



# Artist/Art Educator: *Making Sense of Identity Issues*

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***“Where do you work? Oh, you are an art teacher. What kind of art do you make?” Have you ever grappled with how to define yourself—teacher, artist or both?***

We, the authors, are three experienced art teachers who, while enrolled in a graduate art education program, sat in our studio, pondered these questions and tried to rekindle the artists within us. Although our histories and current positions were different, we had similar experiences and questions relating to our professions. We were educators, we were artists, and we were struggling to be both. We soon realized that we were actually juggling issues common to many individuals in art education and concluded that studying the topic might prove helpful.

In order to understand the nature of the identity phenomenon, we studied the lives of 11 art teachers' in depth, and asked how they experienced their professional identities as art teachers and artists. The names of the participants were changed to pseudonyms for our report and are used throughout this article. The participants came from three locations across the United States—a major east coast city, a midwestern suburb, and a Caribbean island—and taught different K-12 grade levels. All the participants but one were women. These participants

represented a continuum based on their preparation either in studio art, art education, or professional education.

The participants recorded their stories in journals and interviews based upon questions related to their experiences of their professional identities during preservice preparation, at school, through artmaking, and with socio-psychological role perceptions (See journal prompts in Figure 1). In addition, 3 of the teachers participated in a visual data gathering strategy (S. J. Johnson, personal communication, January 20, 2003) in which they created abstracted collages illustrating their identities and environment. The results of the data revealed emergent patterns in the narratives which we hope clarify an issue that (1) art teachers may confront during their careers and, (2) is generally muted in the world of art education.

1. Experiences of training in: education, art education and/or fine arts
2. Experiences with administrators, colleagues or students relating to your role in the school
3. Influences on classroom practice including artmaking
4. The dual professional role of artist/teacher
5. Naming of professional self

Figure 1: Journal Prompt Topics.

## Experiences Relating to Professional Identity

When we examined the ways in which the art teachers experienced their identities as professionals, the significant factors were: (a) amount and kind of preservice preparation, including studio course work, specific art education programs and art teacher mentors; (b) work environment (e.g., "school culture"); (c) existence or non-existence of artist identity before preservice training; and (d) management of professional identities.

**Preservice preparation.** We found, both in our study and through our review of the literature, that the lack of adequate preservice preparation for art educators was very influential in the development of weak or conflicted artist and art educator identities. Chapman (1982), Day (1997), and Zwirn (2002), among others, frequently mention the need for strong professional preparation in art education. The reasons for this identity conflict are numerous—art education degrees granted without authentic art education coursework, either too much or too little focus in studio art, general educators hired as art teachers, and art-educators' perceived lower status in the art world. According to Day (1997) art educators "enter the field as teachers of art, not having the benefits of knowing their professional foundations, the literature of their chosen field, or the major contributors of art education" (p. xi).

**Art education.** Thoughtful, thorough art education preparation has the potential to build foundational identities that enable art teachers to move into the real world of their field and identify themselves confidently as art educators and as artists. One way to achieve this confidence is to weave together the artist and teacher identities to create the art educator's professional identity.

In our small sampling, we found that the art teachers with the least identity conflict had early, simultaneous preparation in art and art education, although a specialized art-education major did not guarantee comfort with the art teacher's role. For example, Eva and Michelle were prepared as general educators and expressed insecurity with their professional roles. Kim, Cindy and Tara were fine artists, by early training, and voiced high dissatisfaction. Scottie, trained in fine art with an artist/teacher mentor, wrote and spoke with satisfaction and confidence as an artist/teacher himself. Both Lee and Miriam were prepared as art education specialists and found their programs seriously lacking, but eventually identified with the role of art educator. Only Mimi, from a comprehensive undergraduate art education program, remained secure when asked about her preservice preparation. Our study confirms the view that an ideal, undergraduate-level, art education program recognizes the importance of the two identities interacting, acknowledges that one profoundly influences the other, and effectively reinforces both.

**Fine art.** A well-developed artist identity is grounded in technical knowledge, practice and creative philosophy. Strengths or weaknesses in these areas inform the professional identity of the art educator in both positive and negative ways. For some participants the classroom was viewed as a work of art-in-progress and formed an outlet for the teacher's creativity. As Cindy, an art teacher with a well-developed artist identity states, "I think I challenge myself as an artist [in the classroom]. I get my art, and thrill that I need from art, by coming up with ideas [for student projects]." However, for those participants with limited studio training, the artist identity was not thoroughly developed, and suffered in the long term. This lack of development negatively impacted the art educator identity, as illustrated by Miriam, who was certified through an art education department. Miriam wrote, "I did not have any in depth [art] experience ... I think I felt unprepared to teach most things because I mostly had Intro. to Jewelry Making, Intro. to Sculpture, etc."



