



A Former Student's  
Perception of  
**Not Gifted,  
Just Different:**  
A Case Study

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Yeah, all the gifted and talented people I've ever met, they're odd people. They're odd or different, and that includes me. I've always thought of myself as odd. Maybe that's why I was very introverted because I just didn't want people to know just how different I was. It just so happened that people saw me as talented in art. That art was my vehicle. That's what I needed you to know and still discover who I am through that; you just helped us all do that.

(B. Kiwak, personal communication, February 22, 2001)

## Introduction

When I was a high school art teacher, I had difficulty understanding what it meant to have a gifted student in my classroom and what exactly I should be doing differently for that student. As a professor in a teacher-training program, I still have difficulty with the term *gifted* and what that means for me as a teacher because it is just as difficult, not only to find agreement about what constitutes gifted students, but to find agreement in the literature. Most gifted and talented programs in the United States rely on an IQ of approximately 130 to select participants (Runco, 2007). According to Woolfolk (1998), “Renzulli and Reis (1991) have defined giftedness as a combination of three basic characteristics: above-average general ability, a high level of creativity, and a high level of task commitment or motivation to achieve in certain areas” (p. 126).

Characteristics of artistically gifted students and the characteristics of their artwork have been identified in the research literature (Hurwitz & Day, 1991). Because some of my previous students have become successful artists and have remained in continuous contact with me as a mentor and friend, I became curious about how a former student identified as gifted throughout her schooling would remember her sense of giftedness during her high school

years. “When asked to reflect on their earliest artistic experiences, artists seem to have remarkable powers of recall” (Hurwitz & Day, p. 142). I thought I might design an interview protocol that would help me to see how well an individual artist's memory of her development matched the characteristics described by Hurwitz and Day.

First, a brief introduction to the case study participant, Barb Kiwak, will provide the reader with some insight about the grown-up Barb as well as an adolescent 10th grader in an Art II class at Centennial High School in a middle-class Ellicott City, MD, suburban community (see Figures 1 and 2). Barb's family welcomed me as her teacher, a “question-asking-critic,” and a mentor who encouraged and challenged her status quo, a relationship that continues today with the addition of friend and fellow artist. Barb has been a self-incorporated single artist entrepreneur since graduating in 1988 from Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, MD. Our paths cross several times a year as she brings me up-to-date sharing her latest artistic adventures. Art for her was always a passion, a new adventure, and a way to show the extent of her skills and thinking. She usually wants to know if I'm still designing new art problems for my current students to solve based on the most recent museum or gallery shows I've seen. We share our latest artwork and

exhibition sites before talking about the next garden party.

My memory of working with this one highly gifted student revived the emotional turmoil I went through as her teacher. The dilemma for me as her art instructor was having this young lady in class who would be every art teacher's dream. I'd often think, “What am I going to do with her? She seems to know everything already.” Her technical drawing, painting, and sculpting skills not only exceeded her fellow students, but my skills as well. I sought advice from my mentor, my former junior high art teacher and art department chair of my first employment as an art teacher, about how to enhance her creative potential and still maintain the sense of community in the art room. Additionally, of concern to me were comments from other students in the class who challenged my teaching strategies, “She already draws, paints, and sculpts better than anyone. Why don't you just leave her alone?” Or, if I asked Barb questions about her work, her classmates insisted, “Why do you always ask her stuff, too? Let her be and do her thing.” It became important that all of the students understand that each student has the potential to grow and develop beyond the identified baseline of seeing, knowing, thinking, and making. It was this former student/current professional artist I wanted for the pilot study.

