

# Educating the Art Teacher:

## *Investigating Artistic Endeavors by Students at Home*

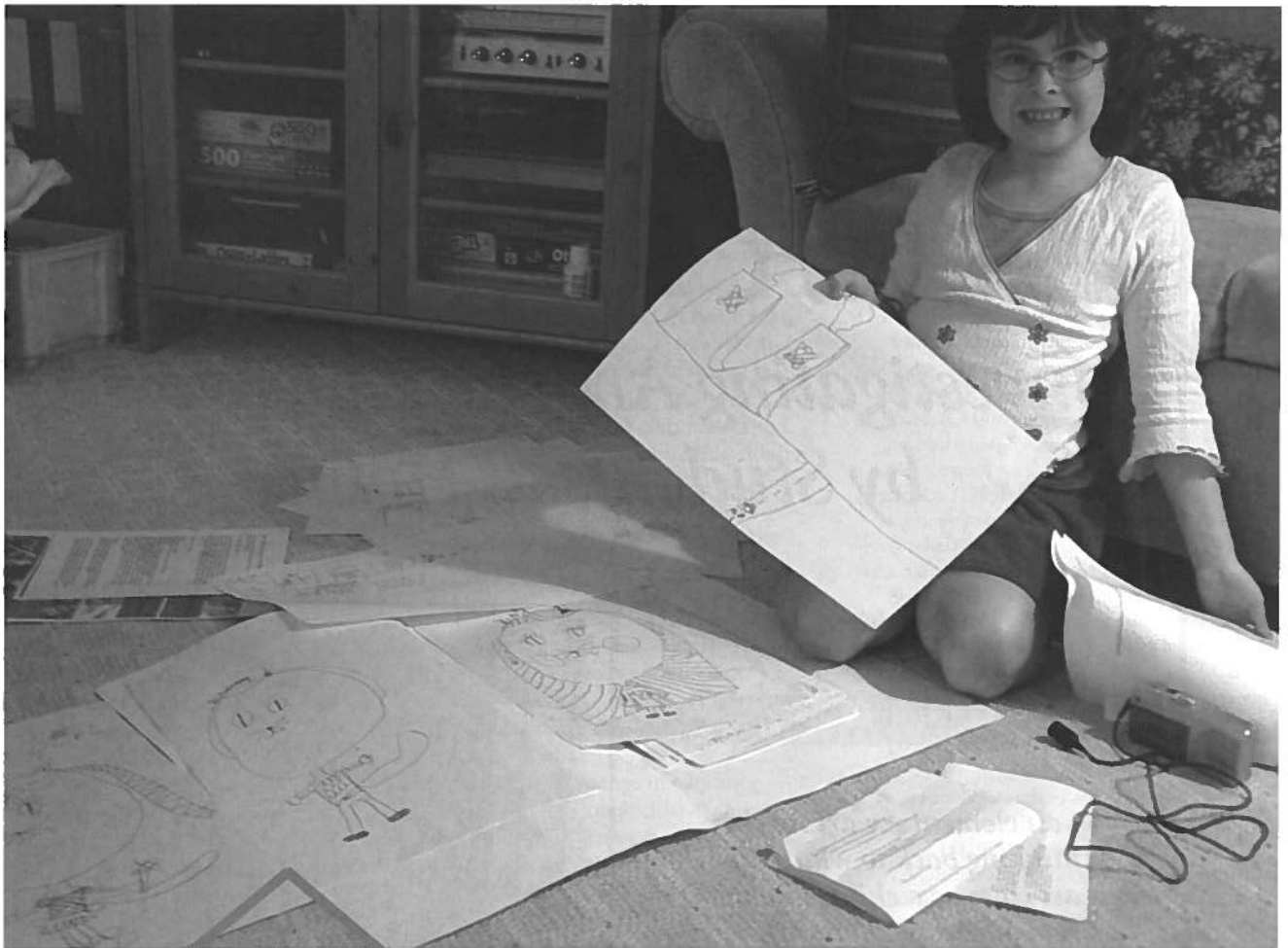
BY JENNIFER E. CRUM

**A**s an elementary art teacher thinking back to what I did in art class as a child, I do not remember much: a construction paper pumpkin for the Halloween parade and a cut-out reindeer face at Christmas.

