



Transcript of episode 51: The Crossroads of Academics and Art

- Emily: [00:47](#) I'm Emily Kircher-Morris and welcome to a conversation about creativity. More specifically, we're talking about talented visual artists who are gifted. Why is there that bright line between academia and the arts? Between cognition and creativity? Where should that line break down or should it? And why is it so easy for educators and others to associate creativity in terms of art or music when it also really applies to problem solving and cognition? We'll have a conversation with Dr. Jennifer Fisher. She is in the somewhat rare position of bridging the gap between art and academia. She's a teaching professor and an art education coordinator in the University of Missouri system. She is also a certified gifted educator. We'll talk to her in a minute and later we'll hear from a gifted student about when he discovered his passion for visual arts and some of the difficulties meshing that passion with the mostly non arts-based curriculum at school.
- Emily: [01:51](#) Before we get started, I'd like to invite you to join our Facebook group. It's called the Mind Matters Gifted Ed Advocacy and Support Group. The topic of today's podcast is one subject among many others that we will discuss there in the group, so go to facebook.com/mindmatters and find the link to our group. You'll need to request a membership, but we would really love to have you as part of our conversation. Also, thank you so much to our new Patreon members who helped support our efforts through a monthly financial contribution. In return for joining a \$5 a month or more tier, we will send you a set of nifty Mind Matters earbuds. Mind Matters will always be free to listen, but we have some cool perks for our supporters. To learn more, go to patreon.com/mindmatters.

Jennifer: [02:39](#) Hi, I am Dr. Jennifer Fisher and I am an assistant teaching professor at the University of Missouri, St Louis, where I work also as the art education coordinator.

Emily: [02:50](#) Our guest mic is tested and ready, so stay with us for our chat with Jennifer in a minute. (break)

Emily: [03:44](#) Our guest today is Dr. Jennifer Fisher. She is an assistant teaching professor and an art education coordinator. And I'm really excited to talk with Jennifer because there's an intersection where giftedness meets creativity and for the purposes of this conversation, specifically the visual arts like painters and sculptors, et cetera. But there is some confusion about the term arts and confusion about how it meshes with academic giftedness. Jennifer exists at this intersection professionally. So Jen, can you shine a little light on what we're talking about here?

Jennifer: [04:21](#) So one of the really interesting things that I always consider is whenever you hear people in gifted education circles talking about sort of academic giftedness versus high ability visual artists or other or creatively gifted, gifted in leadership, whatever, it's always really interesting to me that we often separate the arts from sort of an academic class when that's certainly not the way that it's always been. If you look back through the American education system, even in the 20th century it's a relatively recent sort of development that somehow we as a society have decided that the arts somehow aren't an academic discipline, which is really interesting. There are a good deal of technical skills necessary in order to be a really successful visual artist. There's also a huge degree of divergent thinking that goes into the creation of art, which we know is sort of what some of our gifted kiddos do best. And so, I dunno, it's kind of interesting to me that whenever I often talk with people in the gifted education community who really care deeply about our gifted kids, they so often fail to think about the arts as an academic discipline in which our students can be gifted and sort of think about it as separate or other from more traditionally recognized types of giftedness.

Emily: [05:37](#) Well, most of the time gifted education programs or their identification processes don't involve any type of, you know, I mean I think sometimes there may be some sort of creativity component. And to be fair, creativity is not necessarily, I mean there are so many different types of creativity. I do think people think of creativity and they, they automatically assume arts, but that's not necessarily the case.

Jennifer: [06:00](#) Sure.

Emily: [06:00](#) What are some of the problems that come when, when we do try to separate those two things?

Jennifer: [06:07](#) Yeah, so something that I have found now, this is not something that I can support with like like published research data. This is kind of a hunch that I have and I've been working toward with some colleagues. From my just sort of anecdotal evidence, what I have found is that oftentimes gifted students or students who are identified as sort of this traditionally academically gifted, they're sort of not really pushed toward or encouraged to take visual arts classes. I see that many of them are encouraged to take music or be really involved in music. But again, visual arts are sort of seen as this like no discipline discipline or that there's not some sort of like standard to meet or or ways to become a better artist or this sort of process we follow in order to help students develop themselves as artists.