This qualitative case study looks at a former art student from a working-





Figure 1. Barb Kiwak, "Self Portrait Still Life," Graphite, 9" X 12", 1982, First one-hour timed drawing home assignment submitted in 10th-grade Art II class.

class suburban family who had been identified as gifted and talented in the visual arts at a very young age. This case study follows the Hurwitz and Day (1991) descriptive criteria for identifying gifted children and the characteristics for their artwork by gathering data from listening to the responsive memories of an adult artist prompted by the criteria outlined in *Children and Their Art: Methods for the Elementary School*. This study reveals general characteristics of gifted students in the visual arts and practical instructional strategies that supported the development of a student who exhibited all of the characteristics of giftedness according to Hurwitz

and Day. This study further examines this student's interview responses and offers emerging ideas as guidelines for art instructors in the development of instructional strategies for gifted students.

### Methodology

The participant chosen to pilot this procedure had been a student in my high school art classroom who, at the time, exhibited all of the characteristics cited by Hurwitz and Day (1991). She currently is a highly successful illustrator/graphic artist living in the Baltimore metropolitan area.

The 3 ½ hour interview began with updates of her career as a graphic artist and questions related to memories about attending high school art class (see Figure 3). A series of reflective questions based on the characteristics identified for gifted and talented children in the visual arts (Hurwitz & Day, 1991) closed the interview. Barb was asked to respond to each characteristic and recall if and how the term applied to her, particularly during high school.

### Findings

Excerpts from the February 22, 2001, interview are depicted in two



Figure 2. Barb Kiwak, "City Patterns," Gouache, 9" X 12", 1992, Professional Artist

categories: (1) the participant's recollection of her background and developmental experiences and (2) her responses to the characteristics of giftedness. The participant's responses are in quotes or block quotes. The parts of the protocol questions are in bold.

### Developmental Background

When asked to recollect **her earliest memories of making art**, Barb had vividly pleasant memories of making art with family members:

I was sitting on the couch and my dad would baby-sit us and he loved to play that game where you get a pad of paper

and you scribble something real abstract and the other person got to make something out of it. That used to be my favorite game. And my sister, my dad, and me [*sic*] would play. I just remember delight. I got the feeling I delighted him and my sister with the things that I'd come up with.

**First off, when you came to this high school having previously worked with a commercial artist, did you see yourself as G/T gifted and talented?**

I felt, in my family situation, at least I know how to draw.

Early on that was a big deal. I remember playing games as a kid and all my friends saying, wow, you're really good. I had this feeling that *that* was special then about me. At least I can do *that*.

At age 16, Barb moved from the Midwest to the East coast where her parents enrolled her in a class with a commercial artist outside of public school. "I'll never forget him either because he's a wonderful teacher," as she endearingly speaks his name. "He was excellent and he was making a living doing art. He would always let me in on the jobs that he was doing and show me the process. So, I began to see



### Interview Questions and Prompts

1. Recollect your earliest memories of making art.
2. When you came to this high school having previously worked with a commercial artist, did you see yourself as G/T gifted and talented?

### Characteristics of the Gifted Child

3. Hurwitz and Day (1991) constructed a profile of a gifted child built on the greatest consensus from multiple writers in the field. They agree that a gifted child observes acutely and really looks closely at things, has a vivid memory, handles problems that require imagination, expects new experiences, and also delves deeply in confined spaces. Does this describe you?
4. I will ask you to respond individually to each of the characteristics of a gifted child and later ask you to respond to each of the characteristics of the artwork of a gifted child. First is be precocious; was that you? (Shown photographs of her high school work for response).
5. Gifted kids make art even before starting school and often as early as age 3. Was this you?
6. Emergence through drawing: "Giftedness shows itself through drawing and for the most part dominates the visual expression of the gifted child, lending itself easily for rendering and showing details" (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, pp. 135–136).
7. Rapidity of development: Another characteristic of giftedness points to how quickly one picks up ideas and develops them.
8. Extended concentration: Visually gifted children stay with an artistic problem longer than others because they both derive creative pleasure from it and see more possibilities in it.
9. Self-directedness: "Gifted children are highly motivated and have the drive to work on their own" (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 136).
10. Possible inconsistency with creative behavior: "Gifted children exhibit behavior that might possibly be inconsistent with behaviors associated with creativity, especially in the high school years. Young people's reluctance to make fools of themselves, to appear ridiculous or to lose face among their peers tends to instill attitudes of extreme caution in confronting new problems" (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 136).
11. Art as Escape?

