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Tom Barone

Arizona State University, U.S.A

Liora Bresler

University of Illinois at Urbana—Champaign, U.S.A.

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Experiences of Artists and Artist-Teachers Involved in Teacher Professional Development Programs

Rena Upitis
Queen's University

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Abstract

This research explores the experiences of artists and artist-teachers involved in two professional development programs for arts education: a national Canadian program and a state-wide American program. Both programs aim to help classroom teachers develop ways of teaching in and through the arts by interacting with partnering artists and/or arts organizations. Based on survey data and interviews with artists, artist-teachers, teachers, and administrators, the paper outlines the experiences of artists and artist-teachers who had been involved in the programs for at least two years. The main themes developed through this research were: (1) how artists' views of their art forms were altered, (2) what the artists viewed as challenges of contemporary public education, (3) how artists' views of the teaching profession were altered, and (4) how artists articulated the benefits of the arts in young people's lives. The paper closes with a discussion of issues to consider when designing professional development programs involving artists and teachers.

In recent years a variety of professional development programs have been fashioned to increase the level of arts literacy of classroom teachers in North American public schools (Mitchell, 2000; Remer, 1996; Vagianos, 1999). While there is some empirical data on how these programs have affected teachers, there is very little research on the ways in which the artists who become involved with these programs are affected (Meban, 2002). Yet, these artists often have distinctive insights into both artistic and teaching processes. Consequently, the present paper focuses on the views of artists and artist-teachers who have been involved in two such programs: Learning Through the Arts, a national Canadian program, and the professional development programs offered by the Kentucky Center for the Arts. By artists, I refer to the musicians,

dancers, drummers, painters, and storytellers who would identify art-making as their primary vocation and/or source of income and for whom the professional development program that they are involved in is a secondary occupation or interest. By artist-teacher, I refer to those teachers with substantial professional training in one or more art forms, who maintain a home studio or are otherwise active in art-making, but whose primary vocation is teaching.

Literature

There are a wide variety of forms of teacher development programs in the arts including summer institutes, short courses in the arts, and other types of partnerships involving teachers, artists, arts organizations, and school districts. Some of these programs are at the school district level where regional resources are harnessed to form collaborations between teachers, artists, and cultural institutions (Babineau, 1998; Vagianos, 1999). Others occur on a school-wide basis, where a substantial proportion of the teachers in the school are involved in the initiative (Upitis, Smithrim, & Soren, 1999; Elster, 2001). Most of these programs claim that their purpose is not to transform classroom teachers into arts specialists. Rather, these programs attempt to infuse more arts-inspired approaches into classroom teaching, particularly when arts specialists are no longer present in the numbers that they once were, to carry the mantle of arts education (Stake, Bresler, & Mabry, 1991). As Elster (2001) stated in describing Learning Through the Arts, the goal of program is not to treat the arts as a separate area of learning, but, to use the arts in a “comprehensive and complex approach to bringing about school transformation ... meet[ing] the day-to-day needs of teachers” which include pressures to conform to governmentally mandated curricula and testing regimes.

The extent to which the issues relating to the artistic process are encountered in an artist’s work in an educational partnership will depend in part on how deeply the artist is involved in the partnership itself. A recent American publication delineates a continuum of artist involvement in educational settings, ranging from “performing artist” to “interacting artists” to “collaborating artist” to “master instructional artist” (Gradel, 2001). In this document, some of the challenges artists face in working in educational settings are also discussed, including the difficulties of finding time to plan and communicate with teachers, of planning assessment strategies that resonate with the school system, and of resolving the tension between individual artistic endeavors and processes with the philosophies and teaching approaches of the educational settings.

The institutional challenges identified by Gradel (2001) in relation to arts partnerships have been identified by other researchers examining arts partnerships (e.g., Bumgarner, 1994; Meban, 2002; Patteson, Upitis, & Smithrim, 2002) and are also echoed in the general literature on teacher development and change. Some of these factors include teacher autonomy, availability of resources, time for planning and development, support of administrators, school commitment to professional development, and district and provincial/state policies regarding curriculum and testing (Elster, 2001; Fullan, 1991; Gradel, 2001; Patteson, 2005; Sarason, 1999).

