

# The Picasso in Your Classroom

## How to Meet the Needs of Talented Artists in Elementary School

by Hope E. Wilson

Cassidy, a talented artist in my third-grade classroom, struggled with classroom assignments. It's not that she wasn't capable of high-level work, but tasks such as spelling tests, arithmetic practice, and test preparation worksheets were making for a very unhappy child. Cassidy was consistently eager to participate in learning activities that had a visual arts component and would demonstrate focus and attention to detail, but her reading and math assignments were not completed with nearly the same care and proficiency. Her hasty work often included many incorrect answers and illegible writing, that is, if she would even complete the assignment at all.

Most classroom indicators lead you to believe that Cassidy was a struggling learner; however, I had the good fortune of seeing a very different side of Cassidy through her artwork. Once, as an assignment to draw her family, she drew a flame to represent her dad's warmth, a wave for her mother's cool temperament, and a flower to represent her continued growth. This level of abstract thinking was certainly an indicator of her talent and abilities, but how could I tap into those abilities in the regular classroom?

### Importance of Arts Instruction

As they engage students in their strength areas, teachers can develop talent in many areas. Art is an important part of life for students like Cassidy, and thus, should be an integral part of their curriculum. Students who are talented in the visual arts benefit from curricular programming that takes into account their unique gifts. Early and advanced opportunities in the arts play a vital role in the later development of professional artists. It has been found that talented students who participate in programming for the visual arts report long-term affective and career gains (Confessore, 1991). These programs should be learner-centered (Burton, 2000) and emphasize the production of artwork (Burton, 1994).

More specifically, classroom teachers who are aware of the characteristics of visual arts talent are more able to recognize students like Cassidy and create a supportive learning environment that will meet their needs in the classroom. Simple curricular modifications and instructional strategies geared toward the visual arts will assist teach-

ers in helping talented student artists be more successful. This article will attempt to aid classroom teachers in these areas. First, the characteristics of artistic talent and how to identify each characteristic in students will be discussed. Then programming and curricular options will be offered for each domain of artistic talent.

## Characteristics of Artistic Talent

For ease of understanding and applicability to the classroom, based on a synthesis of the research on art education (Clark, 1993; Porath, 1997; Winner, 2000), artistic talent can be divided into three domains: technical skill, visual thinking, and creativity (see Table 1). Although these domains are not explicitly stated in any one theorist's work, they provide a structure for organizing the various characteristics identified in the research and are supported in my experience with working with artistic children. In addition, these areas of talent may help teachers conceptualize the different ways that visual arts talent may manifest in children. Students who are artistically talented may exhibit each domain to a greater and lesser degree. Although advanced achievement in all three domains may be necessary for high levels of career attainment as an adult, each domain may be identified separately for students (Winner, 2000). Curricular decisions should be made to address each area of talent.

### Technical Skill

The domain of technical skill concerns the ability of a student to manipulate materials to convey an intended purpose. This may include the use of any or all types of media

Domain	Characteristics	Curricular Options
Technical Skill <i>The ability of students to manipulate materials to convey an intended purpose</i>	In the student's artwork: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>advanced drawing skills (use of perspective, foreshortening, etc)</li> <li>elaboration and inclusion of many details</li> <li>attachment of complex meaning to drawings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Product choices (puppets, triaramas, and folded books)</li> <li>Providing opportunities to express knowledge visually</li> <li>Graphic organizers</li> <li>Drawing pictures to solve problems</li> <li>Allowing more time for students to finish artistic projects</li> </ul>
Visual Thinking <i>The ability of people to understand and interpret visual information</i>	The student expresses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>conceptually deep understandings of visual images/artwork</li> <li>understanding of visual organization of images (elements of the design)</li> <li>interpretation of meaning of visual print (advertisements, Web pages, and photography)</li> <li>mathematical and conceptual understanding of ideas when presented as graphs or charts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Writing prompts about artwork or images</li> <li>Discussions about visual portrayals of meaning</li> <li>Visual representations of important topics</li> <li>Opportunities to learn through graphic and organizational charts</li> </ul>
Creativity <i>The ability of students to think flexibly and generate novel ideas</i>	The student's ideas are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>different or unusual</li> <li>prolific</li> <li>adaptations of old ideas in new ways</li> </ul> The student may: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>have a desire to be different</li> <li>enjoy generating new ideas</li> <li>combine ideas in new ways</li> <li>be able to generate many ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Foster creativity by withholding judgment and encouraging student differences</li> <li>Brainstorming (Osborn, 1963)</li> <li>Attribute Listing (Crawford, 1954)</li> <li>SCAMPER (Eberle, 1997)</li> </ul>

(i.e., drawing, painting, sculpture, and printmaking). This is a noticeable indicator of artistic talent and can be expressed through both the ability to create realistic interpretations as well as represent abstract concepts.