### Characteristics of Artwork From a Gifted Student

12. Verisimilitude?
13. Visual fluency?
14. Complexity and elaboration: "Complexity and elaboration; they want to add to it. They want to make it very complex, putting in a lot of things" (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 137).
15. Sensitivity to art media?
16. Random improvisation: "Gifted children often doodle" (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 138).
17. Childhood fantasy: During their childhood, most gifted children experience fantasies and daydreams, along with a love of stories (Hurwitz & Day, 1991).

Figure 3. Interview questions and prompts.

that end of it—working with clients.” Although her parents encouraged her art “to make her own money,” they continued to worry about her career choice in spite of her obvious skills.

She, on the other hand, never worried.

It’s going to happen. And sure enough, everything I ever wanted to do, like getting into certain avenues, editorial, advertising, institutional, medical, children’s books, or whatever I’ve set as a goal, I’ve been able to do it. Today, I do lots of stuff for the Humane Society of the United States, *Highlights for Children*, Children’s Better Health Institute, Scholastic, National Bar Association, *Education News*, and another medical publication company that houses lots of medical magazines inside of it. Honestly, I don’t think all my life I doubted that I was going to go into art.

When asked to describe her teen years’ attitude she recalls,

I remember thinking back [to] that art class and your teaching was a pivotal time in my life. I think I was just a miserable teenager. In a time period when both sisters were making all kinds of wonderful grades, I just felt miserable. I was very introverted at the time, real unhappy, and so shy I almost couldn’t function. I didn’t want to move. I didn’t know where I was and I found myself in a brand new school with not a lot of friends. I mean, metaphorically speaking, I was a kid on a dark highway. I didn’t know where I was going and you came along and said “Come on let’s

try this way.” And you took me a little ways and you were like, “OK. Go.” And I thought all right now, I have the confidence to do this. That’s a teacher I’ve been looking for.

### Behavior Characteristics of Gifted

**Hurwitz and Day (1991) constructed a profile of a gifted child built on the greatest consensus from multiple writers in the field. They agree that a gifted child observes acutely and really looks closely at things, has a vivid memory, handles problems that require imagination, expects new experiences, and also delves deeply in confined spaces (p. 134). Does this describe you? (See Figure 4.)**

I’d say I’d always do that, pretty much. Looking and remembering! It’s everything I see. I do find at times when somebody is talking to me thinking, “Who’s this person?” You pick a little phrase and you just get a sense about them. You examine them. I always looked at things and people rather closely; they’re the details.

As far as doing things that I didn’t want to do, I had no attention span. I mean I’d sit in class and my parents would receive phone calls all the time when I was really young about my limited attention span. I’d be looking out the window. They moved me constantly across the room. The teacher would close the windows because this would be me all day long, sitting with my hands holding up my head, bored. Literally, I didn’t feel like I was doing it all the time, but when looking out the window, I’d see cloud formations, the

yellow grass and thinking about what I’m going to do when I get out of here. I was always looking and remembering. I was never on what I was doing. But when I found an interest, you couldn’t drag my attention from it.

Yeah. Of some things I remember, not all things. But, when things do, I do remember those things, like a smell will just transport me. I remember a few days when I was a kid that just the colors would be crystal clear. I just remember the colors. I guess I’ve had those sensibilities and can clearly remember many things, smells, and colors.

**I will ask you to respond individually to each of the characteristics of a gifted child and respond to each of the characteristics of the artwork of a gifted child. First is be precocious; was that you?**

Laughingly, she comments, “Of course. Well, of course! I am, absolutely. People who know me would say, Oh yeah.” (As her art instructor, even though she was shy, there was certain precociousness there. She really wanted specific, yet open-ended ideas and themes to happen, but indicated that what did happen was OK because she “found that it’s just a larger world inside my head.” She always thought that she could see it, visualize it, and then make it happen.) **When shown photographs of her high school work,** “Oh, when I look at it, I see a precocious kid absolutely out of control. I see a lot of technique and not a lot of compositional skill yet.”