The specific challenges identified by an administrator who was involved in the Kentucky Center for the Arts are also relevant to this discussion, not only because these sentiments were expressed about one of the specific professional development programs under consideration in the present paper, but also, because these sentiments were expressed two decades ago (Rowlett, 1986). Rowlett, a school principal whose teachers were involved with the Kentucky Center over a period of several years, claimed that in order for an arts program to thrive, the program required the full support of the local and regional administrators as well as the school staff, with particular individuals being identified as the champions for the program. Like others, Rowlett identified the importance of supporting professional development of teachers through financial support and release time. Rowlett also noted that the objectives of the particular arts partnership had to be clearly articulated. However, the area that Rowlett emphasized most was the need to involve the greater community, arguing that without exposure in the community and the

subsequent support of the community, arts programs would ultimately fail to thrive. Indeed, the involvement of the community for successful teacher development and school change is perhaps more important in arts partnerships than in other forms of professional development because one of the features of the arts is that they often involve a performance aspect that is less apparent in other disciplines, and further, that such performances or exhibitions often need to take place in particular venues in order to be effective.

Based on the literature, it was expected that the reflections of the artists and artist-teachers would center on three basic areas, namely, the political-social context of schooling, the artistic process, and the logistics associated with establishing and maintaining arts partnerships. In analyzing the data, however, I was open to the emergence of new themes arising from the data.

Method and Analysis

Selection of Professional Development Programs

Both of the programs selected for the present research shared the broadly stated aim of enabling teachers to enliven their work through the arts and/or arts-based approaches. The Canadian Learning Through the Arts (LTTA) program, established in 1994, operates throughout Canada and in the United States, Italy, Singapore, and Sweden (<http://www.rcmusic.ca/>). As the name implies, Learning Through the Arts focuses on ways of using the arts to introduce and reinforce learning in other subjects, such as the mathematics and sciences. LTTA is a school-wide initiative, with a minimum commitment of three years. It runs through the course of a regular school year, with some professional development meetings between artists and teachers scheduled just prior to the beginning of each school year. Schools taking part in LTTA pay approximately \$50/student, which includes professional development for teachers and artists, as well as artist visits to the classrooms. While prior research on this program has provided ample evidence of transformations in teachers' practices as a result of their experiences with professional artists and arts organizations (Grauer, Irwin, de Cosson, & Wilson, 2001; Patteson, Smithrim, & Upitis, 2002) and ample evidence, also, of the positive effects of the program on students (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005), the artists' perspectives have not received the same attention.

In 1983, the Kentucky Center for the Arts was established as a center for the performing arts in Louisville, Kentucky (<http://www.kentuckycenter.org/>). From its inception, it had a strong educational focus, creating programs to enrich the lives of people in Kentucky through experiences in the arts. By using both its own extensive arts facilities, as well as the facilities of partnering organizations throughout the rest of the state, the Kentucky Center has embarked on an impressive array of educational projects. Two of the best-known programs are the Kentucky Institute for Arts in Education held in Louisville, and the regional Arts Academies, offered in six regions throughout the state. Summer institutes and academies are available to teachers who volunteer to take part in such professional development opportunities, and these teachers are usually supported financially by their school administrations. Thus, teacher participants come from a variety of school cultures, and together, work with artists and arts organizations.

Kentucky Institute for Arts Education, Spring, 2004



Data Collection and Sample Sizes

Data were collected from artists and artist-teachers through surveys, individual interviews, and focus group interviews over a period of four years. The focus groups included both artist-teachers and classroom teachers. Program directors and site administrators were also interviewed. Both partnerships were involved with most types of data collection, although in some cases data collections occurred in different years. The artist survey was administered to artists associated with only one of the two partnerships. In all cases, participants were assured results would be reported anonymously.

The artist survey was administered in 2001 to all artists who had been involved in the educational partnership for two or more years in the capacity of a “collaborating artist” or “master instructional artist” as defined by the *Creating Capacity* framework (Gradel, 2001). A number of open-ended questions focused on artists’ classroom experiences, perceptions of teaching and learning, and on how the educational partnerships affected their personal and professional growth. Close to 90 artists met the selection criteria and were surveyed; the response rate was slightly over 40%.

In 2002 and 2004 four individual interviews with artists who had been involved in one of the two programs for at least five years were conducted. Of these four artists, two had also completed the survey. In one case, the artist had been involved in educational partnerships of various kinds for two decades. In these interviews, artists were encouraged to reflect on the processes associated with teaching and learning, to talk about how the provincially and state-mandated curricula affected their work, and to speak about their own art-making.

Interviews with program directors in the spring of 2004 allowed for the triangulation of results from the artist and artist-teacher data. Program philosophies, political and institutional factors, modifications to programming over time, and issues dealing with program logistics and costs were explored through these interviews. Further triangulation was achieved through focus group interviews with teachers, in which teachers were encouraged to describe their experiences with the professional development program in terms of their own art-making, the art-making of their students, the program logistics, and the ways in which they interacted with the artists. These focus group interviews with teachers were conducted three times, in 2001, 2002, and 2004.