Jennifer: [06:53](#) And so from my perspective, and I've worked with a lot of gifted high school students especially, I see that if they are considered gifted no matter what type of giftedness it is, but particularly those who maybe are considered, again more traditionally academically gifted, I don't see that they're encouraged to take visual arts classes. And I think that's really problematic, um as far as developing them as, as full and whole individuals and people. I've also seen, I feel like in the art world I'm kind of the gifted person and in the gifted world I'm kind of the art person. And I found a lot of my colleagues in gifted education are super uncomfortable when it comes to thinking about visual arts because they have this perception that, well, you know, gifted ed is robotics and it's divergent thinking and it is maker spaces and it's all these other really cool and wonderful things that of course it is, but it can also be visual art making.

Jennifer: [07:48](#) And I wonder if it's because some of these teachers perhaps themselves don't feel comfortable as artists or don't feel comfortable making things. And so I think sometimes that sort of manifests itself in the, if you have like a gifted education classroom, I don't see a ton of projects widespread projects that are being sort of catered toward the visual arts. Whereas, you know, gifted teachers we're kind of jacks of all trades. We can, we can figure out how to do math things with our students. We can figure out how to do STEM based things. Occasionally we'll get a STEAM based thing where the arts are involved in STEM. But for the most part I, I see them kind of pulling away from the arts or not teaching them in a way. And I always want to remind them that they are generalists, sort of in the sense that they

hopefully should have some sort of understanding of many different things, maybe even, particularly at the elementary level. And they should also be introducing their students to the visual arts.

Jennifer: [08:45](#) I think about a gifted student I taught last summer and she was really wonderful. She had high verbal abilities, was very bright, very politically engaged and a very enthusiastic student. Who would otherwise you, anything I ever asked her to do or, or engage in any really tough discussion about, you know race relations or socioeconomic, I mean, just really tough conversations, no problem. And would hop right in and made it very clear how she felt about a lot of things. And then whenever I asked my students to do an arts-based project, it was like, just all the wind got sucked out of her and she started freaking out and just kind of sat there staring at the paper and it was super open ended. It wasn't graded. It wasn't something that really other people were going to see. But she had so much anxiety about creating a work of art on a piece of paper.

Jennifer: [09:37](#) She was begging me to let her do it on her phone and to make digital art. And I think digital art certainly has its place as a, as a valuable medium, but the, just the fear that this student had this high school student about making art on a piece of paper because she said, well, it'll just look terrible. It'll look awful. And I thought, who cares? You know? But again, with sort of like these perfectionistic tendencies in a lot of our students, whereas if it was a really tough math problem, I think that maybe a gifted teacher would say, "Oh, let's try it. Let's, let's work at it from several angles and let's look at it from a different perspective." But if it's visual, visual arts related, they might just say, "Oh, you know, we're just, we're not all artists." Well, you know, I'm not really a super strong mathematician, but I just worked really hard and tried to learn. So I could be a better mathematician. Art's really just the same.

Emily: [10:24](#) I notice a lot of times when I've worked with kids, especially gifted kids, they do get really focused on finding that just right answer. And so the nice thing about math and science is that it's very clear, like I know that this is the right answer. And anytime they have to do something ambiguous, whether it's in writing or visual arts or whatever the case might be, that can be really paralyzing for them. I think because of that perfectionism and also because you know, naturally they want to do the right thing and so, and they, and they get reinforced for doing the right thing. You hit on something else. I think that's really important too. And that is kind of a comparison, you know? So I come to gifted education kind of with that counseling background and

you've got the arts background and I know a lot of times when I talked to gifted ed teachers about social emotional stuff, they will say to me, well, I'm not a counselor. And I imagine that that's probably the same thing that you hear.

Jennifer:

[11:16](#)

Totally. And so one of the really interesting things that I always think about is if you've studied art education for any length of time, you probably have heard about a guy named Viktor Lowenfeld. He's kind of a giant in the field of art education. And he, you know, this is back in the early 20th century, talks a lot about the stages of artistic development and to boil a really sort of like long, uh, complicated situation down to the roots, it's essentially like any other kind of a scale of child development watching how a child develops artistically at each stage, whether they start in the scribbling stage you know, from, it's like zero to two, I can't remember exactly where they're just trying to hold a crayon or they're just trying to put a mark on a piece of paper and watching how that develops.