I think I do not remember more about art at school because these experiences were not that important to me. When I look back at the artistic experiences I had as a child, I think mostly about what I made in my home. I spent many afternoons and weekends creating artworks, without instruction and receiving only encouragement and praise from my family. I remember the fun times after school in my bedroom where I played records and made crayon rubbings on the textured linoleum floor. I remember long weekends at the kitchen table painting and making magazine collages to display around the house. I think I remember these activities so vividly because they meant something to me. Now that I teach art to elementary school children, I consider how students perceive art under my instruction. I question what influences their interests, abilities, and values for art. This curiosity led me to explore art activities that students engage in at their homes.



A portrait of the author around 1981 making art at home.



The sister of the siblings in the "Everywhere" family shows me some of her many drawings.

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Given that I had a set of rich art encounters at home, and that their impact on me was far more lasting than anything I did in school, I wondered about the nature of my students' home art experiences. Did they experience art in ways they considered special and distinct from school-based art projects presented by a teacher? Hamblen (2003) stated that in local contexts, such as home, children produce art that is "personal, autobiographical, fanciful and sometimes socially irreverent" (p. 116). She suggested that local art contexts may provide clues to significant art learning and the experience of "real time" art tasks. Skills used in local art practices need to be identified and considered valid (p. 117).

To explore these questions as a curious art teacher, I conducted a small-scale, observational study. Designed to examine how art is practiced and valued by families living in my rural community, I wanted to know what

purposes art serves the students and their families. I also wanted to discover how families influence the understandings that students have about art. I began the inquiry in the elementary school art classes that I taught. I asked approximately 250 children in grades two through five to write statements about the art they made at home. It was fascinating to read the detailed responses. Activities including quilting, crocheting, and cartooning were some of the most popular kinds of art made at home. Very few students stated they created sculptures or paintings at home. Some students told me specifically where in their homes they made art, such as the kitchen or their bedrooms. Meanwhile, many students would comment on other members of their family being artists, such as siblings, parents, or grandparents. I investigated further by selecting a small group of families to study through in-depth interviews.

Within five families, eight students were interviewed, including two in second grade, one in third grade, three in fourth grade, and two in fifth grade. I selected students who exhibited varying characteristics related to artistic ability, participation, and behavior in the classroom. I hoped that through this investigation, by examining a varied range of students, I could understand why specific attitudes about art seem to contrast in my classroom. Through the interviews, I observed these students in an atypical setting for a teacher: within the family home. The families mostly engaged in making art at distinct settings, inspiring me to label these cases as: the “Daycare” family, the “Garage” family, the “Kitchen” family, the “Basement” family, and the “Everywhere” family.

### **Observing Artistic Behaviors and Attitudes in the Classroom**

In the “Daycare” family, two brothers preferred to make origami projects in art class. They often threw projects away, wasted supplies, and saw art as an activity requiring little effort. In the “Garage” family, the youngest sibling of three maintained a high interest in art class. He showed compassion toward helping others create artworks, and was considered artistically skilled by his peers. However, he found it difficult to judge whether his art was good. In the “Kitchen” family, two sisters demonstrated more previous knowledge of artistic materials than other students in their class. They preferred working collaboratively. In the “Basement” family, a male student showed exceptional aptitude for artistic endeavors, particularly in drawing and painting. He was confident in his artistic ability. Finally, in the “Everywhere” family, a strong-willed brother recalled a wealth of famous artworks seen outside of art class. His younger sister proclaimed that she knew when she was finished with her art because she *was* the artist. Meanwhile, both siblings refused to create a project in my class if the lesson did not suit their artistic styles.

