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# Visual Art Gifted Child in Pre-School and Early School Years

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#### ABSTRACT

Visual arts media in pre-school and early school years and development of children's drawing are well researched. However, when one considers that children are endowed with a talent for visual arts, the research is not as comprehensive and clear-cut. The signs of freedom of expression and imagination, intuitiveness and originality, an inclination to individual work, high sensitivity, and other indicators begin to show soon after visual art gifted (VAG) children enter the representative stages of visual arts. This article was based on a longitudinal case study that was carried out to show some aspects of the functioning of a VAG child in pre-school and early school years and to make some suggestions on how to consider the needs of VAG children.

#### **KEYWORDS**:

pre-school, early school, visual arts gifted child, qualitative research, case study

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## INTRODUCTION

Gifted children are pupils who show great potential in intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, or academic fields (Colangelo & Davis, 1997; Keser & Erdem, 2019). Compared to their peers, gifted children reach an advanced level in their field(s) of strength. While for Sternberg (1993), "gifted-ness implies a potential that should lead to exceptional achievement without exceptional support" (Taber, 2007, p. 6), other researchers consider that both genetic predisposition and environmental factors play an important role in this. The former allows talent to manifest itself and the latter provides appropriate conditions for the development of potential (Taber, 2007).

Various criteria have been developed in research to identify children's talent (Heller et al., 2005; Koshy & Robinson, 2007; Sternberg, 2000). Keser and Erdem (2019) emphasize that achievements of gifted children can be observed or measured by utilizing various observation and measurement instruments based on their cognitive development. Approaches to researching giftedness in early years vary according to the different areas of giftedness, but in general, gifted children are characterized by their ability to devote sustained attention to problem-solving, by their propensity to ask questions, to experiment and explore, by inventive problem-solving strategies, and by their ability to use their imagination to develop highly original ideas (Gadanidis et al., 2011). Reis and Renzulli (2009) as well as Johnsen (2012) highlight the complex learning needs and strengths typical for gifted children. Samardzija and Peterson (2015) also support this view, presenting similar results based on qualitative research on academically gifted pupils. They found that the learning preferences of gifted ness (Samardzija & Peterson, 2015). However, gifted children are far from homogeneous in terms of skills, motivation, culture, and support (Porath, 1993), and they do not all share the same characteristics (Golomb, 2016; Johnsen, 2004; Treffinger & Selby, 1993).

Although some meaningful efforts have been made to identify gifted children in the field of visual arts, and numerous researchers have found that studies in artistic ability are still particularly necessary (Codd, 2004; Fisher, 2018; Zimmerman, 2009, 2010), additional effort is required to achieve proper treatment of VAG children. Winner (1996) confirms that children's talents are much more difficult to identify in visual arts than in other disciplines (e.g., mathematics or language). Therefore, many teachers and parents are still not able to correctly identify the VAG indicators in early stages (Pibernik et al., 2017). Fisher (2018) finds that examined teachers

[...] felt as though their ability to work effectively with high ability visual art students was almost entirely a result of their own, self-directed efforts to develop professionally. Many respondents to the study cited personal, rather than professional, experience as the primary means by which they meet the needs of a subpopulation of students. This suggests that there is an extraordinary deficit of training in both preservice and in-service professional development (p. 28).

A great effort in this area was made by Golomb (1996, 2016). The author determines that the development of artistically gifted children has been a neglected topic due to the paucity of available data, which has led some investigators to believe that there are no child prodigies in this domain. Therefore, Golomb selected some longitudinal case studies to provide insight into the evolution of a universal graphic language and emphasized it is also highly subjective and reflects individuality of the VAG children and adolescents.

However, in practice, the needs and abilities of VAG children still too often remain overlooked and underestimated. This becomes particularly clear when they enter school, where other school subjects' achievements are still much more highly valued than those in the visual arts domain (Rech Penn, 2019). VAG children, therefore, often cannot successfully "cash in" on their strong field. Consequently, the lack of encouragement from the environment that should support VAG children, motivate them, and strengthen their self-esteem in their strong field in relation to their peers, remains. Zimmerman (1994) endorses the research on the impact of educational opportunities, environment, and the role of art teachers in VAG children's development. The author also endorses the impact of the standards and examination movement and its relationship to the education of gifted pupils in the visual and performing arts. In addition, Zimmerman (1997) emphasizes the need to explore pupils' background, personality, gender orientations, skills development, and cognitive and affective abilities. However, it seems that identifying one's talent in the visual arts is a challenge. Identification is regularly based on drawing, rarely on painting, while possible talents in other visual arts media (e.g., sculpture, mix-media, architecture) are frequently omitted altogether.