*What the Research Says.* Technical skill is, of course, linked to developmental stages (Lowenfeld, 1963). Young artists are limited by their fine-motor skills and conceptual abilities. Although some gifted young artists may demonstrate drawing abilities that are conceptually advanced, such as the use of perspective, it is more typical for gifted artists to show advanced levels of elaboration or flexi-

bility in their products (Porath, 1993, 1997). For example, a talented artist in kindergarten may not be overlapping objects to show depth (a skill that typically develops later in elementary school), but may draw people with an extraordinary amount of detail (e.g., buttons on the clothes, shoelaces, and eyelashes). Thus, children gifted in the visual arts tend to do more with the conceptual framework that they have, rather than necessarily having a more advanced framework (Porath, 1993). Research supports the importance of the development of technical skill in the advancement of artistic talent (Rostan, Pariser, & Gruber, 2002). In

**Table 2**  
**Product Choices for the Visual Arts**

Science	Social Studies	Mathematics	Language Arts
Tri-Fold Board	Timeline	Chart	Triarama
Poster	Magazine	Tessellation	Sculpture
Invention	Venn Diagram	Geometrical Grid	Story Map
Cross-Section	Mind Map	Graph	"Wanted" Poster
PowerPoint	Mobile	Logic Puzzle	Book Cover
Presentation	Family Tree	Flip Chart	Painting of Setting
Diagram	Cartoon	Origami	Flow Chart
Picture Dictionary of Terms	Mural	Informational Table	Costume
Model	Video	Game	Storyboard
Display	Brochure		Puppets
Terrarium	Photograph		Puppet Show
Computer Program	Classified Ad		Illustrated Book
Museum Exhibit	Blueprint		Picture Journal
	Relief Map		Pop-Up Book
	Flip Book		Character "Sketch"
	Coat of Arms		Visual Poem
			Folded Book
			Coloring Book
			Play With Set Designs
			Wordless Book
			TV Show

addition, technical skill in drawing is an important predictor of later interest in artistic endeavors (Wakefield, 1992). Thus, the development of technical skill is vital to the later production of art. This technical skill is not limited to the production of artwork, but the ability to attach meaning to their representations (Rosenblatt & Winner, 1988; Schoenfielder, 1998). Although the role of the classroom teacher may not be to instruct students in the development of technical skill, they can encourage students to pursue opportunities for advancement.

*What a Teacher Might Notice.* These characteristics may manifest themselves in a variety of ways within a typical classroom. Students with high levels of technical skill tend to be attracted to opportunities to create, draw, or represent their ideas visually.

These students may be able to best express their understandings of classroom concepts through visual media, such as drawing, painting, or sculpture. Some students who have high technical skill in visual arts will be able to realistically represent objects, scenes, or figures. Other students will be able to add great levels of detail to their drawings, and may not be able to finish their projects in the same amount of time allotted to the rest of the class. Finally, these students also may represent more complex understandings through visual representations that are symbolic or abstract. Cassidy was doing this when she drew a flame to represent her father.

*What a Teacher Might Do.* There are many ways for teachers to meet the needs of students who are gifted with technical skill in the visual arts. By offering opportunities for students

to express their learning through art, teachers will capitalize on their students' talents. Whenever possible, teachers can give students product choice options that include the production of visual representations. Specific product modifications in language arts might include:

- Allow students to create a series of drawings similar to "story boards" used in film production, rather than always having students summarize a story in words.
- Have students design a cover for a story with appropriate details to demonstrate understanding of the main idea or climax of a story.
- Incorporate the creation and use of puppets to recreate pivotal scenes in a novel.
- Allow students to create a triarama (see Appendix A) from a single sheet of paper or a diorama to demonstrate understanding of setting.
- Encourage students to document their learning about a variety of content areas through the use of folded books (see Appendix A).
- Invite students to create a cartoon to express their knowledge of the subject area, encouraging them to give a concise expression of a complex idea (Holt, 1993).