**Gifted kids make art even before starting school and often as early as age 3. Was this you?**

So maybe that’s why as a kid, on an emotional level, I really



**Figure 4. Barb Kiwak, “Study,” Watercolor, 4” X 9”, 1982, 10–15-minute painting study from nature.**

was attracted to art because I didn’t have that confidence that I wanted. I remember at age 5 sitting under a tree with friends drawing doll outfits. I remember my friend Anne Marie got mad at me. “You draw too good [*sic*].” That’s what she said. And my sister said, “Stop drawing so good, you’re showing us both up.”

**Emergence through drawing:** “Giftedness shows itself through drawing and for the most part dominates the visual expression of the gifted child, lending itself easily for rendering and showing details” (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, pp. 135–136).

I had a good time with those. I really did. I . . . I . . . I enjoy doing detail. I enjoy doing detail. I enjoy creating that little environment. You know?

**Rapidity of development: Another characteristic of giftedness points to how quickly one picks up ideas and develops them.** As her teacher, even though Barb came in with skills and an eye for detail, I remember noting, “You pick things up so quickly.” She remembers,

You called my parents for permission to take a quick ride to the museum to see Dali's *Last Supper*. I was having a problem visualizing a montage overlay for a poster competition and the moment I saw the transparent Christ figure, I knew right away what to do. I recall saying, “I got it; let's go back.”

**Extended concentration: Visually gifted children stay with an artistic problem longer than others because they both derive creative pleasure from it and see more possibilities in it.**

Absolutely, that's one thing I can give myself is that I would stick to my art; it's like my baby. I can't remember the last time I actually walked away from a piece, threw it away or whatever. I stick with it with all my emotion. (As her instructor, the major memory is that, above all

else, this kid had “stick-to-it-iveness.”)

**Self-directedness: “Gifted children are highly motivated and have the drive to work on their own”** (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 136).

I think that's a big part of freelancing and being an artist today because, let's face it, in this day and age you really can't get into a company in art unless you're self-directed. Back in high school, I think I'd die if I had to do the same thing over and over every day. That would be so boring to me. I am disciplined like that because, I'm going to have jobs that I'm really bored with, but above it all I love what I do so I'd find a way to make it work. I *always* could find a new exciting way to make art.

She insists that still today her career path has been self-directed by a need to make a difference. Her sensibilities extend to having her voice heard in her work, but also that that voice does no harm.

That was like my first year out of college and I'm thinking advertising's the place to be because of all the money. And truly, advertising is where you want to be if you want to make a lot of money, but after doing a few years of advertising, there are only so many beautiful looking people with hamburgers or sitting at computers or the bank . . . the pearly white teeth. I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't do it. Advertising just . . . just leaves me cold. I'd much rather make less money, you know, and do the interesting issues: animal issues, the women's rights issues

the . . . I like to feel like I'm making a difference. You know? And, of course the Christmas cards are just fun. Um, but I just . . . I . . . I can't do it. I was up, a few years back, to do a tobacco ad, um . . . smoking . . . big money in it. I just could not ethically do it.

**Possible inconsistency with creative behavior:**

**Gifted children exhibit behavior that might possibly be inconsistent with behaviors associated with creativity, especially in the high school years. Young people's reluctance to make fools of themselves, to appear ridiculous or to lose face among their peers tends to instill attitudes of extreme caution in confronting new problems.** (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 136)

Things that factored in were my being an introvert, fear of being in a new situation, having an overall feeling of being a miserable teenager, not knowing where to fit in and hating the regiment of school. You've got to do it. There's just no other way around it. I'm sure I was not unique. I'm sure that there are still lots of kids that I think, especially, if you're coming from an art or creative sort of sensibility, already feel sort of odd. You don't really fit in with the in crowd nor do you want to fit in with the in crowd. I think there's a major confidence problem.