### **Beyond the Classroom and Into the Home**

Artworks created by children in the “Daycare” and “Garage” families were mostly drawings and origami-based paper projects. In the “Daycare” family, the children made artwork using scraps as a sort of time-filler after homework was finished, while the mom prepared dinner and the dad was on his way home from work. While in the “Garage” family, everyone engaged in artmaking: the mother created photographic collages of family events and memories, the children drew and painted, and the father made fishing lures from deer tails, wire, and fabric dyes. The family spent time together, and the parents taught their children how to create projects. Artworks created by children in the “Kitchen” family included organized file cabinets of drawings, paintings, collages of found objects, and kit-based projects such as plastic paint-by-number designs. A stroll through the den revealed a room full of family treasures: hand-carved tables, oil paintings, and pottery created by relatives including aunts, uncles, and grandparents of the children in the “Kitchen” family. Both sisters in the family created artworks together, while their mother assisted them with the processes as she created her own artworks, playing a role as both teacher and participant.

In the “Basement” family, only one child, the middle of three brothers, created artworks. His parents saw him as the artist of the family. He had a wide variety of art projects created and collected over a period of years, including drawings, paintings, and kit-based projects like puzzles, braiding with gimp string, and sand art. An interesting aspect of this student’s artmaking was his manipulation of the materials he used—even kit materials. For example, when he used a “sand art” kit, he did not read the instructions. Instead, he experimented and used the sand for texture in his portrait drawings and imaginative paintings. The “Basement” family artist devoted a large portion of his time and energy at home to produce his artwork. I was particularly interested in investigating this student’s work at home since he took the activity of making art so seriously.

Other students who seemed to take their artmaking seriously were members of the “Everywhere” family. The siblings excitedly showed me a wide variety of drawings kept in their large portfolio bags. Both children created many drawings in their home on a daily basis including a series of comic drawings and imaginative character drawings. The sister had over 45 drawings, mostly based on a cartoon character that fights tobacco-using characters. The mother stated her daughter completed these drawings over a period of 2-3 weeks. The brother had a large quantity of drawings in his portfolio bag as well. Most drawings were based on animal forms and popular science fiction movies. In the “Everywhere” family, the mother created art, collected art purchased in galleries,

and took her children to art museums. She encouraged her children to work independently and preferred to not interfere by giving instructions. She emphasized that the most important aspect about her children making artwork was for them to enjoy it.

### **Family Influences: How Values for Art in the Home Affect Art Practices in the Classroom**

The most intriguing aspect of my investigation was learning how the families influenced students' values for art. For example, in the "Daycare" family, the mother acted as a passive provider of materials and prioritized activities such as math homework. Did this action influence her sons to perceive art as a form of frivolous entertainment, as they had in my classroom? Since art was valued as less important, art class was not taken seriously, and was viewed as a break from other classes. In the art room, behavior-related problems with these boys occurred when they played with art materials and did not complete their artwork during class time. When I noticed other students in my classes exhibiting these types of behaviors, I questioned if similar influences on artistic activities took place in these students' homes.

While in the "Garage" family, acts of making art, decorating, and simply being creative were respected as important. Did the mother's belief that "everything is art" explain her son's inability to make decisions about aesthetics in the classroom? In the "Kitchen" family, the mother served as a provider of art materials and instruction, and a participant in making art with her daughters in the home. In return, her children's values for artistic practices seemed to be transformed beyond those associated just with art. Social skills became influenced and instilled by the family experiences in art, such as cooperation, collaboration, and community involvement. Many students seemed to enjoy working with others to make art in school, which caused me to wonder how many of these children engaged in collaborative, family-oriented artistic activities in their homes.

