

Establishing Fine Arts Festivals as Equitable Learning Opportunities for High Ability Visual Artists

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how leaders in a university-based educational fine arts collaborative worked to create an equitable learning opportunity for secondary-aged high ability visual artists from backgrounds that are typically underrepresented in gifted education. It discusses how issues of inequity and representation in gifted education can be partially addressed by incorporating visual arts-based elements to existing music festivals.

KEYWORDS: high ability visual artists, gifted, talented, ability grouping, equity

“It was nice to see that I’m not the only one my age who likes art this much. Who cares this much. There are other people out there like me.” This was how one high-school aged high ability visual artist (HAVA) expressed their feelings about taking part in an all-day visual arts festival geared toward meeting the needs of HAVA learners. Fisher (2019) describes HAVAs as “students who exhibit behaviors or produce artworks that display a visual artistic aptitude considered well above average for their peer group” (p. 28). While this population of students has often been referred to as “gifted and talented”, Fisher (2019) prefers to utilize the more descriptive phrase “high ability,” noting common negative connotations associated with the terms “gifted” or “talented.” Within this article, the authors will describe how a long-held music festival for students from low-income school districts throughout the St. Louis region expanded in order to incorporate the visual arts and partially meet the needs of underrepresented HAVA learners. It is their goal to describe how others may adopt this model as a means of serving HAVAs from marginalized groups.

The Des Lee Fine Arts in Education Collaborative and Festival

The Des Lee Fine Arts in Education Collaborative is funded through an endowment from the E. Desmond Lee family and the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The Collaborative is dedicated to enhancing the quality, influence, attitudes, and accessibility of fine arts by

connecting educators, artists, and performers for St. Louis students. The Des Lee Fine Arts Festival has been an annual activity of the Collaborative for nearly twenty years, focusing primarily on high ability musicians. While this type of festival is exceptionally common in music education, under the leadership of Dr. Michael V. Smith (second author of this article), the visual arts have recently been invited to join, making it a true Fine Arts festival. Before committing to the invitation, Dr. Jennifer Fisher (first author of this article) began by searching for existing examples of fine arts festivals that included both music and the visual arts. The search yielded no results. Without a foundation from which to build, the authors decided to model the visual arts portion of the festival off of the format set forth by musicians.

Within the current iteration of the festival, students are selected from Collaborative school districts, again focusing on providing fine arts experiences for underserved school district populations. High school students participate in a day of clinics, specifically in a Festival choir, band, orchestra, or most recently, a visual art studio or theater troupe. The day concludes with a culminating concert performance and art gallery opening.

Benefits of Ability Grouping for High-Ability Learners

The Des Lee Fine Arts Collaborative Music Festival has long served as an extracurricular form of ability grouping for high ability musicians throughout the St. Louis region. Numerous studies have shown the positive effects ability grouping yields for high ability students (Clark and Zimmerman, 1984; Worcester, 1976; Steenbergen-Hu, Makel, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016) These experiences are particularly important for high ability learners hailing from backgrounds that are traditionally underrepresented in gifted education populations. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) (2019) states that “gaps in support of and services for our most advanced students are even more pronounced for children from minority, ELL, and low-income backgrounds.” A major goal of the Des Lee Fine Arts in Education Collaborative is to reduce those gaps.

Clark and Zimmerman (1984) state, “Students in the ability groups are more likely to explore and exchange ideas with greater group acceptance and can pursue advanced study in selected areas. Ability grouping also supports more opportunities for independent study, through special courses and non-school activities” (p. 158). While critics suggest that ability grouping contributes to achievement gaps and disadvantages lower achieving students (Belfi, Goos, De Fraine, & Van Damme, 2012), since 2017, the Des Lee Collaborative Fine Arts Festival has actively sought to provide students from underrepresented backgrounds (within gifted education) the

opportunity to converge at our university and work with other high ability students from similar backgrounds. It is the authors' desire to share this model with other arts leaders who may be seeking to provide challenging enrichment opportunities to students from NAGC's identified minority, ELL, and low-income backgrounds.

Positionality and Opportunity

Both authors have acknowledged that they approached this festival in positions of both dominance and privilege. They are both White college professors with doctoral degrees who have worked extensively with socioeconomically disadvantaged students in K-12 environments. While formal demographic data about festival participants was purposefully not collected, the authors informally observed that all teachers who participated in the festival appeared to be phenotypically White, presented as female or feminine, and were likely college-educated given their teaching positions; this corresponds with data showing that in the 2017-2018 school year, 76% of K-12 teachers were female, and 79% were White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Alternatively, informally collected data from the authors estimates that approximately half of the Festival participants phenotypically appeared to be students of color, gender representation seemed to be evenly split between male and female, and all students attended schools who served primarily students from low-income socioeconomic brackets. The students represented schools from urban, suburban, and rural communities.