**Art as Escape?**

You know, it's . . . art is an escape. And art is a vehicle to

know who you are. You know, everybody's got his or her own vehicle. I mean there are so many people who are floundering out there. They just haven't found, you know, their vehicle, their media. My media is art. Your media is definitely teaching. Your media is people.

Barb spent double, triple time in the high school art room and said she spent most of her waking hours in her bedroom at home reading fantasy novels, visualizing the characters and environments, sculpting animals and the like. She insists that everyone must find his or her place. She seemed happy as she recalled how she saw art as an escape as well as a vehicle for discovering her purpose in life.

## Characteristics of Artwork From a Gifted Student

The results or products that emerge from a gifted student tend to demonstrate verisimilitude, visual fluency, complexity and elaboration, sensitivity to art media, random improvisation, and childhood fantasy. As with the characteristics of the gifted students, each of the qualities of the artwork from a gifted student was presented to the interviewee separately for her response.

**Verisimilitude?** After asking what that means and discovering that drawings look real and seem true to life, she responded:

That's always been me. All that abstract artwork usually bores me because they're just nothing for me to have a frame of reference. I don't know. I needed to see some sort of basis of realism. Even now, all my favorite artists

and illustrators are pretty much the realists. I love the impressionists. That's even more real than the older stuff in the Vatican and the Renaissance period. I mean, I sense the heat, the environment, and the smells of the impressionistic artwork.

**Visual fluency?** Of the artwork, one of the characteristics that appear to be probably most significant is similar to that of trained artists, but visually fluent children will have more ideas than they have time to depict. "Usually, if you give a G/T kid a still life to draw, they'll find things that other people won't find" (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 137).

For example, Barb was shown a graphite drawing from a high school series for a children's book illustration assignment (see Figure 5.) She discovered that the point of view of looking from the back of the refrigerator at the child's face looking in the refrigerator intrigues viewers because of the attention to detail and each new viewing reveals more information. When a renowned art educator viewed her original pencil drawings completed for a children's book series, he remarked that he just wanted to tell everybody in this space to be quiet. Let him just look at this artwork. It's not only that you're looking into the refrigerator, but being able to see the kind of texture and detail, not just on the pickles or the pepper, but the light as it's reflected on that glass and the transparency of it and the dots on the dress and the light underneath the shelf.

Barb noted, "That's what I still try to do in my work, show everything I see; you can never have too much detail."

**Complexity and elaboration:** "Complexity and elaboration; they

**want to add to it. They want to make it very complex, putting in a lot of things"** (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 137).

Right, I completely agree. What can I put in here? What can I show people that I've noticed? It's kind of like a game. I want people to know that I've seen this. Look at this! It's a game. You try to pack everything that you can into the composition. What can I notice? It's part of the fun of it. Elaboration can be seen in those pickles. Look at the glass and texture of the pickles. It's just the whole thing of looking from the back of the refrigerator.

**Sensitivity to art media.** Barb's desire to add extreme complexity to her compositions found her often drawing with both hands simultaneously as she elaborated on characters and settings (see Figure 6.) Given an assignment of showing oneself in a composition that illuminates a time period in which she would love to have lived, complete with characters and architectural structures, she said,

I was so inspired. For the first time in my life, I felt inspired and a light clicked on and I couldn't get enough. I couldn't show you enough of what I could do.

She became bound and determined to explore materials; she drew, painted, and sculpted her imagined storybook characters and settings. She expected to practice and practice and become a professional illustrator as a career choice. Even with her demonstrated abilities, she initially did not think she "had the goods for college."





Figure 5. Barb Kiwak, "Face in the Refrigerator," Graphite, 18" X 24", children's book illustration page (one of 20 drawings), 1984.