Text files containing responses to open survey questions and transcriptions of interviews were imported into *Atlas.TI* software to facilitate the coding and analysis of the data. A set of data codes based on prior analytic work was used for the first level of analysis (Patteson, Upitis, & Smithrim, 2002). Additional open codes were added based on the literature dealing with artistic practice, institutional influences, and on the structural features of the two programs. After the first level of analysis, open codes were modified insofar as some codes were collapsed or eliminated, and the remaining codes were grouped into families. For example, the family “views of the teaching profession” included such codes as “attitudes of teachers”, “pressures on teachers” and “classroom discipline”. All of the codes relating to the program structures were eliminated because the nature of the program—that is, whether it was a full-school commitment, operating year round, or whether it was a series of summer offerings made to teachers from different schools—made no discernible difference to the artists.

Four overarching themes remained: influences on art-making, views of the teaching profession, challenges of public education, and benefits of the arts. The results reported in the next section are organized according to the final families of codes.

Results

Influences on Art-Making

By far the most prevalent theme revolved around the ways in which artists’ practices and attitudes were influenced as a result of taking part in the professional development programs.

For the most part these influences were positive ones. Many artists described how some of the skills associated with their particular art form had been sharpened through their work with teachers and students. One sculptor claimed he was more skilled at bust portraiture as a result of his work with the students and their teachers. A musician talked about how her classroom experiences had given her new ideas for “handling and approaching [her] own home studio music classroom”.



Sometimes these positive comments had to do with attitudes towards art-making. One artist stated that she had more self-confidence as a result of taking part in the professional development program and that she was more likely to achieve her personal artistic goals as a result. Another claimed that her “people skills” improved as a result of taking part in the partnership, which had a positive effect on her professional reach as a dancer

**Kentucky Institute for Arts Education,
Spring, 2004**

and choreographer. One artist suggested that “working with artists from across the country expanded [his] exposure to and understanding of a variety of art forms”.

There were a number of cases where the artists indicated that there was no interaction between their work in the educational program and their own art-making. This may have been because their own art-making was of a different nature than the work they did with teachers and students in the schools, and the two worlds, therefore, simply did not meet. Neither of the two programs described in the present paper had a formal artist-in-residence component, and for this reason, it would have been easier to separate one’s own art-making from the educational partnership.

Views of Teachers and the Teaching Profession

Half of the artists in the sample felt that, as a result of taking part in the professional development programs, they had become “more conscious of, and sensitive to, the needs and struggles that educators face in their daily practice”. One artist claimed that “working side by side with teachers in the classrooms has [positively] changed my attitudes towards teachers”. This artist was astonished at how teachers were able to extend what she had offered, claiming that “the majority of teachers and students in the classrooms have taken the lessons I have provided and extended them beyond my wildest dreams”.

Many artists said they had developed an “appreciation for the patience and organizational skills of elementary school teachers”. More often than not, this kind of awareness led to new skill development in the artists. A number of the artists talked about developing patience and flexibility in the context of classroom life, and about their learning in relation to classroom management and relationship building with teachers and students.

However, it is also the case that a sizeable portion of artists did not hold teachers in high regard, and some chose to leave the programs because they felt that their work as artists was not valued by teachers, or was so distorted by the educational system that they were no longer producing art, but rather creating lessons with the art as a “motivational gimmick” to engage children to take part in the work that they would rather not do. Another artist felt that teachers were simply not interested in extending the art-making that was introduced by the artists, stating that she “made some rather naive assumptions about the amount of spin-off the teachers would

carry on with. Not much of that has happened”. A different version of this view was held by the artists who indicated that teachers were more interested in the work of artists when they could make curricular connections, stating that “when [we] make curricular connections a priority, that goes over really well with all teachers”, implying that when art was presented on its own terms it was less likely to be positively received than when it was tied directly to the curriculum.

Challenges of Contemporary Public Education



Limitations of timetabling

It would appear to be a perennial and universal lament among artists, artist-teachers, and teachers alike, that there is not enough time to plan arts encounters for students. As one artist explained, “with more planning time and more flexibility in format, I feel my knowledge and experience as an artist would be put to much greater use. In addition I believe that the teachers would be more comfortable being more involved and would also get more out of the process”. Artists also indicated they could not always predict the amount of time a certain process might take, and that the fluid nature of art-making did not accord well with the “40-minute class time-tabling”.