Jennifer:

[12:02](#)

Most people not just high ability students or gifted students. Most of them stop getting formal arts training in late elementary or middle school. And then a few students go on to get arts training in high school, or maybe they just take the one visual arts class, it's required so they get their fine arts credit. But if you think about whenever people stop learning about art, it's often much earlier than they stopped learning about things like biology or any type of mathematics. And so that's where their skillset stops. It's again, it's just like any other discipline in that you continue to grow in it and improve or, you know, basketball or anything else. And so because most people stop taking art courses and getting arts instruction in late elementary school or in middle school, that's kind of where their artistic development stops.

Jennifer:

[12:53](#)

And so the fact that they can't draw, you know, maybe photo realistically or the fact that they can't sculpt in a way that they believe they should be, it's really because I think generally speaking, that's when they stopped learning. And if I had stopped learning math in middle school, that would be, where my skillset stopped. And so I think it's some of that fear that people take into the course or that gifted educators taken to their classrooms because they think, well, I haven't taken an art class. I can't draw a stick figure. I can't draw a straight line. And I'm like, well, you probably can draw a stick figure and I can't draw a straight line because I'm not a robot. And those are like not necessary things in order to be an artist. I think just showing students that the visual arts are, uh, necessary and a valuable part of their lives and that their art doesn't have to be quote

unquote good. It can just be something they do because it helps them be a better human being.

Emily:

[13:47](#)

I know a lot of times kids in our geographic areas that we're kind of in the st Louis area, and I know this varies across the nation. So at the elementary level, the gifted programs, a lot of times our pull out programs and then in our area, once you get to middle school, your gifted program is an elective. And so you have to choose, you're either going to take your gifted program or you're going to take maybe your art class or something like that and you have to pick and choose. And then I know what happens with a lot of the kids that I know they want to take band. And you know, I think it's unfortunate so often that kids have to make those choices. I mean, I don't know that I have a solution for it, but it's a hard position and I think parents probably gravitate to, well, you should take the gifted ed class.

Jennifer:

[14:27](#)

Right. Totally. And so I, that's actually kind of like the story of my life. I'm not with my parents. My parents were really supportive of anything that I wanted to do. But I think about growing up I was in the gifted program and then in middle school I got really involved in instrumental music. My sister had been really involved in instrumental music and so I had sort of seen the success and the fun that she had in that. And so I joined in and whenever it came time for middle school, there literally were not enough hours in the day for me to take all the classes I wanted to take. And so even though I would have loved to have taken a visual arts class, I took band was my elective. And then I, I think there were three or four of us who were in band and were in gifted.

Jennifer:

[15:06](#)

And so our gifted class was basically like lunch. We took our lunch into the gifted room and we had gifted class while we ate, which, I don't know, it was the best, but it was better than nothing I guess. And so it really, I guess sort of never occurred to anyone to say, Hey, Jen, like, why don't you try visual arts class? Why don't you try this? And so after I finished taking visual arts classes in sixth grade, I just exclusively took band, which a lot of people are like, Jen, you know, you're an arts educator and you, you never really did art. You were really into band. And I think it's because it just has sort of never occurred to me that like my, like doodling on the paper or drawing or the fact that I could do posters really well.

Jennifer:

[15:50](#)

It was just something that I never thought about. And then my senior year I took a humanities class and of course it was like an honors class and it was visual arts literature and the history I think up into the Renaissance and I just remember and we had a

great art teacher at my school, so it wasn't like, you know, I was avoiding a classroom or anything. And I got in there and started learning about art history and it was so fascinating to me. I just realized like I've really been missing something. I've really been missing this knowledge that I think is just incredibly important and so interesting. And I ended up writing a letter to the art teacher. I only had her for one semester and just sort of saying like, I'm really sorry I never took art classes. I wish I would have, you know, and I loved band of course.

Jennifer: [16:35](#) And it was a wonderful part of my life. But as I got into college, I sort of realized like, I think if I'd work really hard on my technical skills, I've got the, you know, the creative chops or the divergent thinking chops to make some pretty cool art. And it worked out. I, I had to work and catch up on a lot of my drawing skills and things like that. But in general, I think it's kind of where I should have been maybe all along, but nobody ever said, Hey Jen, why don't you try it? Because, you know, cause I was in the honors classes or I was in the dual enrollment classes. And it just never really occurred to anybody that I would take a visual arts class, including me.