Each of these product modifications is explained in detail in Appendix A. Also see Table 2 for more examples of product choices that span the content areas. It may be difficult to introduce many product choices at one time, so teachers can gradually increase the number of choices and give students expectations and examples of superior work to ensure quality.

### Visual Thinking

Along with technical skill, visual thinking is another domain of artis-

tic talent. Visual thinking refers to the ability of people to understand and interpret visual information (Winner, 1986, 2007). This includes aesthetic awareness and the ability to see and critique artistic elements of a work of art, including compositional organization and components such as color, line, and texture. Visual thinking also includes the ability to find both literal and abstract meaning in a work of art or visual information. Students with high levels of visual thinking also can make judgments about the production of the piece (how it was made) and the value of a piece (how much other people will appreciate it). Visual thinking is linked to greater artistic talent (Fredette, 1993).

*What the Research Says.* Chetelat (1981), Lowenfeld (1947), and Haroutounian (1995) have included visual thinking, or a similar construct, in their identification measures and definitions of artistically talented students. In addition, artists perform better at visual perception tasks (Ryder, Pring, & Hermelin, 2002) and report spending more time on visual perception activities than non-artists (Schlewitt-Haynes, Earthman, & Burns, 2002). As indicated by the breadth of the definition of visual thinking, it should not be conceived as a single skill, but as a collection of skills that have different developmental trajectories (Winner, 1986).

*What a Teacher Might Notice.* In the classroom, students with high levels of visual thinking will be able to interpret visual information more readily than their classmates. For example, when observing a work of art, students may find the deeper meaning of loneliness while pondering the concrete representation of a man. In addition, they might be more attracted to the illustrations of a story or the cover artwork. They may be able

to converse at an advanced level about the visual organization of not only drawings and paintings, but advertisements, films, or text documents. Students with talent in this domain also have the ability to easily interpret the meaning of charts and graphic organizers. This representation of knowledge may make the most sense to them. Cassidy, for example, struggled with memorizing her multiplication facts, but easily demonstrated her alternative capacity for mathematical thinking when it came to charting and graphing the demographic information of the class.

*What a Teacher Might Do.* Students with high levels of visual thinking skills benefit from opportunities to discuss and verbalize their visual understandings. In language arts, an easy way to incorporate these skills is by using fine art prints as prompts for creative writing or descriptive writing tasks. For example, a teacher could show John Singer Sargent's *Carnation Lily, Lily, Rose* (1885–1886) to the class and ask them to write a detailed description of what they see, a story about what the girls might do next, or an evaluation of the aesthetic details of the piece. See Appendix B for a list of writing prompts aligned with Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives—Revised (Krathwohl, 2002) that can be used with any work of art. These revised educational objectives are a revision of Bloom's (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) earlier taxonomy.

Another way to engage learners with visual thinking skills is to encourage students first to learn abstract concepts through visual means. For example, teachers may introduce making inferences through works of art and then transfer the skill to reading comprehension. The artwork of Norman Rockwell is especially appro-

priate for this type of teaching. His work is narrative and includes many details that help tell the story. By depicting scenes of everyday American life, Rockwell typically conveys a message or moral to his audience. Other artists that may be equally appropriate for this task include Diego Rivera, Henri Rousseau, Horace Pippin, and Grandma Moses. Through the use of questioning, teachers can guide and lead students through the process of drawing conclusions and finding support for their conclusions based on their observations of the artwork. Once this groundwork on making inferences is laid, this could then be translated to making inferences from written work.

For example, a sample lesson using Norman Rockwell's *The Runaway* (1958) depicting a boy and a police officer sitting at a bar in a diner, might include the following dialog:

*Teacher:* What do you see in this painting?

*Student:* I see a boy and a police officer.

*Teacher:* Great, where do you think they are?

*Student:* Maybe a restaurant?

*Teacher:* What in the picture gives you a clue that it might be a restaurant?

*Student:* Well, there is a counter, and some stools.

*Student:* I also see a coffee pot and some food in a refrigerator.

*Student:* And I see the words "Special Today"—that could be list of the special food for that day.

*Teacher:* Excellent, I like how everyone is looking at the picture to figure out what is going on. What other details might give us some clues about why the boy and police officer are at the restaurant?

*Student:* I see something red in the bottom corner.

*Teacher:* What do you think it is?

*Student:* It looks like a red bag on a stick.

*Teacher:* Why might it be under the boy's stool?

*Student:* Because he was carrying it?

*Teacher:* And why might he have been carrying it?

*Student:* It might have had important things inside.