Where is this going to take me? And then . . . you know . . . later . . . couple years into it, you're like, "OK, now I'm going to college. I'm actually going to go to an art college. I'm going to actually make this real. I'm actually going to do something that's going to affect my life with this." I mean it was just so exciting. I could not . . . be completely . . . give my full attention to it.

**Random improvisation: "Gifted children often doodle"** (Hurwitz & Day, 1991, p. 138).

Yeah, then I'm gifted and talented. I was making bad grades, acting like I was doing my home-

work, when in fact I was sitting there doodling. My sketchbooks from then were like diaries and very private. When I look back at the scribbles or doodles, they transport what you were thinking at that time.

**Childhood fantasy: During their childhood, most gifted children experience fantasies and daydreams, along with a love of stories** (Hurwitz & Day, 1991).

I loved art, but it was something that I did at home shut up in my room with the stereo on and I'd sketch. It was nobody's business what I was sketching. I wasn't interested in anything other than just sketching what

I wanted to sketch. Mostly, for me, that consisted of reading a lot of fantasy novels at the time and so I'd sketch the characters. That's so typical of what I was at that time. I was so into all that fantasy type of art. I'm so lucky that I always loved reading. I couldn't spell. Still can't spell. But, I always loved to read and think about fantasy, unicorns, forest scenes, and Robin Hood. I remember doing clay sculptures of half men and half goat, Centaurs and all that mythology stuff. That Dungeons and Dragons stuff, at that time was very much an escape. It helps me see who I am in the world. Plus, it now provides me a rea-



Figure 6. Barb Kiwak, "My Fantasy Time Period," Ink, 24" X 18", 1984, 12th-grade elegant problem drawing composition.

sonably good living—being an illustrator.

I think that out of my entire education, it was definitely split into two periods. The early years with you, which gave me literally a foundation to stand on—and those were just priceless. They still are. That's what I needed as a kid; I needed emotional strokes; I needed confidence. I can rationalize it now because of life experiences. I think it was nice when people would say that I was talented. But, I saw myself

as doing my thing in a different way—not odd, just different.

### Implications (or Emerging Ideas)

While in high school, Barb was unaware of the characteristics assigned to gifted students in the visual arts. Her response upon hearing the list was, "Oh, yeah, that was definitely me as I look back. But, I never saw myself as gifted." As Barb continued to reflect upon high school and what she terms a "pivotal time in my life,"

several important points emerged for her that might be relevant to educators in general and art educators in particular. For example, as the interview progressed, Barb reiterated her excitement about building artistic behaviors centered on problem solving and personal voice that might build her confidence in the art-making process. It gave her strength to be confident in her abilities to also connect and relate to her peers.

Barb's attitudinal posture was determined by the extent to which she felt engaged in the assignments in



all of her classes. Her gripes and frustrations align with those identified by Woolfolk (1988), placing “hating to be bored” at the top of the list. Barb believed that art problems must make meaningful connections to everyone in the class. In response to an assignment that asked students to pick a time period in which they'd like to live filled with characters alongside a self-portrait in that environment, Barb recalls, “that was transporting to me. I think when you're starting off as a young teen artist, just be transported. I mean you just want to draw things that you want to draw. That assignment sparked my teenage interests.”

After listening attentively to this professional adult artist recall memories of art-making experiences from early years to adulthood, throughout her recall, a series of words began to resonate: encouragement, support, confidence building, coaching, conversation modeling, brutal honesty, and real-life experiences.

### Encouragement and Support

That's what I needed. As a kid, I needed emotional strokes; I needed confidence. I can rationalize it now because of life experiences. I think it was nice when people would say that I was talented. That's really well drawn or really nice. Can I have that? That would give me a lot of pleasure. But, as far as knowing what that meant to be gifted and talented, no, I don't think I knew really what that meant in the grand scheme of things while I was still getting straight “D's” and “C's” in everything else.