In order to develop specific talents of the child as properly and successfully as possible, it is essential to identify and recognize them at an early stage (Fetzer, 2005; Heller, 2004; Kirk et al., 2014; Perleth et al., 2000). However, it is difficult to reliably identify a child's talent in the first stages of visual arts development. Visual art giftedness becomes clearer after the child enters the representative stages of visual arts expression. For reliable identification of talent for visual arts at a young age, it is necessary to observe the general functions and reactions of children in addition to their art products. Partnership between educators, teachers, and parents is therefore very important and helpful for the VAG child.

Intense interest in expressing via visual arts, a strong sense of initiative and, consequently, a more frequent practice of visual arts becomes typical for VAG children and contributes to their faster progress, more detailed and richer art presentations, and frequent insistence on their own ideas. However, even frequent reproductions of the same content are never entirely identical with previous attempts (Golomb & Haas, 1996; Matthews, 1994; Milbrath, 1996). Through activities of visual arts, soon after entering the representative stages of visual arts, VAG children show some signs of a high degree of sensitivity, freedom of expression and imagination, intuitiveness, and originality, as well as an inclination to individual work. In addition, they also show exceptional visual memory, ability to concentrate on artistic activity for a long time, fascination with certain content, and intensive involvement (Golomb, 2016; Milbrath, 1996). Although internal motivation of gifted children in their field of interest is usually strong, they also need a stimulating environment that helps and supports them (Johnsen, 2012; Golomb & Haas, 1996; Taber, 2007). In addition to educators and teachers, parents have an important role in this regard (Clark, 1997; Clark & Zimmerman, 1988; Garn et al., 2010; Rivera et al., 1995). They must provide support and encouragement to VAG children

when they face misunderstandings as they grow up (Meckstroth, 1991). Even though many teachers and counsellors consider parents of gifted children to be "too ambitious for their children, too involved with them and too protective" (Milgram, 1991, p. 20), some empirical evidence confirms that parents are usually very reliable partners of teachers when it comes to identifying potential talents of their children (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Some parental assessment scales (e.g., Parent Inventory of Finding Potential, see Rogers, 2002) were created for this purpose.

## **QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A VAG CHILD**

The aim of the study was to examine selected indicators for gifted children of pre-school age for VAG children in their early childhood and to show how they behave in practice. We adapted general indicators of giftedness (Winner, 1996) to the field of giftedness in visual arts. To make the study comprehensible, we selected and discussed only four of the general indicators, namely: a) freedom of expression and imagination, b) individualism, c) sensitivity, and d) intuitiveness and originality.

## **Research questions**

In the case study, we focused on the following question: How are selected general indicators of giftedness demonstrated by a VAG pre-school and early school child?

## Description of data collection and processing

A longitudinal case study was conducted on the VAG girl Maja (pseudonym) for the purpose of this research. To ensure objectivity, research in visual arts should include both the creative product and the creative processes. We found the art-based qualitative research approach to be best suited for an in-depth investigation of the VAG child's artistic reactions in early childhood. It provides a complete representation of the issue. To identify Maja's talent, we used the Parent Inventory for Finding Potential rating scale (PIP; Rogers, 2000). It was completed by her parents when Maja was four years old. The average score of 3.50 indicates artistic preferences. We did not use any other tests to identify the Maja's visual art talent, but both authors of the research are specialists of early visual art development and we agreed that Maja's visual art preferences were above average in relation to ordinary children (e.g., the wideness of her visual art interests, intensive visual art preferences, and noticeable surpassing of her peers in artistic development). Data in the long-term case study were collected by using various qualitative research methods (Vogrinc & Sagipi, 2019): a) observation through participation; taking photos and notes of Maja's self-created and self-regulated art activities; b) art-based research analysis of the photo archive (selected over 500 digital photos of Maja's art activity and visual art products); c) collection of various art products created by Maja over six years of the study; and d) collection and notation of various comments and observations of the people with whom Maja interacted in pre-school and early school (parents, grandparents, a pre-school educator, and 1st-grade teacher contributed over 40 data sets on Maja's visual arts activities). The collected material was classified chronologically and content-analysed (Vogrinc & Saqipi, 2019). A descriptive and causal-non-experimental method was used to interpret the features; for explicit presentation, individual features were provided with image examples in addition to descriptive interpretation. When this proved useful, we also carried out a comparative analysis (a comparison of Maja's artwork with that of her peers).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