Emily: [17:11](#) Do you think that there are a lot of gifted kids out there who have that multi potentiality and are forced into those types of decisions?

Jennifer: [17:20](#) Yeah, I, so again, I only have a little bit of data to sort of support that. And it's, it's, some of it's unpublished at the moment, but I think about a teacher that I was interviewing for a journal article that I have submitted at the moment and she had a student come to her maybe in second semester, and the student had was going to take art four, it was the student's senior year. And instead she had signed up for calculus because her parents thought that she should take calculus. She's a very bright kid. And so the student came in and was sort of really sort of sheepish talking to the art teacher and almost sort of embarrassed, like, you know, will you still let me in? Is it okay if I come in even though I missed the first semester of art four, that's not really where I wanted to be, but my parents sort of thought I should take calculus because that's what smart kids do, you know?

Jennifer: [18:11](#) And so the teacher said, you know, absolutely come in and we'll catch you up on some of the stuff you missed and, and we'll get everything caught up. And this teacher was just sort of lamenting the fact that this student had spent the entire first semester of her senior year and you know, she had already gotten into the college she wanted to be in and was very

excited and heading off to a really great university in the, in the fall. But that she was still sort of not quote unquote allowed to take the things that interested her. And I think this happens more often than we maybe realize sometimes. I know a lot of times gifted students music is kind of always, and this is, I'm not disparaging music. I was heavily involved in music and it was one of the most wonderful parts I think of my, my formative experience as a kid. But I think sometimes we just don't consider that the arts are also an intellectual pursuit. And that's really problematic

- Emily: [19:01](#) With a lot of my clients that I talk to and they're talking about their careers, I can think of two clients in particular, one who is extremely talented in the visual arts and is so perfectionistic about it and never thinks that her stuff is is good enough. I'll have to show you some of it sometime because it's truly amazing. And then another client who is is a writer and she has these amazing, amazing ideas for fantasy. And I feel like just societally there are careers that you can do if that's what you love. And I think the creative writing, you know, for me it's like you could go and get your degree and then you could work for a publishing company or you can be an editor. I mean there are so many other things other than just being a writer. And I think that's what freaks people out.
- Jennifer: [19:43](#) It freaks parents out.
- Emily: [19:44](#) And the kids don't know. They don't know any better, you know? It's like, gosh, there are so many opportunities out there and I wish that we could empower those kids to take their academic giftedness or whatever that is and tie it together, overlap it, because they're not necessarily always separate constructs.
- Jennifer: [20:01](#) Yeah. Well, it's like if you look at the current definition for NAGC, National Association for Gifted Children, it includes artistic giftedness in the definition. I think it's just something that oftentimes people overlook. And as you're talking through this, I'm thinking about the book of our friend, friend of the podcast, Dr. Katherine Fishman-Weaver in wholehearted teaching of gifted young women, she talks about this group of really high achieving young women that she worked with over many number of years. And every chapter starts with their artwork because what she found with them is that, you know, they're taking all these really rigorous courses. And by the way, arts courses can be very rigorous as well. It's not just, you know, organic chem that has, that has to be hard.