Figure 2: Scottie's Class Demonstration.

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**General education.** General education courses are also part of an art education degree program. Our research participants acknowledged completing these courses yet many perceived them negatively. The participants concluded that most of these classes were unsuccessful in creating a connection between the general field of education and the visual arts as a specialized discipline.

Three of our participants came from a general education background and struggled to develop their identities as professional art educators. As Michelle explained, "I am an anomaly, one of those teachers of art without fine arts degree credentials, about whom other art teachers justifiably complain... I will continue to feel self-conscious about this despite the confidence that I have in my work." Michelle, like the other participants who became art teachers after training only in classroom teaching, felt insecure in her role.

**Mentors.** Additionally, most participants mentioned, unprompted, that having a mentor was influential in the development of their professional identities. According to Chickering & Reisser (in Zwirn, 2002, p. 47), "Mentors have key roles in helping students clarify values as well as educational and career goals." In our study, this role model appeared in the form of a family member, teacher, professional contact, artist, or a model from history.

The important influences of preservice preparation upon participants' professional identities can be summarized as (a) amount and kind of preservice course work, (b) quality of art education programs, and (c) mentors, both teachers and artists. Preservice preparation sets the stage for professional identity and lays down a foundation, but over time decreases in importance as practice takes over.

**The school culture.** Professional identity forms over time and with varied experiences and meaningful feedback that allow people to gain insight about their central and enduring preferences, talents and values (Schein in Ibarra, 2004). Art teachers' practice in the school setting and their perceptions of the experience become the dominant influences on their professional identities as their careers evolve. Whether the artist and teacher identities are viewed as one or as separate, the day-to-day interactions with members of the school community illuminate the issues around the topic of identity. We compare the participants' responses from our case study with literature and findings of experts within the field of art education and identity theory in the following section.

**Administrators' role in the art educator's professional identity.** In general, administrators determine the art teachers' job duties and responsibilities within the school. They are responsible for hiring faculty, scheduling, budget issues, and moral support, among other duties. Chapman's (2004) most recent survey on the status of art education indicates that colleagues' and administrators' lack of knowledge about visual arts programs continues to be a problem. Though not all of our participants reported negative feelings regarding their administrators, it was an issue for many as witnessed by the poor scheduling, lack of financial support, and true recognition of their art