## The respondent

Maja was the youngest child in her family. She had two older sisters and a brother. The family lived in a family house in a suburban area. Her parents were both highly educated. The girl had an artistic background (her grandfather was a contemporary painter and professor of the Slovenian Academy of Fine Arts and Design, and her mother was a teacher of fine arts), so Maja's artistic preferences and potential were quickly recognized, which led to the timely and accurate observation of her artistic development. Maja's mother carefully recorded key information (date, context, and comments accompanying the creative process) on the Maja's artefacts. Before she attended kindergarten at the age of 3.6 years, Maja was in her grandparents' day-care.

Our study found some similarities with the Golomb and Haas (1996) study of the artist Varda, whose development was largely self-directed until she entered art school in her late adolescent years. As the researchers emphasized, the artist lived in a generally supportive family environment. Maja's art development was also mostly self-directed. However, since her mother was an art teacher, the girl's home was well stocked with various art materials and tools, which were easily accessible to the girl. Her mother constantly cared for supportive environment and stimulating reaction to the Maja's expressions. She prepared art materials appropriate to the girl's age and expressed preferences (the mess and disorder that accompanied Maja's creative process never posed an obstacle that would hinder her creation), but she deliberately did not want to instruct or teach her daughter directly in Maja's early artistic development.

Like Golomb and Haas (1996) observed in Varda's case, Maja did not skip the stages in her graphic development. Maja first started to practice the arts before she was one year old. The girl quickly switched from the first phase of visual art (scribbling) to the controlled use of the drawing tool (age 2.7 years); soon after that, she began to create her first representative forms (Anning & Ring, 2004). At approximately the same time, she spontaneously began to create mixed forms (sculptures) and to construct various spatial formations. At the age of 3.3 years, Maja entered the phase of conventional human figure drawing. The figures were simple but contained most of the required attributes (body, hands, legs, and head with general facial details: eyes, nose, mouth, and hair). Her drawings of human figures resembled those of older children (4+ years).

In contrast with Golomb's (1996) case study of the boy Eitan and his constant interest in drawing, Maja's interests in the arts varied intensively in her pre-school years from one art field to another (from drawing to sculpting, to building the models of houses, mix-media expression, etc.) and often also diverse combinations between different art fields. Maja often spent time playing, drawing, painting, as well as sculpting in her grandfather's art studio, surrounded by different works of art. Her grandmother described how Maja, at the age of three years, repeatedly pushed a chair in front of a specific abstract painting and watched it in silence. After some time, Maja commented that this was *her* painting. When Maja was four years, she announced that she would become a painter like her grandfather when she grows up, "But I will also build houses," she added. Her parents did not take that announcement as an initiative to "educate an artist." However, they tried to maintain her artistic enthusiasm by providing her with various art materials and experiences, as well as sincere interest in her work and positive reactions to her ideas in visual arts. They took photographs of the Maja's exploration of visual art and made notes of her ideas. The notes contained the explanations and reactions that usually followed her work in visual art.

Maja was identified as a child with some indicators of ADHD syndrome (Rihter et al., 2021) shortly after she entered primary school (6 years). However, she regularly calmed down when she created her art, entranced by expressive activity and isolating herself from the environment for an hour or even longer. Creative activity was a versatile mental and physical activity that completely absorbed her, similar to Milbrath's (1996) reports of the gifted boy, Joel.