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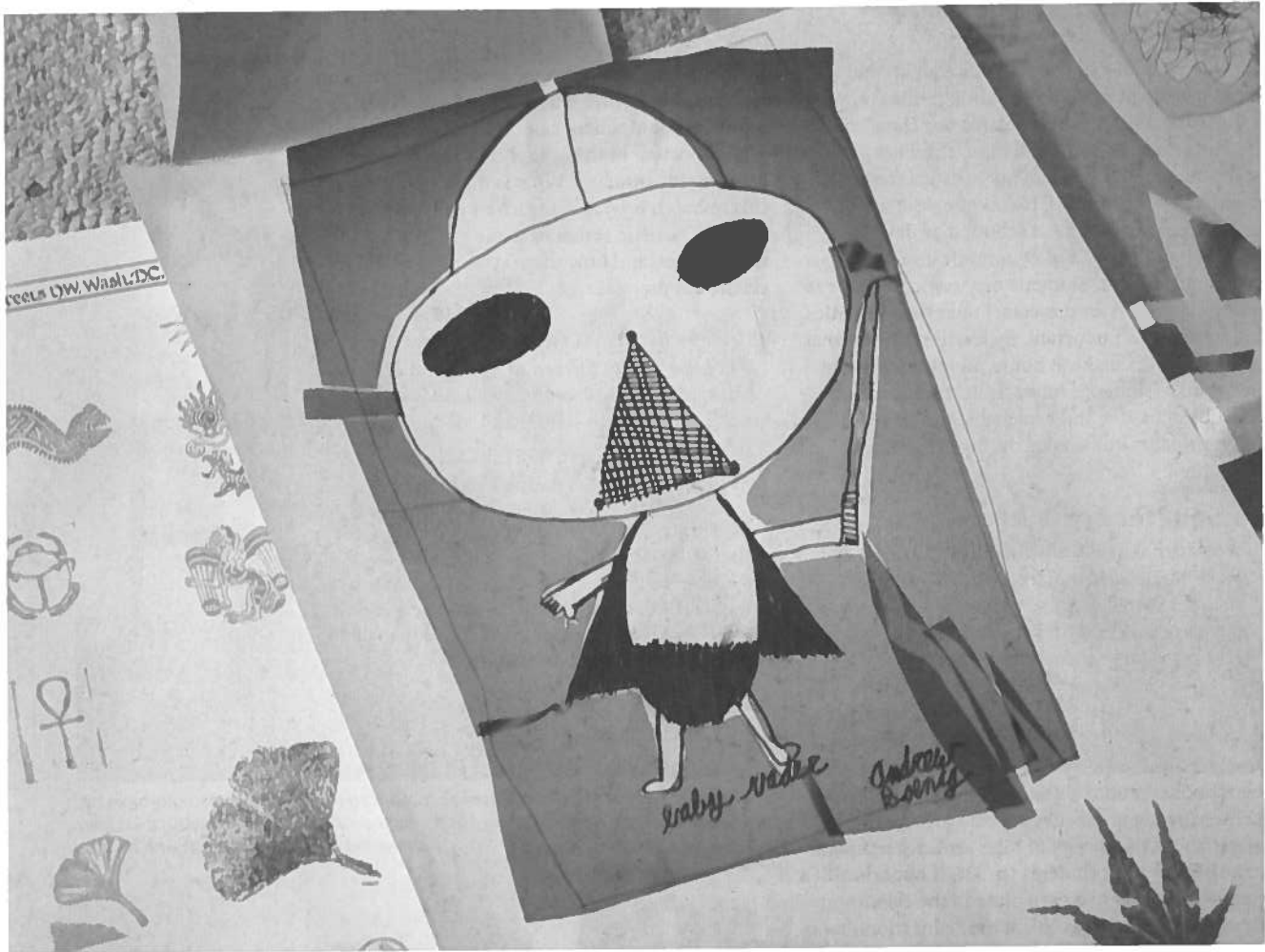
The "Basement" family perceived artistic ability as a gift, which was encouraged by the parents who believed their son was an artist. This strong belief influenced the student to view himself as an artist. In the classroom, the "Basement" family artist strived to excel in any artistic activity presented. He proudly proclaimed himself an artist to his classmates and shared his own self-taught art techniques. This child's confidence became infectious in the art classroom. His values for art related mostly to the parental support he received to pursue artistic activities. The father spoke about how art that has meaning makes one "think about things." He expressed some opinions, which could have further influence on his son's own values about art:

My taste in art relates to having pictures that capture societal issues like things that you would see, and they make you wonder. Pictures that capture something, that's what we would like to see. It probably would not be just a bowl of flowers. I think that art has more importance when it has meaning and not just decoration. (personal communication, May 22, 2006).

Did the father's views of art influence his son's decisions in artmaking, such as the desire to alter procedures of kit-based projects in order to make artworks more original than directions suggest? As a student, the "Basement" artist created artworks that met the specific criteria of classroom assignments, yet, he consistently demonstrated a strong will to remain independent as an artist. Through his choice of subject matter, such as painting a dragon rather than a linear perspective scene, he tended to use imagery that conveyed personal meaning when making his artworks.