The positionality of all participants is important in light of research that outlines how autonomous funding structures and an emphasis on "academic" rather than artistic giftedness lead to inequality of opportunity for underrepresented HAVAs. Brian Wright and Donna Ford (2017), both Black scholars of gifted education, state,

Gifted education is not federally mandated. This autonomy allows schools to ignore...racial disparities in gifted education...all children, but especially those from low-income and non-White backgrounds, [deserve to] have access to the rigorous academic environments they need and deserve... These children may exhibit special talents in academics or the arts. Thus, limiting the recognition and the identification of giftedness to the three Rs [reading, writing, arithmetic] can miss untapped potential (Wright & Ford, 2017, p. 112).

Acuff (2020), citing herself (2018) and others (Lopez, Pereira, & Rao, 2017; Sions, 2019), states, "[students of color need] to see themselves in the curriculum that art teachers develop and the resources that they use in the classroom." This idea influenced Dr. Fisher's eventual decision to lead brainstorming on the theme "Declaration" beginning

the festival day by displaying and discussing a black and white photograph of the 1965 Selma march (details about this process are discussed in further detail in the next section). Further, Acuff (2020) goes on to say,

Teachers' emphasis on certain media and artmaking processes in the classroom communicates messages to students about their significance in the art world writ large. For example, textiles and fiber arts such as weaving and quilting...have a marginalized position in the U.S...“Crafts,” which are grounded in community and shared kinship (Katter, 1995), are most often associated with the artmaking practices of indigenous communities of color. (Acuff, 2020, p. 19).

By choosing to emphasize fiber arts, Dr. Fisher made the intentional choice to utilize art making media that has been marginalized by the mainstream art world (discussed further in the next section).

Creating the Experience

Observing the model followed by the music educators, Dr. Fisher decided to create a flexible, yet rigorous, agenda for her incoming HAVA students. Throughout the process, the authors chose to utilize Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory framework due to its flexible nature, as well as the paucity of existing research surrounding this type of visual arts festival. Methods and data collection were purposefully informal, due to the Authors' fear that lengthy IRB forms, school and guardian approval forms, and the possible perceptions of HAVA students, their guardians, and their teachers that it was “too much work” to apply for consideration in the festival would prevent students from coming. In an educational environment that already disadvantages many of the student populations present at the festival, the authors did not wish to implement another barrier. The process began by contacting the high school art teachers from each of the member schools in the Des Lee Fine Arts Collaborative.

Nominations and Student Selection

The secondary art educators were contacted via email and encouraged to nominate students from their programs according to the criteria outlined in Table 1. (Table 1) (M. Smith, personal communication, December 14, 2018).

Teachers who wished to nominate students were directed to a website where they could submit student names according to their perceptions of student need and ability. Once all student nominations were submitted, Dr. Fisher compiled lists of which students would be accepted for participation. Facility restraints meant that approximately

30 students could be served, and students were chosen based on a combination of school size and the number of students nominated. Fisher (2019) describes HAVAs as “students who exhibit behaviors or produce artworks that display a visual artistic aptitude considered well above average for their peer group” (p. 28). Further, Clark and Zimmerman (2004) assert that HAVAs often exhibit task commitment and high levels of creativity with regard to the visual arts. There is no universally agreed upon definition of giftedness, and thus, HAVAs (Fisher, 2016), making it more difficult to advocate on behalf of the existence and needs of these students. While some states require gifted students be served by Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), few require IEPs on the basis of artistic giftedness or talent. A complete lack of federally-mandated consistency, alongside ever-evolving state educational laws, makes developing widespread educational recommendations for HAVA students extraordinarily challenging. In the authors’ state of Missouri, gifted students, and thus HAVA students, are not served by IEP procedures (unless they qualify for an IEP in other learning areas).