## Freedom of expression and imagination

Gifted children are truly motivated to understand the meaning of their strongest attribute, and the way they learn is qualitatively different from that of their peers (Johnsen, 2012; Reis & Renzulli, 2009; Winner, 1996). They ask numerous questions that reflect their sincere interest rather than their uncertainty. VAG children notice, observe, compare, and comment on various objects and phenomena in their environment that attract their attention. According to the study by Clark and Zimmerman (1988), most VAG pupils reported that their experience of making art was stimulated by pleasurable experiences rather than emotional crises, and they devoted a lot of time and energy to working on artworks. In the same study, these respondents also identified their family members as encouraging development of artistic talents, even if they had no art background or many resources at home to support the study of art. Many of these pupils also expressed a need for advanced teachers who would challenge them more than they experienced in many of their school situations (Clark & Zimmerman, 1988). With the help of information and knowledge, VAG children can develop unusual, original ideas that result in the ability to create unusual, unique objects or unforeseen visual arts solutions. Indeed, in pre-school, we often experience unusual connections and conclusions that children draw based on segmented and partial knowledge (Podobnik, 2014). The difference between ordinary and VAG children is that the results of the VAG children's visual art are expressed as an in-depth reflection on the object, the study of its characteristics from different angles (Milbrath, 1996), and complex representation (Frelih, 2014). With VAG children, we often find that they take the initiative to use visual arts media, even if the learning content is not directly related to the visual arts. This becomes particularly clear when they come to school, where school subjects are separated and more specialized.



Figure 1. Maja (5.4 years); "A rabbit"

The distinction between ordinary and VAG children can also be observed in the degree of motivation for artistic expression and in the creative process itself. When gifted children are engaged in learning, they become absorbed in the subject and lose a sense of time and place (Winner, 1996). Strong motivation can be observed on the basis of intense interest and concentration, and the final results of the visual arts usually show us how actively VAG children have approached the issue (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1981; Matthews, 1994; Milbrath, 1996). At the same time, it is also important to pay attention to the creative process itself, in which VAG children show extreme concentration, isolation from the environment, associative flexibility, and a creative trance (*Example 1*).

**Example 1**: Maja was a very vivid and curious child in pre-school. She constantly asked different questions. In the expression of visual art, however, the girl functioned extremely independently and only turned for help when she needed certain material that she could not acquire herself. If the girl expressed a wish for a certain material, the parents helped her to a certain extent to acquire the things she wished for or suggested that she use other materials. Occasionally, the girl was only given a hint of where she could try to look for materials or a suggestion to replace a certain material with substitute materials for which funds are available. Sometimes the girl was satisfied with this, but sometimes she stubbornly insisted on exactly the material she had come up with to realize her idea. After Maja (5.4 years) found aluminium wires, wooden sticks, and rubber rings in her brother's craft box, she began to combine these materials into a new whole. Although this activity was quite strenuous for her, given her weak physical abilities and fine motor skills, she was extremely perseverant and independent in her creating. For half an hour, the girl constructed her mix-media form in complete silence and absolute concentration. In the end, she only asked for a cotton ball to attach to her sculpture and explained that she has created "a rabbit."

Whenever she was satisfied with her work, Maja showed her product with a clear desire to describe its features. She enthusiastically explained what she has made. During the process of "evaluating" the features of her product, she asked questions and evidently expected answers from her listeners, which she also corrected if she did not find them suitable.

VAG children's freedom of expression and imagination often becomes more evident when the learning problem within fine arts is not strictly defined with instructions on how to solve it. Therefore, it is not surprising that freedom of expression and imagination are mainly present in the spontaneous expression of the visual arts when VAG children think about certain contents and choose for themselves the means of expression that help them develop a certain idea. Through that kind of creative process, VAG children can easily transform their drawings into sculptures, or their sculptures can become surfaces for painting, and even their tools for drawing can become constructive material for sculpture. Twigg and Garvis (2010) observe that children understand that there are "rules" for creating art in school and that this impacts their artistic endeavours. As a result, "it is important for early childhood educators (and other adults) to practice negotiating with young children in relation to art experiences" (Twigg & Garvis, 2010, p. 199).

