Careful listening and observation provide clues as to the appropriateness of these alternatives.

The same advice is useful for decisions regarding participation in art shows, competitions, or contests. Parents should be alert to the real (although small) potential for exploitation. Most sponsors tend to be quite ethical in their approach and procedures. However, careful reading and discussion of all fine print is highly recommended before this type of pursuit. For example, some contests or competitions (quite ethically) state that the winning entries become the property of the sponsor. A child unwilling to permanently part with the work submitted might have an unpleasant experience if not prepared. The child must be just as prepared (emotionally) to not have the artwork chosen. Some sponsors are seeking a particular look to compliment their product, which may have very little to do with the quality of the work that is chosen. If a child is emotionally ready to have her work judged by others, these experiences can be constructive. An award is an external (someone else's view) validation of the work *in the context of that assignment*. Although creating a product to meet the specific demands of a contest is challenging and an important way to learn healthy competition skills, most competitions do not provide an explanation or any feedback to unselected entries. It is very important for parents to stress these facts prior to entering these activities.

Additional resources are included below:

- At the national level, the National Art Education Association (NAEA) has an honor society for junior and high school art majors (see http://www.naea-reston.org/nahs.html).
- High school seniors can apply for the Arts Recognition and Talent Search (ARTS) where finalists are nominated to be named a Presidential Scholar in the Arts (see http://www.ARTSawards.org).
- Many organizations sponsor awards and/or recognition for secondary students—check online or look up the recommendations made by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, which monitors contests for integrity as potential possibilities for public schools.
- The May/June 2003 (Volume 10, Number 5) issue of *IMAGINE* focused on visual arts and has more opportunities and resources for academically talented youth (published by Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth).

Like an athlete, it is one's personal best that needs to be the focus of improvement. The fact that understanding ways to improve on one's work is far more constructive than comparing the work to others must be stressed.

Sustained practice hones interest into developed talent. Many biographies of artists mention the development of a talent during early childhood that is characterized by advanced technical skills as well as an early and intense emotional response to their artistic endeavors (Dali, 1965; Frisch & Shipley, 1939; Rubin, 1980; Scrivani, 1988). The "self-directedness" (Hurwitz & Day, 2007) or "rage to master" (Winner, 1996) that is required for sustained practice may be

the characteristic that most differentiates the artistically gifted from others with visual arts talent.

Because this high level of motivation and independence often begins before kindergarten, awareness of the other behavioral characteristics associated with visual arts talent is useful. Hurwitz and Day (2007) have found artistically gifted children often are very prolific and may have more ideas than they can find time to do. The degree of *visual fluency* (number of ideas or variations) can equal that of professional artists. Other characteristics he described include: *extended concentration* (the ability to stay with an artistic problem longer than others because there are many possibilities to explore); *rapidity of development* or rapid acceleration through the developmental stages of drawing that may be so fast that stages appear to be skipped; *complexity and elaboration* of a child's schemas; the degree of explorations with media; technical skills; and *perceptual acuity* (super accurate sensibility or ability to accurately perceive information from the senses) used to render real-life subjects the child has chosen from the environment.

Artistic ability also requires creative imagination and aesthetic intelligence (Hurwitz & Day, 2007; Meier, 1939). Although creative imagination is an active ingredient in artistic talent, it appears to be idiosyncratic in nature. Random improvisation may be characteristic of doodles that often are explored as gifted children will frequently improvise with shapes, patterns, and lines (Hurwitz & Day, 2007).

On the other hand, those who continue to develop their visual vocabulary may, at times, exhibit behaviors antithetical to behaviors associated with creativity. For example, there are times when a child may be focused on developing a technique or solving a problem (like accuracy of shading or linear perspective) that has no apparent relationship to creative thought. Other times, such children approach new problems with extreme caution as a way of protecting themselves from ridicule or embarrassment in front of peers or adults with high expectations. The recognition and success received from extensive practice may not be easily given up to try something unfamiliar.

Like professional artists, specialization and narrowing of the field of inquiry by the child also may be the result of highly focused "problem-defining skills" (Kay, 1999). Self-initiated challenges define problems prior to solving them. The professional artist uses whatever medium it takes to best address the issue at hand. This might involve learning how to use materials in a new way or the use of unfamiliar materials. The artist's choices are lead by the emotional and intellectual components of an idea. Subject matter, art materials, or any other variable may be severely limited by the young art student at any given time as well. All of the artistically gifted students who I have worked with—including a 6-year-old—had acutely specific choices of drawing medium, subject matter, inspirational material, and working conditions.

A child's strong sense of what is elegant, beautiful, or personally correct is another behavior similar to expert adult artists (Kay, 2000). The development of these personal aesthetic preferences appears to evolve from self-directed challenges. This problem-defining characteristic is implied in portfolio evaluations that assess art spirit. Historically, problem finding/defining and an aesthetic sensitivity have been associated with creative thought in science, mathematics, and the arts. GCT

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