In reference to her parents, while acknowledging their concern for her financial future, she was never dis-

couraged from practicing creative artistic behaviors. She says that now,

Whenever dad comes over to the house, “Let's go up to your studio. What are you working on?” He's so interested. I'm so grateful, as well, that I came from two parents that really didn't say, “Well, it's not going to happen.” They did encourage me; because I think if they would have discouraged me at that time, I don't think I would have been strong enough. I think I probably would have gone in some other direction, and then all my life I would have felt this dull sort of emptiness.

In regards to her high school art class, Barb commented,

I was the kind of kid that needed a lot of encouragement. And then from there, I particularly needed stepping stones, and especially with your class, there were certain art situations that you would create that would feel so good. Like I'd win a competition, go on a field trip downtown, or you would show real artwork and I could just see clearer as to what I might do. So you created around this whole thing of art good feelings. Another thing was that I'd come too far and it'd been such a good time that I wasn't going to let people down. I was going to make this happen. Besides, this is what I wanted to happen *for me*.

### Confidence, Coaching, and Conversation

This feeling of being different meant she had the arts to express

herself. She wanted and yearned to be consistently challenged like her fellow students. She looked for art problems that caused her to ask questions of herself. She looked for feedback and direction on where to go for resource support information, both text and image. She commented on the inspiration she garnered from seeing her art instructor model passionate artistic behaviors while making art with the students. In her mind, gifted meant that you already had all of the answers and she knew that she knew a lot of art making, but she also expected to learn a lot more. She wanted to know that she was improving with practice along with her fellow classmates. Her ease with being coached was grounded in her desire to gain more and more confidence in her skills and her thinking.

You would sit down with students and you would talk and talk with us. That's what you did for me and other students. I felt the need to just get your attention and try to keep it and delight you with my creative abilities. “Oh, look what I did.” You would sense when I really felt pleased with something. You gave me compliments, critiqued really well by asking questions. And, I think also part of it was I felt I wasn't too good at much else and I had your attention and I wanted to keep it. I wanted to show you that I was serious. You just bring it on and I'll show you I can do it. I loved the challenges you gave us. I can do it Ms. Art Teacher.

I saw that you were an artist. I'd say to myself that she knows what she's doing. She's passionate about all this art stuff. That's what I want.



When asked how she knew that her art instructor knew what she was doing, she responded, "You just exude confidence. It was what I desperately wanted."

### Brutal Honesty

Teachers have the responsibility to encourage and support children who, because of their precociousness and interest, will go far beyond the goals of general education in some areas of human learning and performance (Hurwitz & Day, 1991). In the course of the conversation and critiquing artwork, the art instructor must help the student confront the issues relative to his or her artistic accomplishments. Barb appreciated this:

Being brutally honest, you never had a problem with that. I still do. You'd ask why I brought something to you as finished when I knew it was terrible. The few classes that I've taught that I've let some students get away with stuff early on, I don't think I did them any favors.

Once or twice Barb tried to slide by not doing her best, but when I called her on it, she knew what had to be done. Gradually, she learned that as an artist she must always give her best.

Absolutely, now I'll do it as many times as it takes. I have no problem at all. An important point here is, at that time, like I said earlier, I had your attention. I wanted to keep it. I didn't want it to fade. I wanted you to give me a chance. OK, I'll fix it. I can do it. A technical oversight means a lot in illustration and how someone understands how

you conceptualize ideas. Don't give up.

### Real-Life Art Experiences

It worked because we simulated a real company. There were arguments and choices. We had the same assignment, but we had interpreted it differently. And you kept that in mind. You were so patient. You were so patient with all of us.

Students could select two or more competitions to compose artwork at the national and local level. Barb submitted work for multiple competitions and received several scholarships and art prizes. We talked about the large amount of money made during her senior year entering various competitions. "I was bursting with confidence by the end of that year," she recalls.

I remember not being able to help her understand adding technical light to her very representational drawing, so I invited into the classroom my mentor who now was a well-recognized portrait painter and a master of painting light to help Barb understand how to show that light on the very edge of objects. To that individualized instruction, Barb responded,

Just that simple technique, it is so pivotal to just about everything that you draw and paint. Just that little light, that's what gives objects volume. And, I still remember George sitting down and talking to me about that. That's one of the big tricks that really make something look really voluminous. He knew that it was important to me to give me confidence in what I was doing. I felt very special.