## Individualism

Some studies indicate that children's feelings about work, alone or in groups, are dynamic and vary under different conditions (Walker et al., 2011; Kanevsky, 2015). However, gifted pupils express many concerns when grouped heterogeneously with pupils of different abilities (Clinkenbeard, 1991; Walker et al., 2011). Visual art expression is commonly an individual-based activity, especially in preschool and early school, but in some cases, it also offers collaboration options. Lowenfeld (1981) has noted that group work in art classes can lead to frustration among VAG children and that they do not like to participate in group activities during art classes. The aversion to group work often stems from the fact that young children's ability to work in groups is generally relatively weak. If VAG children firmly believe in their idea and the method of its realization, they may refuse to submit to the demands of the group. French, Walker, and Shore (2011) proved that gifted pupils indicated a preference for working alone; however, their eagerness to work in groups increased when they felt they would be "supported and appreciated in their group" (Kanevsky, 2015, p. 2). Since VAG children can find very interesting solutions that can have a positive effect on the creativity of other children, it seems reasonable for a teacher to take that into account when planning the group activity, forming the groups, and supporting the group members to find a common solution (*Example 2*). **Example 2**: When Maja was 6.3 years old, we organized a visual arts activity in her kindergarten to see her willingness to participate in group activities. The activity consisted partly of individual work (drawing a building) and partly of group work (designing and setting up the building model; the group determined the purpose of the building). During the individual work, Maja drew a "car wash for spaceships." To continue the activity, we brought some big cardboard boxes into the playroom. The groups were formed freely according to the children's wishes. At first, Maja joined one of the groups, but soon other group members found her idea too ambitious. Maja stubbornly insisted on bringing in her impressions from the drawing activity (light effects in the spaceship car wash), but the girls rejected it. Maja, therefore, decided not to participate in the creation of the group task. She asked the pre-school educator for her own box, and since no box was available, she became moody and did not want to communicate with anyone; she just watched her friends' activities. At the initiative of the educator, who brought her some different glitter and LED-lamps on a wire, Maja reunited with her group, and the girls successfully realized their common idea. After finishing the activity, the girls were very proud of their creation. The educator stressed that the group had successfully created their building because the girls considered different ideas.

An interview with the educator showed that Maja often reacts similarly. The educator usually tried to support her in these situations with different strategies (provide her with the desired material, let her work individually, involve her preventively in the friendly group, support tolerant communication in the groups, etc.). The educator underscored the role of alleviating potential stress and discomfort, which she justified as crucial for all children in her group.

## Sensitivity

Piechowski (1991) notes that highly gifted and creative pupils can show signs of extreme sensitivity and emotional intensity. They may be more concerned with their life and world purpose than their peers. Visual arts activity is highly present in pre-school, and VAG children generally do not experience self-evaluation, self-doubt, and self-criticism as intensively as after entering the school, where other school activities are often more valued (Rech Penn, 2019). As mentioned above, VAG children at school usually find it more difficult to achieve equal recognition of achievements in their strong field than their peers who are successful in other fields (e.g., mathematics, science, sports, etc.). Twigg and Garvis (2010) emphasize that insensitivity to a child's artistic creation can have a long-term impact on the child as a creator and as an individual.

In contrast, Roege and Kim (2013) note that art education has some important advantages for the development of creative thinking, and one of these may be a non-routine problem-solving process that consists of the structure of art. As Ulger (2019) noted, non-routine problems occur during the production of works of art in the field of visual arts, and because of the structures of the discipline, which cannot be built on unchanging rules, they may occur more frequently in the education of visual arts than in other educational disciplines. These structures offer more opportunities to think innovatively about alternative solutions to problems. In this case, creative abilities of VAG children are extremely beneficial, as they can view the content from a different angle and open up the possibility of tackling the problem offered by the teacher more broadly or comprehensively.



Figure 2. Maja transferred visual arts features into the geometry task

**Example 3**: 1<sup>st</sup> grade children learned how to use the template ruler in geometry for the first time. For their homework, pupils had to draw different geometric shapes. Instead of using the template ruler according to the teacher's instructions, Maja used it in her own way and drew many different animals by combining different geometric shapes. Maja enjoyed the task very much, as it was the 'drawing mathematics' she liked. She implemented the use of the geometric tool, but she also expanded the exercise with her idea. Her teacher did not find her geometric solution suitable, and Maja's work was used as an example of an improper use of the geometric tool. The girl accepted this as a failure. The next day she began to complain about headaches that would prevent her from going to school. The problem was solved by the parents' explanation of Maja's stress to the teacher. However, Maja distrusted the teacher for the rest of the school year. This distrust led Maja to start rejecting the teacher's suggestions and demands in all schoolwork, even in the fine arts lessons she liked most. Throughout the rest of the school year, she relied only on her mother's opinions and suggestions.