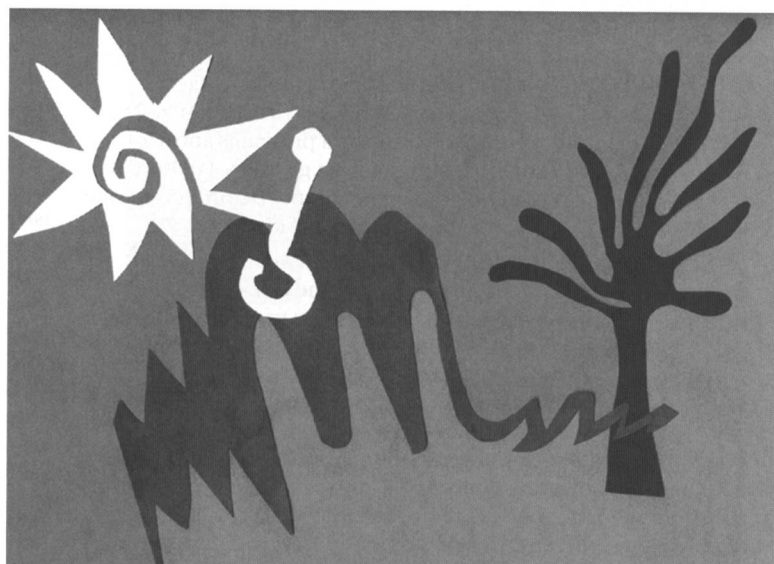
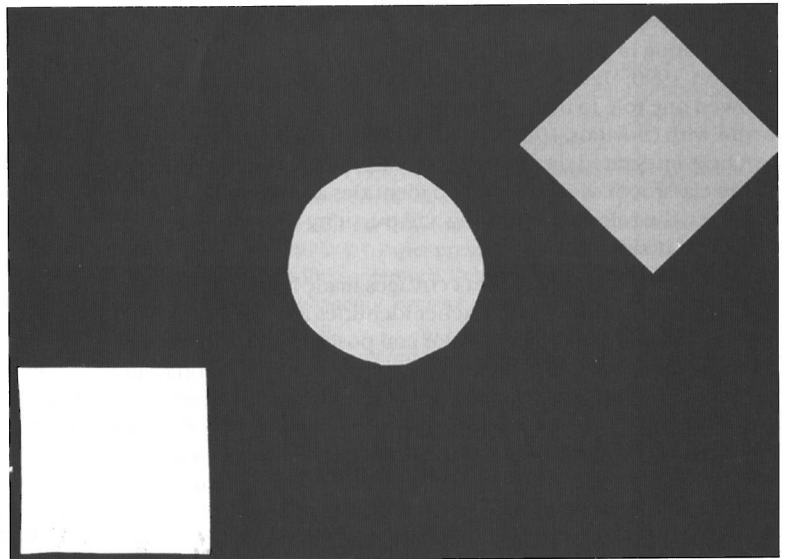
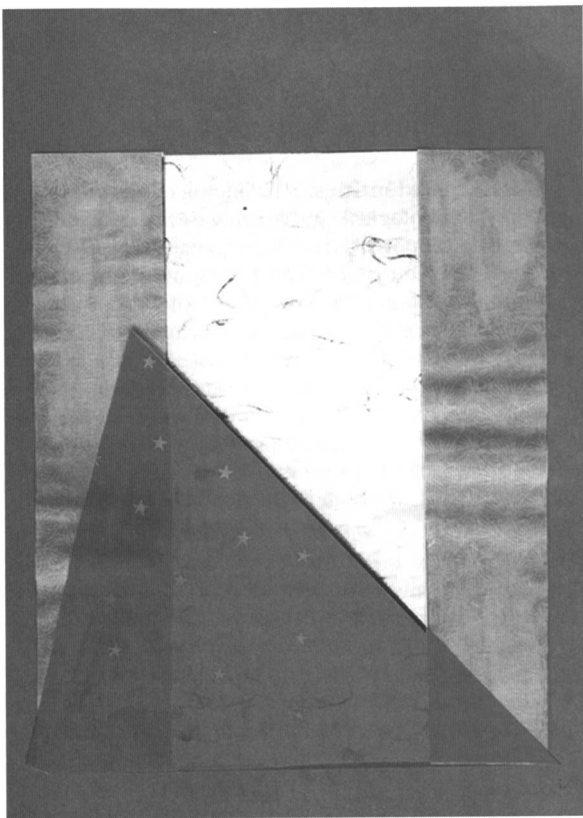


Figure 3: Participants' Visualizations of Identity Experiences: (from left) Kim's Conflict, Lee's Balance, Eva's Separation.

programs. Michelle summed up her urban, elementary situation this way: "This year, class periods are 10 minutes shorter. Transit times between classes are 5 instead of 10 minutes. I feel like one stop on an assembly line, where the process of artmaking is either misunderstood or discounted." On a more positive note, Mimi, a Mid-Western elementary art teacher mentioned, "Every once in a while there will be a nice note in my mailbox. It is a good feeling." These vignettes illustrate the extent to which administrators can impact one's professional identity.

**Dual roles: Educating the students, nurturing the artist.** Even though the participants agreed that their primary responsibility at work was to educate students rather than promote themselves as artists, the majority reported that maintaining the artist identity was important. Our participants tried to do this by bringing the artist identity into the classroom and/or pursuing their own artistic work outside of the classroom. Relying on memories of being an artist was not enough for participants to feel secure in both artist and teacher roles. The difficulties and successes experienced by the participants in maintaining both roles are better understood through the identity theory work of Smith-Lovin (Burke et al., 2003), who tells us that if one wants to maintain two identities, one must create situations where they are simultaneously validated. In other words, if the artist identity is not validated in the school or elsewhere, then it may drop out of the picture and most likely will not return until the person enacts it.

Being recognized as an artist and teacher was extremely empowering for those participants who were able to fuse the two roles together. Having the courage to do this was a major obstacle for several of the participants. Miriam, a highly distinguished elementary art teacher, reported increased self-confidence and tremendous satisfaction after exhibiting her



artwork publicly for the first time after 33 years of teaching. At the opening, she stated to one of the researchers: "This is the happiest day of my life, all art teachers should have a show. I just needed someone to push me into it." In contrast, Scottie, a Caribbean high school art educator who has been actively making art, described the validation that he experienced through giving and selling his work to others *in his school*, including his principal. (See Figure 2.)