- Emily: [20:44](#) Or, thinking that it's going to be like arts crafts.
- Jennifer: [20:47](#) Yeah, totally. And there's totally a place for arts and crafts. I love to make arts and crafts, you know, but but yeah, I mean, it's a serious study. It's a serious discipline that, you know, Divinci did it and he was a really smart guy. And so I think about these students that came through and Katherine's book where she was talking about the art place as sort of the only place where many of these students felt a sense of release or a sense of calm in the absolute chaos. And I don't mean to insinuate that art isn't a rigorous or that it doesn't require a good deal of thought. But I do think for many people, the process of art making can be so almost meditative. And that's why I encourage it even for students who feel like maybe they're not the strongest artists, it doesn't really matter. You know, I, I don't sing very well, but I sing in my car and it makes me happy. And so you should do it because it makes you happy. So I dunno, I wish people would look at it the same way. And I wish that some of Dr. Fishman-Weaver students would have had the opportunity to take some of those visual arts classes earlier. Because she said she constantly found them retreating to the art studio to find some peace in the chaos of their life.
- Emily: [21:59](#) Integrating visual arts for our bright kids could be really cathartic for them in so many ways because I could see the social and emotional value of risk taking and you know, overcoming that, some of that perfectionism and just exploring like you can't always do and some of the other academic areas. And also when you're talking about that yes, there's, there are academic rigorous, you know, AP courses and calculus and all of those other things, but you know, the opportunity to be in that state of flow. So what are we talking about when we're talking about flow? We're talking about an intersection of difficulty and competence where you're really just in that moment, but it's so fluid when you're talking about like an art type of activity that I feel like it differentiates so easily for kids no matter what it is. And they can really see that progress and really be in that moment.
- Jennifer: [22:51](#) Helps them be present. Yeah. Whenever this what is it? Yeah. The, the difficulty level and the level of skill are both high. Then you know, you're avoiding boredom and you're avoiding anxiety. Our students, I find, they're, they're highly engaged. Their brains are working really quickly, but they're also in this sort of state where they start to lose time. They start to lose sense of their surroundings, but, but in a way that is very present simultaneously. And I think for a lot of gifted kids because they oftentimes can have a sustained attention or

sustained focus on one particular project or idea that can be a really wonderful place for them to be.

Emily: [23:32](#) What should we be doing in our schools? Like what, where should the change be taking place? What are we really looking for when, when we want to make these changes.

Jennifer: [23:40](#) So if this were a perfect world and Jen got to design schools I would make sure first that every student has access to arts education in general. Certainly, of course I want to say visual arts education, but I'll take what I can get. I think that Missouri is actually really fortunate because we have most of our schools, our elementary schools and middle schools have certified art teachers in them that are art specialists. Some of our fellow states are not as fortunate, so they might have elementary generalists who sort of are again, a Jill of all trades who have gone in and sort of know all the disciplines, but maybe are not an art specialist and who are teaching them art. So first I would make sure that every student had access to arts education or visual arts education.

Jennifer: [24:29](#) After that, I would want to make sure that art teachers know how to meet the needs of their high ability visual artists, or I call them HAVAs. Because what I found in my research is that in general visual arts educators are very willing to work with those students. And they're, they're excited about having them in class and they believe they exist. But when it comes to identifying research based best practices for how we meet the needs of high ability students, they might not really know what those are. They're not so great at identifying them. Sometimes they feel very confident in their ability to meet the needs of those students. But they don't have any training either. And so I would encourage my colleagues in the art education community to really focus on the needs of all learners. We want to make sure that our students from every demographic imaginable have their needs met.

Jennifer: [25:19](#) And that includes our high ability students and getting them resources. Like, you know, not every art teacher is also an expert in every kind of art making. I think about myself and I would say probably like one of my weaker areas is fibers. I love fibers, but it's not my strongest area. And so if you have a student who's really into sewing or weaving I would probably try to hook them up with a university professor who was a specialist. Or when I think about art history, I know enough art history to teach it and my K-12 classroom, but I'm not an art historian. And so if I have a student who's really into Renaissance history, I need to find them resources. So that they

can expand their understanding of that. And last but not least, I would say in gifted education circles, I would encourage my, my colleagues in gifted ed to be as inclusive as possible when they think about opportunities in the gifted classroom, especially if it's a pullout class.

Jennifer: [26:11](#) Don't be afraid to incorporate authentic arts-based learning opportunities for our kids because they need to understand that the arts matter too. It's not just STEM. STEM is wonderful and STEM makes life possible. But I think the arts make life worth living. And so some kind of balance between the two I think is, is really important when we talk with our high ability kids.

Emily: [26:32](#) Just before we kind of wrap up here, what about for parents?