Because of children's heightened sensitivity, visual art forms created by VAG children express a deeper engagement with the content that has caught their attention. They focus on details and are very interested in how and why things work. Therefore, it is not unusual for them to take certain objects apart to find out what is hidden in them and what makes them work. All these factors also contribute to deviating from the usual motifs of visual art or the expected presentation of visual art and usually go beyond the simplified presentation of an object (*Example 4*).

**Example 4**: Apart from expressing her sensitivity to visual art forms, Maja was extremely sympathetic to animals and concerned about their welfare. She repeatedly built different shelters for different insects (e.g., beetles, bees with wet wings, injured grasshoppers, etc.) around her family's house. She designed very elaborate and detailed shelters, ensuring that every detail is tailored to their "inhabitants," their well-being, and their needs as she understood them. Certain details were only seen when the object was dismantled. In a conversation with her, it becomes clear that the girl has an explanation for every detail and that every detail has its purpose and exact function.



Figure 3. Maja (6 years) continuously built homes for bugs ("Home for the Beetle")

## Intuitiveness and originality

VAG children bring the ability to express visual art into other fields of activity and learning, and use the expression of visual art as an "instrument" in their play and learning. Pre-school VAG children create all kinds of tools needed for their games (e.g., make tickets for their puppet theatres, design the interior of the place where the toy lives, make miniature picture books for toys, etc.).

A similar phenomenon can be observed in school. VAG children spontaneously use visual arts media to complete the learning content of other school subjects. It can be observed that VAG children focus on the features they find interesting or important in the content. They contain information that is relevant to them, often in a way that the teacher has not considered (*Example 2*). In this way, VAG children may ignore some features that the teacher expects or demands in the content. It is crucial for the well-being of the gifted child that teachers take these characteristics into account (Meckstroth, 1991) and listen to the children's explanations. Some of their explanations may surprise the teacher and make them see the content from a new perspective.

VAG children are generally less inclined to conformism, but especially in art lessons, their art products tend to be clearly different from the results of their peers. It has been shown, however, that uniqueness is one of the biggest problems for general schoolteachers when they attempt to grade the products of the visual arts. The products of gifted children are often unpredictable and surprising, even for art teachers (Zimmerman, 2010) who specialize in the discipline of art and work with older pupils. For general teachers who teach in the early years and are often less specialized in the arts, this is often a major problem. The grading standards that general teachers use usually include the criterion of "originality," but, in practice, the product that meets this criterion often remains unrecognized or misunderstood. An original, unique solution in visual arts does not necessarily follow the established rules, but represents a new, unusual product where a child does not follow the teacher's guidelines but relies on their own vision. Teachers who are confronted with the problem of correctly assessing such unusual products of the visual arts and respecting the positive differences between children often overlook this as an opportunity but, in some ways, see it as an obstacle.

It is true that VAG children use the media of the visual arts more often, which usually leads to better developed fine motor skills. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that quality in the visual arts should not be judged solely based on motor skills (Barnes, 1990). Unfortunately, in school, purely decorative drawings, paintings, or sculptures are rated better than unusual, expressive representations created by artistically gifted children. The problem is that an inadequately adapted form of expression in the visual arts, which evaluates only certain forms positively (e.g., precision or decorativeness), but overlooks the ability to solve (art) problems in a unique way, deprives VAG children of exactly what they should build on. This is particularly important because children may find the teacher's judgement of their performance as a relevant indicator of their success (children compare themselves with each other on this basis; see e.g., Twigg & Garvis, 2010). Some VAG children who are pushed into stressful situations start to refuse to complete the schoolwork and to display negative behaviour (Flint, 2001). In such situations, some even rely on their strong area (e.g. demonstrating their feelings by drawing, painting, etc., even if it does not satisfy the expectations of their environment; see *Figure 4*).

*Figure 4.* Maja (7 years) demonstrated her frustration by drawing emotion portraits on the edge of her notebook where the demanding task made her stressed

**Example 5**: According to her mother's report, Maja (6.7 years) did not like to attend the school (1<sup>st</sup> grade), and she repeatedly visited her pre-school educator during the entire school year (kindergarten and school were in the same building). The girl liked mathematics the least. She had problems understanding numerical values and calculation. It took a great deal of time and energy to motivate Maja to do mathematical tasks or homework. Her parents had to transform numbers into objects so that the girl could imagine and calculate them. Once her pre-school educator helped Maja to make a simple string abacus, a device that made her calculation easier. Maja was very enthusiastic about the creative activity and made some more abacuses. Some of them she gave to her school friends.