**Quality art education programs value the artist as teacher.** On one level, the desire to be an artist and a teacher may be viewed as a personal matter; however, maintaining both roles has been shown to be a significant indicator of successful art education programs. In the *Gaining the Arts Advantage* report (1999), which identified factors that contribute to successful art education programs, both art teachers and administrators express the importance of "the teacher as artist." The report states, "Teachers who also pursue their artistic life repeatedly told researchers that the value placed on the professional quality of their art by school administrators stimulates and refreshes their commitment both to their art and to teaching" (p. 13). As observed in both this report and our study, the amount and kind of artistic activity may vary from person to person, but the experience is invaluable.

In summary, the school setting has a mixed influence on the artist/teacher identities of the participants, regardless of their training. The knowledge and support of the visual arts by administrators is important to the identity of their art teachers. The participants reported many different strategies for incorporating their artist identity into the school setting, which increases their commitment to teaching. They also reported that validation as an artist outside the school culture was important.

## Interaction Between Art Educators' Dual Professional Identities

Although identity is not as easy to observe as a mentor or classroom, it is a noticeable thread that weaves through the lives of art teachers. Psychologists believe that professional identity builds on personal identity. The subjective experiences of our participants' teaching and artmaking practices both formed and were formed by their personal and social psychology as well as their educational background and work environment.

### Importance of childhood influences on artist identity.

In examining the language used in their responses to interviews, we found that 7 of the 11 participants in this study internalized a childhood artist identity that became a part of the foundation for their professional lives. This inner artist may no longer practice daily, may not trade aesthetic offerings for cash, or show in a gallery, but unless she or he "makes things special" (Dissanayake, 2000), the artist's identity becomes overshadowed and eventually unravels. One art teacher reported a spiritual connection at age 5 that told her she was an artist. Two other participants claim that they had "always been artists." Another participant's artist self came from her "core," and the final two simply called themselves artists, as one said, "because of the way I view my world." These statements illustrate one aspect of the dictionary definition of "professional"—that of having a "calling." The participants who were the least conflicted with their dual identities reinforced this early sense of calling with combinations of studio training, personal practice, and/or mentoring.



## Professional Identity Management Strategies

We found three broad categories of professional identity management used to minimize conflict when we related both the participants and the researchers of this study to art teachers participating in similar studies (Anderson, 2000; Chapman & Newton, 1990; Mishler, 1995; Zwirn, 2002). Some individuals allowed one role to overtake the other or had only one identity to begin with (Bolanos, 1986; Parks, 1992; Zwirn, 2002). Other art teachers integrated the two roles by becoming an artist/teacher in the classroom, viewing the two identities as one. Still others balanced the roles by separating and pursuing them at different times and in different spaces.

Figure 3 shows three abstract collages made by participants to illustrate their artist and art teacher identities and their school setting. The choices of shape, color and position indicate three identity management strategies, corroborating information found in their interviews and journals, and in the literature. The strategies depicted do not fall neatly into one category or the other, but do provide a visual image of how each art teacher experienced her professional identity (from left to right): conflict, near balance and separation (Jung, 1964, Scott, 1969, Rose, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

**Holding one professional art educator identity.** Susan Zwirn (2002) notes,

Pushing a certain type of art teacher to become a practicing artist in addition to being a teacher may instill anxiety and a sense of failure in art teachers who are successful ... These individuals may be excellent art teachers who develop their students and themselves through nurturance and sacrifice. (p. 219)

One participant, Miriam, had a long career as an art educator and was perfectly happy in this single professional identity, although she has felt external pressure to be more of an artist.

**Integrating multiple identities into one.** The participants, with the help of a support system that includes a strong art education college course or personal role model, usually negotiated a management system in which multiple identities are integrated. For example, Scottie, who consciously modeled his professional identity after the Renaissance master-apprentice relationship, sometimes succeeded in this strategy and wrote at one point, "I am both an artist and a teacher of art. They are both who I am and what I do." Professionals in the fields of both psychology and art education describe integration of identities as beneficial to the individual (Erikson as cited in Zwirn, 2002; Mishler, 1995; Stankiewicz, 2001).