Jennifer: [26:36](#) So I would say in general if you are the parent of a high ability kid in any area, make sure that your student feels that they have your support to engage with the visual arts, to create things, to visit art museums and visit art spaces. Your student or your kid might not really have a ton of interest in it. And we know interest plays a big part in what our high ability and gifted kids decide to do. But just letting them know that it's a viable discipline. It matters. It's important. There's a reason why people have been making art since the literal dawn of time. But also if your student decides that they want to take an arts class, a visual arts class in lieu of something, you know, a physiology class or something that, you know, a class that gifted kids are supposed to take let them take the arts class because what are they going to lose? They have a lot of time to learn and if they're engaged and they, they like to go to school, that's gonna make a huge difference.

Emily: [27:35](#) Jen, thank you so much for your time and all of your expertise.

Jennifer: [27:37](#) Thank you.

Gifted Student: [27:42](#) Preschool, I would use, spend most of my time just kind of doodling around and drawing. I think monsters I'd see on TV or other movies that I'd watch and I'd just like try to recreate those and I'd make my own little worlds. And there was one key moment that my parents knew like, Oh, this isn't just like him doodling. This is something special. I had made this mural that was like 12 papers, like taped together of like this ancient prehistoric scene were dinosaurs and like godzilla type creatures, pterodactyls, all together in this cool world with colorful markers and everything. And I still look back on that like wow that's really cool. But that was the one moment that they knew. And I mean I didn't really know at the time cause I was

just doing my own thing. But ever since then I've just been kind of learning from there.

Gifted Student: [28:30](#)

I mean they'd have the art classes in elementary school that we'd go to and it wasn't until middle school I opted to do the art classes in middle school cause I didn't have to, there is like, you could do music classes but I, I wanted to go into the art classes but it wasn't really any outside ones that were kind of like varied until high school in which there's really a plethora of different classes you could take after intro. I think from the get go I had a really good counselor at school who understood who I was as a person and let me kind of go and do the art classes just as long as I made sure I was filling out all their other requirements. Cause I mean I had done both theater and visual art so it really fine arts is a huge portion of what I had done through high school.

Gifted Student: [29:20](#)

They had been having us take career quizzes and counseling training ever since middle school. And I'd always gone to the audio visual arts made it always kinda been a part of that. And the sciences kind of followed soon after. So when I was applying to colleges, I knew that art would definitely be one of things I'd pursue. But also the humanities and history of human culture is also something I wanted to possibly study. Parents, teachers might still be caught in the mindset that, you know, certain quote unquote stable classes, positions, careers in life are more acceptable than going the artistic route. But in my mind, the main thing about being a gifted person is that we can think in a more creative way and think and problem solve in such a vastly different way. And that's why being in a creative environment, taking these classes really pushes your mind and helps you hone those abilities. It's much more inherent to being gifted than people give it credit for.

Emily: [30:35](#)

There is an inherent social and emotional value to artistic endeavors. Art serves as an outlet to express unspoken emotions or an opportunity to pause and self regulate intense emotions. Jen and I mentioned perfectionism during our talk and it reminded me of my own little gifted 2e perfectionist. This was years ago and he was probably about two and a half years old. He was drawing a stick figure person, you know the one with the legs coming out of the chin and the arms out of the ears. He was pleased with his first drawing and then he wanted to draw more, but after the first success, he was frustrated by each drawing, attempting to draw a circle for the head or a curve for the mouth and pausing, shaking his head and flipping over the paper to start on a fresh page. Creating art requires risk taking and facing ambiguity over many possible solutions to

a task. Talent domains and gifted individuals are as varied as the individuals themselves. The broad abilities and potential of students has such greater range than what our current academic curriculum allows. How do we encourage and value our artists and musicians, our storytellers, without pressuring them to give up their creative outlets for areas that make us feel more comfortable? Balance is key. One more AP class probably isn't going to make a major difference in a child's long-term success, but pursuing their passion to take that art class might have a lifelong impact.

Emily: [32:13](#) I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on Mind Matters. (music).

Dave: [32:16](#) Our thanks to Dr. Jen Fisher. To learn more about her, go to our episode page at mindmatterspodcast.com. If you try to search for her, Google will just ask you if you mean Jenna Fisher and no, that's a whole different person. A reminder, if you want a transcript of today's episode, we'll have it on our website. It's brought to you by our generous Patreon patrons. To join them and be a Mind Matters supporter, go to patreon.com/mindmatters. For Emily and our incredible group of musicians who write and sing the music you hear, I'm executive producer Dave Morris. Thank you for listening. (end)