## CONCLUSION

In pre-school and early school age, children need to know that adults support and appreciate their activities. During the research, we observed Maja, whose visual art preferences became obvious early, credits also to her mother, who was a teacher of fine arts. Maja continuously expressed her thoughts as well as her feelings through visual art. We saw that she was completely immersed

herself in the activity she was interested in, isolated herself from her surroundings, and delved into her own world and thoughts. In the beginning, the girl showed high self-confidence in her work, but soon after entering school, her confidence began to decline. However, she had strong support at her home, which proved that in the environment and in circumstances in which she could trust into her artistic preferences, she did not expect constant supervision, guidance, or approval from her surroundings. She mainly contacted the people she trusted when she needed such contact. It turned out that Maja proved to be hypersensitive (in both a positive and a negative sense). She was very concerned about the welfare of the weak (e.g., injured animals) and sensitive to incomprehensible criticism (Example 3). The latter caused Maja to be unwilling to accept guidance from people who she believed did not understand her needs. However, she maintained trust in people she believed knew her field of interest (e.g., parents, especially her mother, and pre-school educator) because they had strong arguments for advice and gave her support. We believe that her supportive family environment undoubtedly had an important influence on her creative activities.

All of the above supports the idea that VAG children need an encouraging environment and interlocutors who are able to set appropriately demanding challenges in the field of visual arts, who offer help and support when children express the need for it, and who provide constructive feedback. Johnsen (2012) emphasizes that educators need to "understand the population's characteristics and needs before they plan and implement assessments, curriculum, instructional strategies, learning environments, programming, and professional development" (p. 13). As we established above, identification of visual art preferences or giftedness in the early years is reliable when we monitor children's overall functioning and responses, as well as their art products. VAG children, even in their early years, can be highly autonomous and sincerely believe in their artistic abilities if they receive the right challenges and support from the environment. However, parents, educators, or teachers need to build that trust by accurate argumentation or through a sincere and supportive interest in the child's work, which they nurture constantly and sensitively. Golomb's (1996) case studies proved that parent's extensive knowledge of visual arts is not crucially needed, but it seems in our case study that it was a bonus. When VAG children develop trust in their educator, teacher, or other adults, they will develop legitimate self-confidence in their artistic preferences and abilities, so they will not ask for constant supervision or approval.

Artistic talent in early childhood must not become a reason for neglecting or underestimating development in other disciplines. However, it is appropriate that teachers, especially in lower grades, allow VAG children to use and enhance their artistic potential even in school subjects and disciplines in which art is not the most common practice to approaching (or solving) the tasks. We believe that most school tasks in the early grades allow teachers to adapt tasks so that VAG children can use their strong field. This will make it easier for VAG children to make better progress even in their weaker school subjects.

## **Limitations and Closing Recommendations**

The results of the present research should not be generalized, as each child comes from a different environment, and has their own character and ways of behaving. Different case studies of VAG children have proved that (Golomb, 1996). With the present case study, we wanted to show some indicators of visual art preferences and illuminate their background. As we have shown, Maja's visual art products are not always nice, beautiful, or decorative, but the creative process and the circumstances in which she intervenes in visual art and how she does it show her obvious visual art preferences. We believe that our study may help some parents, educators, and teachers to pay attention when similar indications appear with children in their environment. Most VAG children will not become renowned artists in the future, but with appropriate support, their talent will help maintain their playful curiosity, openness, and creative skills, which are a good basis for achievement in various areas. When enabling VAG children to achieve that, their enthusiasm and courage can open new aspects and contribute to common progress. Many experts engaged in research on giftedness in pre-school and early school age (Lenz Taguchi 2010; Sutherland 2015; Ziegler 2005) emphasize the need for a new paradigm. Some even suggest that it would be better to reform the system than to identify gifted children within the existing system. However, even some of the activities adapted to gifted children could improve the quality of school practice in general, as Zimmermann (2010) points out: "What is learned from best practice environments for talented art pupils should be adapted as outcomes for all pupils and in a variety of educational settings" (p. 88).

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