Like my mentor George, I continue to call what the students saw as "tricks" strategies for giving them a "problem-solving hat rack." Sometimes students needed a more practical way of thinking about how to reach creative solutions, and using "think-about," and "consider this" as strategies for brainstorming ideas.

You gave me a gift and from there I've been able to walk into my adult life, but I've never forgotten. In my life, there's like a handful of people I think that have been really pivotal in just helping me to find who I am as a human being and that's all here. I really appreciate being treated like all the other students. I felt like I belonged to the art room community. You pushed them; you pushed me.

### Conclusion

Certain educational practices have the gifted student isolated from the class and often have pull-out sections for special projects. Kohn (1996) contended,

It would be hard to think of a more effective way to snuff out a sense of community than grouping students by putative ability. The most extreme versions of this practice—segregation of students with special needs or those lucky enough to be deemed "gifted"—are likely to have the most extreme effects. (p. 106)

Early on and throughout the interview process for this case study, Barb was insistent that in all of her sense of being different, she was made to feel more welcomed over time because she

As an artist/teacher, I learned from Barb the importance of providing opportunities to gain a sense of belonging to the classroom community.



was challenged to move to her next level as her peers were challenged to do likewise. She enjoyed the sense of community as students shared brainstorming ideas and engaged in mini think-about sessions.

As an artist/teacher, I learned from Barb the importance of providing opportunities to gain a sense of belonging to the classroom community. This is an important part of any mentor relationship. Barb reiterated the value of the art-making experience and interacting with classmates, brainstorming together, learning to ask critical questions that caused self-reflection, and challenging students to reach for their particular benchmark based on discovering their own baseline skills. Within the context of the classroom, a gifted student can be challenged to the next level of development with open-ended elegant problems that allow individual voice and personal meaning (Kay, 2003). After listening to Barb's response about not being gifted, just different, and wanting, no, needing to be treated like her other classmates, the argument here would be against separating a gifted student from the masses with other assignments. The confidence gained while achieving a sense of belonging as one discovers his or her own narrative voice emerging from creative visual expression shared with other

artists/storytellers of diverse abilities and backgrounds, there emerges a need to foster a sense of community that includes the gifted.

In many ways, this article has been a reflection on the beliefs and practices that govern how art instruction is delivered to students who have been identified as gifted and talented, as well as the thoughtful teaching strategies that would encourage creative growth and development in the many students that sit in art classrooms. Despite the fact that this former student was, as an adolescent, identified as "extremely gifted" by virtually everyone in her school environment and the community, when she reflectively revisited the high school art experience to which she brought multiple skills, she still *did not see* herself as gifted. In concluding the interview, I asked her, "So, are you GT and do you fit these characteristics?"

Oh yeah, now, I'd say I fit them. But still, I see myself as different; I still learn new stuff all the time and I still have new stuff to know. Gifted people have it all already. I was very needy. I didn't want to do my homework in other classes; I wanted to know why I had to do it and what it had to do with anything for me. I do think I asked a lot of my teachers. I wanted to know why. But, you always came back to thinking. Why do you believe this? Why am I making this choice and not that for everything we did? It challenged you to be able to say what you wanted to do and why it meant something to you as you worked really hard towards the goals set.

What also emerged from this interview were several key thoughts that

could be translated into strategies for art instructors to model artistic behaviors and care enough to provide choices, offer counseling, use elegant problems to challenge thinking (Kay, 1998), chart progress, encourage reflective and developmental critiques, and experience real-world competitions to holistically build confidence and expectations for the gifted student to move beyond his or her current cognitive and skill level. The data gathered from this retrospective case study suggest the need for further study, and I welcome other researchers to conduct their own case studies with the possibility of combining the results for further research. **GCT**

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