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Foundations of Creation

On the day of the festival, the high school students arrived at the Blanche M. Touhill Performing Arts Center at the University of Missouri-St. Louis at 8:45 A.M. alongside their musician peers. Dr. Fisher had already organized supplies, set up workspaces, and created nametags for each student. As expected, the high school students immediately sat down next to their peers from the same high school they attended, clustering in small groups and talking quietly. Their teachers had been notified via a previously sent email from Dr. Fisher that the students would be separated from their schoolmates:

...in order to help facilitate a community of young artists, I ask that you encourage your students to engage with students from other schools. I will be assigning them mixed-school work tables so that they can get to know students from outside their comfort zones--after all, intentional collaboration is an essential part of Des Lee’s vision! (J. Fisher, personal communication, February 3, 2019).

When Dr. Fisher numbered students off according to tables, many seemed reluctant to separate from their peers, some even insisting upon sitting near a friend from their home school at the adjoining table. In order to facilitate collaboration, Dr. Fisher asked each student to introduce themselves, share what high school they attended, and outline their favorite art media to work with. Several quiet conversations began to take place, with mostly muted conversations unfolding among table groups.

Each year, in an attempt to cohesively connect themes throughout the festival, a visual theme has been selected from the name of a song performed by one of the festival's various music ensembles (orchestra, choir, band). Dr. Fisher introduced the theme for the 2019 festival—"Declaration." Among the many song title choices of the musical groups, titles including numbers and words like sonata, hymn, and prelude did not seem to elicit the type of engaging phrases that would, in and of themselves, inspire students to create. Alternatively, the theme "Declaration" was agreed upon by the authors as a strong foundation from which to begin brainstorming.

Students were also shown a poster-sized black and white photograph of the 1965 Selma march and asked to reflect upon the image in light of the theme "Declaration." Dr. Fisher was surprised to learn that, in a room of students representing a variety of different races and ethnicities, only one of the students seemed to know about the historic march. This reinforced Acuff's (2020) assertion that students "need to see themselves in the curriculum." After Dr. Fisher described what was happening in the artwork, the photograph spurred conversations among the students about the different means by which artists can make a declaration. While students began preliminary sketches of their artworks, students heard a recorded version of the Declaration song they would be hearing performed live later that evening. Next, Dr. Fisher introduced the students to the fiber materials they would have access to in order to create their artwork. Fibers materials were chosen for a variety of reasons. First, they provided a relatively clean medium with which to work--a requirement of the Touhill Performing Arts Center management in order to utilize their workspace for art creation. Further, an informal email discussion with the art teachers of the participating students revealed that many of them felt their students had been underexposed to fibers processes in their home classrooms. Thus, Dr. Fisher believed the medium might "level the preparedness playing field" from which students were entering the festival. The feedback from participating teachers supports Acuff's (2020) assertion that U.S. art culture tends to de-emphasize "crafts" (Katter, 1995) as a marginalized or "othered" art form.

As the brainstorming commenced, many students began to feverishly

sketch ideas, jot down concepts, and even write poetry outlining what type of work they wanted to create. Some seemed nervous to work with fibers, asking if they could draw or paint instead; this is not uncommon. Hurwitz (1983) points out that HAVAs have often invested a significant amount of time into developing their skills in particular areas, and sometimes, they are reluctant to branch out into creative risk taking. After 20 minutes of brainstorming, Dr. Fisher asked students to take turns at their table describing their ideas with their peers and new table-mates. Each student had a chance to take a turn, and their peers generally listened attentively while projects were being described. After quick demonstrations of how to responsibly use the needles and low-temperature glue guns present, students were given a timeline of two hours to work before lunch, with the understanding that they would have only four hours after lunch to finish their artwork. Dr. Fisher encouraged students to utilize their new table mates as sources of inspiration and inquiry, ensured they knew where the restrooms were located, and turned on the day's "theme song" at low volume--it was time for their creations to take shape!



Figure 1. HAVA student working on project



Figure 2. HAVA student working on project.

Creation and Art Making

The variety of student styles was immediately evident. Some chose to draw on the fabric with markers or paint, others chose to sew, and one student even began tearing apart her sketchbook to construct a three-dimensional piece involving fibers. Some students worked on the floor beside their tables, others stood, and others sat rigidly upright, sewing needles poised just inches from their noses. (Figures 1 & 2) As the day progressed, students began to slowly warm up to their HAVA peers from other high schools, sharing stories about procedures in their own art classes, interesting pieces they had made throughout the year, and their plans after high school graduation. One student, then a senior, shared that he planned to attend a university across the state to major in art, another stated that she hoped to major in biology and minor in art, while others were still undecided regarding their post-secondary plans.