Children in the "Everywhere" family acknowledged that their mother promoted artistic growth by providing materials and purchasing artworks. Their mother influenced her children's interest in looking at art and making art by going to places where art was displayed. Both of these children independently chose what art they liked, and what art they wished to create at home. This awareness was apparent in their intent to explore individualism and self-expression through the art they made at home. Meanwhile, it was a challenge to actually teach these students due to their independent habits when making art at home. These children often chose their *own* directions when working on art projects, and refused to complete artworks if their tastes differed from the teacher's grading criteria.

The values about art held by the children in the "Everywhere" family related directly to the mother's view of art as enjoyment: They saw the act of making art as a way of being free from structure and work, and completion of artworks was based on independent choices and decisions. As these students demonstrated an unwillingness to be taught new ways of making art, conflicts arose within classroom instruction. Diverse artistic values and attitudes about art that exist outside school raise questions about how and in what environment art should be formally taught.



An example of a drawing made at home by the brother in the "Everywhere" family.

### The Aftermath: Strategies in the Classroom to Make Art More Relevant to Students' Lives

Through this research process, I developed a set of cause-and-effect relationships among the artworks that students made at home, how their families valued artistic practices, and the behaviors and attitudes I observed in my art classes. I decided to change my practice the following school year by: (1) encouraging students to bring in artworks they created at home to share with others in art class; (2) making connections with my students by incorporating aspects of their art from outside the classroom, such as media and subject matters presented into my curriculum; (3) exhibiting a genuine interest in artworks children make at home to establish trust and respect in my teacher-student relationships.

This research allowed me to find new ways of getting to know students as individual artists and learners. My role as teacher-researcher enabled me to explore concepts of *what art is* to the students and their families in my rural community.

### Suggestions for Activities

After completing interviews, I realized that in one particular fourth-grade class the students were curious about my interest in going to their classmates' homes. The children I did not interview began to question my interest, wanting to know when *their* artwork from home would be discussed. Art educator George Szekely (2006) suggested that for art to have deep significance in children's lives, home art needs to be connected to school art (p. 3). Szekely concluded that children continue being artists when their art dreams are supported in school, and the art ideas they bring from home are valued in school (p. 4). I therefore organized a "show and tell" event in which students brought in artworks made at home, shared their thoughts about how and why they made their art at home. The students explored such questions as "What should I make next?" and "Does this look good?" A class of proud artists and young art teachers emerged as they learned new art techniques and vocabulary words and demonstrated their own unique talents developed at home.

Brent Wilson (2005) stated that although art educators do not usually pay careful attention to the complexities of the works kids produce outside our classrooms, what students make at home can be an excellent catalyst for understanding students' artistic interests and receptiveness. The choice to investigate artistic practices of students outside of school may develop meaningful relationships and communication between the teacher and student. Students may respond better to completing classroom art projects if their own activities are acknowledged as important. By learning about what kinds of art students make at home, an art teacher can be more aware of students' interests in specific media forms or subject matter and can enable the art teacher to build on prior art knowledge during art lessons taught in school.

### Implications for Art Teachers

Children's artmaking is self-initiated. Wilson (2005) stated that children's self-initiated production of visual culture qualifies as pedagogy. Children make decisions to create work or not, and they make decisions about the subject matter and media types of their own artworks. Wilson characterized three pedagogical sites based on: (1) spaces where children construct their own visual culture texts, (2) the conventional art classrooms where teachers instruct art activities, and (3) a place between school art and children's self-initiated spaces (p. 18). These pedagogical sites provide ways to think expansively about the variety of roles art teachers might play in the lives of their students (p. 33). If opportunities are given for home art to have a place in the classroom, art educators could learn to balance art education that is based on curriculum, with that of their students' visual culture from home.

Opportunities need to be provided for students in art classes to reveal how the artworks created at home or out of school can be recognized as legitimate and important in the school curriculum to enrich learning for students. What is most significant about this research is what art teachers can learn from the students' artistic activities made out of school and in their homes, and how these activities can inform classroom practice.

*Jennifer E. Crum is the elementary art teacher at Dr. James Craik Elementary School in Pomfret, Maryland. E-mail: crum2298@yahoo.com*

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