*Teacher:* Why would he have had important things inside of the sack?

*Student:* Maybe he wanted to take those things with him.

*Teacher:* And why would he need to take them with him?

*Student:* Because he was leaving and wanted to take them when he left.

*Teacher:* What about the other people in the picture?

*Student:* Maybe the police officer is asking him about the bag, too.

This conversation could continue, with the teacher continuing to probe the students about the details that they see in the picture and what it might tell them about the story that goes with the picture. The teacher may need to guide students to notice details that may help them to gather information about the story.

### Creativity

The final domain of artistic talent is creativity. Creativity can be exhibited within the domains of visual thinking or technical skill, or as a characteristic independent of artistic talent. The creativity domain refers to the ability of students to think flexibly and generate ideas that are novel to them. Creativity is necessary for advanced achievement in artistic domains, as eminent artists are defined by their

ability to create new and different forms of expression. However, this domain often manifests itself in very young children as well (Saracho, 2002).

*What the research says.* Chetelat (1981), Haroutounian (1995), and Lowenfeld (1947) also included creativity in their definitions of artistic talent. In particular, Chetelat included fluency, or the ability to generate large numbers of ideas, and imagination. There are correlations between creativity measures (Wakefield, 1992) and divergent thinking measures (Ryder et al., 2002) and artistic orientation and career aspirations. Porath also noted that students who were gifted in the visual arts were able to use greater inventiveness in their drawings (1993) and greater flexibility in how they organized the elements of their artwork (1997).

*What a Teacher Might Notice.* Students with high levels of artistic creativity will exhibit products that are qualitatively different from their peers. For example, among the line of pictures of families, pets, houses, and trees on the wall, Cassidy's depiction of a flame, a wave, and a flower stands out. This creativity may be exhibited in many aspects of the students' lives, such as the clothes that they wear or their writing, or it may be limited to their artistic or visual production.

*What a Teacher Might Do.* Encouraging students with talent in the creative domain involves careful cultivation of the classroom environment. Teachers can do this by praising student work that involves new ideas. In addition, teachers can give open-ended assignments that allow students the opportunity to express themselves in a variety of ways. Finally, teachers can give plenty of time for students to generate ideas and encourage them to develop many ideas and then choose

their favorite. Classroom strategies such as SCAMPER (Eberle, 1997), brainstorming (Osborn, 1963), and attribute listing (Crawford, 1954) may be helpful to encourage creativity. SCAMPER, which stands for substitute, combine, adapt, modify, put to other uses, eliminate, reverse and rearrange, can be used with students to generate ideas on how to change a given object or idea (Eberle, 1997). Brainstorming is another strategy that teachers can use with students to generate a large amount of ideas, while deferring judgment about those ideas (Osborn, 1963). Finally, attribute listing uses a grid for students to combine divergent ideas (Crawford, 1954). See Appendix C for examples and further explanation of these creativity strategies.

### Final Words

The importance of identifying, understanding, and meeting the needs of artistically talented students cannot be overstated. Through the concentration of the development of talent, these students can shine, not only in artistic, but also in academic endeavors. By teaching students about art through our integration with other areas, we can develop their patterns of aesthetic understanding (Gardner, Winner, & Kircher, 1975). Although children, especially young children, may be able to produce visually pleasing works of art, they must be taught how to talk about their work and the cognitive strategies that are involved in constructing meaning (Rosenblatt & Winner, 1988). In addition, support from teachers and parents in creative expression is important to the development of young artists (Rostan, 2003).

All of these goals can be met through the openness of the class-

room teacher to creative expression (Fredette, 1993) and the opportunity for artistically talented students to participate in programs that are differentiated for their unique needs (Clark & Zimmerman, 1998). Through the modification of product choices for demonstration of understanding, encouragement of the verbal or written expression of visual thinking, and appreciation for and solicitation of creative ideas, teachers and parents can develop the talent of young gifted artists.

Cassidy benefited from a differentiated curriculum that was sensitive to her needs. Although it was still necessary that she develop the skills needed for the state-mandated tests, she also was able to demonstrate her knowledge of the content through independent projects. For example, after reading *Charlotte's Web* independently, Cassidy created a diorama of Wilbur's pen that included not only the farm animals, but also footprints from Fern's shoe, Templeton's food scraps, and the vestiges of Charlotte's previous attempts at spelling. By the end of the year, power struggles over homework had nearly stopped, and Cassidy was, once again, a happy, enjoyable, and productive student. **GCT**

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