There was a low hum of conversation while all students focused hyper-attentively on their work. Winner and Martino (2003) describe this phenomenon in gifted students as the “rage to master”; “that is, they are intensely motivated to make sense of their domain [visual art] and show an obsessive interest and ability to focus sharply in their area of high ability” (p. 335). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) describes

this state as flow, or, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (p. 4). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) goes on to outline that flow is only possible when high levels of ability are matched evenly with high levels of challenge--an experience that Drs. Fisher and Smith endeavored to create for the purposes of the festival.



Figure 3: HAVA student's finished project.



Figure 4: *HAVA student's finished project.*

Gallery Presentation

After eating lunch amid six full hours of working on their projects, students began to clean up their workspace and transform it into an art gallery. (Figures 3 & 4) The gallery was assembled to be viewed by the family and friends of those who would also be attending the festival's music concerts that evening. Tags were placed by student artwork outlining their names, schools, grade levels, and the titles of their pieces. Students dressed in their personal interpretations of semi-formal attire and stood near their pieces to talk about their artwork with curious patrons. While some seemed reluctant to discuss their artwork and mainly chose to let it speak for itself, others enthusiastically engaged in discussion with curious parents, friends, and peer musicians who were also participating in the festival. After an hour of guiding interested viewers through the gallery they created and curated, students joined one another in a section of the performance hall that had been set aside for them. Together, they watched the musicians perform the songs they had practiced throughout the day with their respective clinicians. After the concert, students retrieved their artwork, loaded busses, and headed back to their respective schools.

Responses from HAVAs, Their Teachers, and Their Families

Before the students left for dinner, but after they had finished curating their gallery, Dr. Fisher asked the students to briefly reflect on their experiences that day. One student stated that their favorite part of the day was being around other "art nerds"—a sentiment echoed by a peer who said the best part of the day was meeting people who were "like me." Nine of the thirty students noted that meeting like-minded peers was the best part of the day. Another student shared that the best part of their day was the "ability to completely challenge myself, even to the point that I would never do on my own or intentionally" (Anonymous student, personal communication, February 5, 2019) (emphasis is the student's own).

Several weeks later, one teacher emailed Dr. Fisher a new photo of a student's finalized artwork, stating, "...one of our students that came to your [festival]... kept working on his project and added to it...I wanted to show you his finished piece. He had a blast" (A. Anderson, personal communication, April 2, 2019). This student was the same one who had earlier discussed his excitement about his plan to attend a university to major in visual art.

Conclusion

The success of the festival's inclusion of the visual arts suggests that this model could be replicated by others who wish to extend opportu-

nities for underrepresented HAVAs. In order to reduce the real and perceived critiques of gifted education as an elitist institution (Gaztambide-Fernandez, Saifer, & Desai, 2013), those in leadership positions within the visual arts must actively design opportunities to extend enrichment opportunities to HAVAs from underrepresented groups. Further, in order to establish the arts as an important and equal area of gifted education, arts leaders must actively advocate for their own inclusion. Simply put, if arts educators do not advocate for the educational needs of their most high ability young artists, no one else will.

Included here is a concise set of suggestions for others who may be interested in implementing a similar program. First, try to build off of an existing fine arts festival. By adding to an already well-established program, art educators and leaders may find that much of the logistical heavy lifting has already taken place. This was the case for Drs. Fisher and Smith. Second, and if possible, attempt to enlist the support of a local university or college. In addition to their frequent possession of large performance and creation spaces, post-secondary institutions are often enthusiastic to welcome high ability high school students onto their campuses. Some may offer their spaces in exchange for recruiting opportunities. Lastly, start small. It can be tempting to want to welcome a much larger group of students than the space and staff can accommodate. However, as with all new programs, issues will arise, and they are easier to take care of with smaller groups of students.

Winner and Martino (2003) referencing Winner (1996) state, “It is our position that hard work is necessary for the development of any gift. But there is no evidence that hard work is sufficient, and thus no evidence to allow us to rule out an innate component to artistic giftedness. Indeed, the strikingly early age of emergence of gifts in art, and the fact that high levels of skill make themselves known prior to formal training, are both strong pieces of indirect evidence for an innate component (Winner, 1996)” (p. 343). Keeping Winner and Martino in mind, in conjunction with assertions made by the National Association for Gifted Children (2019) that students from minority, ELL, and low-income backgrounds are underrepresented in gifted education opportunities, it becomes obvious that it is the responsibility of arts leaders to *intentionally* create opportunities for these students to work hard, grow, and find success as young visual artists. Gifts and talents may be innate, but *opportunities must be provided* in order for our young high ability visual artists from all backgrounds to reach their full potential.

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