*Most art educators valued recognition as an artist and teacher, both inside and outside the school.*

**Balancing of multiple identities.** A balancing of multiple identities is another psychological strategy that developed because the cacophony of potential choices available in contemporary society demands that many people hold multiple, often contradictory, identities (Gergen, 2000). Both Mishler (2000) and Feldman (1982) tell us that artists in particular struggle with an identity conflict from the nebulous status accorded their role in society—they can be marginalized as frivolous romantics, egotistic modernists, or edgy social critics and be worshipped as gallery idols. Kim, a studio-trained participant was "... uncomfortable to be labeled as an 'artist' because I'd either have to be so great—or be artsy... a freak." Neither of these two extreme artist models integrated easily with the more conventional teacher role.

Many art educators, and over half of those in our study, hold their artist self as an identity ideal and want to maintain multiple identities, highly salient to them, but usually marginal to the school community. Participants who were able to clearly separate the roles of artist and educator had some success in balancing both. This successful balancing was sometimes accomplished by focusing on one or the other sequentially over time, sometimes by allotting a dedicated physical space for each. One participant, Lee, convinced her principal to allow her to share her teaching with another artist/teacher, each taking a semester off for personal studio work. But not everyone in the study felt the need to pursue this type of arrangement, as illustrated by Miriam; "I think an art teacher can be a good art teacher without being a practicing artist. I did this for 20 years while my second child was growing up and I felt I did not have the time to be a good teacher, mother, wife and artist." Miriam's time line revolved around motherhood. She had more time for making art after raising her children, as was the case with other women in our study.

One view of the connection between making art and teaching was elegantly explained by a participant in a similar study by Mishler (2000); "... because I've been trained as an artist to look at a problem and find its solutions, not one solution (pounding the table for emphasis) but many solutions, [taking] ... a creative approach has allowed me to ... work with a kid in a way that relies on looking at something from all different angles" (p. 104). This woman was not alone in believing that the creation of her own art was a reinforcing element in maintaining her art educator identity.

**Naming.** *Naming*, a term used by Lippard (2000) when writing about art created by disenfranchised social groups, appeared to be a step in balancing and prioritizing the simultaneous professional identities of artist and art educator. The process of naming themselves (see Figure 1, #5), was visibly empowering for our participants, as described by Leigh who sat up straighter and spoke more assertively as she noted in an interview, "I always sign my name, artist/art educator ... and I always put artist first." The act of identifying herself as an artist first and foremost helped shape her dual identity, while "naming" evidently gave her strength. The names our participants chose to wrap around their professional identities developed over time and were indicators of identity synthesis and professional confidence.

## Conclusion

The implications of our study for art teachers include the following. Firstly, we found more long-term identity issues in most of our participants with both general education and fine art backgrounds. Although our art education majors reported being unprepared after college, all adjusted with experience and said they eventually identified with being art educators, though two out of the three were actively striving to reinforce the artist side of their professional selves. In addition, even though preservice preparation was important, the formation of any professional identity occurs over a lifetime of career experiences, and such development for the art teacher is no different.

Administrators were the most problematic members of the school community for our participants during their careers because, with some exceptions, they did not provide the meaningful feedback needed to maintain an ongoing sense of identity for the art teachers. We found that most art educators valued recognition as an artist and teacher, both inside and outside the school. This recognition was extremely empowering for those participants who wanted to and were able to fuse the two roles. Lacking the time and/or courage to create and show artwork, when coupled with a calling to do so, precipitated a major sense of failure and identity conflict for several participants. Others used identity management strategies, which included: (a) accepting one role and excluding the other; (b) integrating two identities into one; (c) separating, holding and balancing more than one professional identity by managing time and space; and finally, (d) empowering oneself by "naming" one's professional identity.

We began this case study with varying beliefs about the artist/teacher identity conflict. Our opinions, like those of our participants, reflected our diverse backgrounds, and throughout the research process we have reconsidered and adjusted some of our previous beliefs. We broadened our definitions of "artist" to include the sense of having a "calling" and dropped a value judgment of "good or bad" artist when considering our participants' self-defined professional identities. We also realized that while excellent art teachers do exist without an artist identity, having both an artist and art educator identity was almost always expected. This dual identity could be a positive experience for an art teacher who had that sense of calling, especially if reinforced by positive feedback within the school. Finally, we found that art educators who held the identity ideal of the artist/teacher could realize both identities through conscious management strategies. We would like to see the need for these types of identity management addressed in both higher education and professional growth for art educators.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The study was conducted at a private, urban art college from June 2003 to July 2004.

<sup>2</sup>As part of our data gathering, we asked participants to make and write about a collage of three colored shapes representing their school environments, their artist selves and their teacher-selves. We used concepts of S. Johnson to design the exercise and those of Lüscher, Jung, and Rose to analyze the images.