One of the most interesting issues relating to time was the observation that art-making can involve a sense of timelessness, a feature identified clearly in

LTTA, Teacher and Artist Collaboration, 2001

Patteson’s (2005) research, where teachers who were deeply involved in art-making experienced the phenomenon of losing all sense of time and place. One artist-teacher, who recognized the importance of this aspect of art-making, made several deliberate changes to her classroom as a result. She stated, “When I’m involved in art-making, I lose all track of time. But that’s not the reality in the classroom. So, when I do art with students, I have no clock in my classroom. I want students to be in another space”. This artist-teacher went on to describe how she was able to negotiate large blocks of time for art-making, thereby overcoming some of the limitations of the school time-table.

Curriculum expectations

Some artists felt their work with students and teachers was compromised by curriculum expectations in that, rather than being free to pursue an art form and artistic processes, they were constantly concerned about how their work with the students would relate to the curriculum, to assessment, and to standards. As one artist put it, “We’re too worried about curricular links ... isn’t instilling a passion for something in a child as important as some stupid math concept?” While this may represent an extreme view, in that most of the artists interviewed and surveyed were genuinely interested in approaching the curriculum with innovative teaching ideas, it does, nevertheless, represent the frustration felt by some artists when their “art world collided with the school world”.

Watering down of programs

Professional development programs and partnerships evolve over time. When attempts were made to extend the partnerships to a larger teacher and artist population with a resultant “watering down” of the original program structures and supports, some of the artists and artist-teachers suggested that the very success of a program could be its downfall. Teachers and artists lamented the loss of professional development time, noting that there was lower attendance at after-school workshops than was the case when workshops were offered during the day, because teachers were too overextended to “add one more thing to their plates”. Logistical difficulties also emerged when one of the programs was expanded; teachers related stories of booking conflicts with artists.

A failed generation

A challenge that emerged from the data that was not immediately apparent from the literature was what a number of participants identified as a “failed” or “lost” generation, referring to the reduction of arts experiences occurring in the schools for the past several decades. According to the artists and artist-teachers, this phenomenon has led to a generation of students who have not experienced the arts in a deep way. One artist-teacher stated that because students are able to simply turn on a television and watch it, they have not learned to “discipline themselves to work toward a skill or a talent. And we’ve gotten to the point where we accept mediocrity”.

Limitations of physical space

Artists, teachers, and artist-teachers felt limited by the physical spaces they had for teaching. Many told stories of how difficult it was for them to find large enough spaces for dance and drama, appropriate tables and lighting for art-making, and rooms with good acoustics for music-making. Others talked about how it was “impossible to book the gym or multi-purpose room for the arts”, claiming that other activities were given priority.

When asked what a “dream school” or “dream partnership” would look like, without exception, all of the artists and administrators began with a description, not of the curriculum or of the staff, but of the physical space. One artist-teacher suggested that a “perfect school would have a wonderful performing arts hall, a great rehearsal space, good classroom space for all of the other disciplines—plenty of room to do the work, plenty of materials, plenty of musical instruments, plenty of books. And it would be right in the middle of the community”.

Benefits of the Arts

There were no specific interview or survey questions on the value of the arts; this theme emerged from comments freely offered by artists and artist-teachers in the open-ended portions of the data collection. Not every artist talked about the values of the arts, perhaps because the values, to them, were somewhat self-evident—something the artists lived and breathed in their daily lives. One thing was certainly clear from their reflections: even the artists and artist-teachers who had misgivings about the programs had no doubts about the values of the arts for students. Artists talked about how the arts help children both understand and remember concepts, both concepts that are arts-related and those that come from other disciplines. A number of artists suggested that schools do not allow children to explore the full range of their potential, and that the arts should be more prevalent for this reason. One artist claimed that working in the professional development program had strengthened her belief “in the value of the arts for enhancing and expanding learning beyond the traditional notions prevalent in schools”.

**LTTA Physical Involvement of Students, 2001**

Several artists also pointed to the importance of physical involvement and learning that comes with work in the arts, commenting on the power of movement and embodied learning in general. This was related to one of the key findings of the National Assessment on Learning Through the Arts, namely, that one of the great strengths of the LTTA program was children were more involved physically as a result of their work in the

arts, and consequently, were more engaged in their schooling (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005).

Another benefit identified by the artists was that students were able to come into contact with highly skilled professionals, and as a result, their images of artists and artists' lives had been expanded. One of the administrators also spoke about the higher profile artists were achieving within their communities as a result of the professional development program. She claimed communities had begun to value artists in new ways, particularly where a large percentage of artists in the community are involved in the school-based programs.

Despite the rhetoric about the arts enhancing achievement in other subjects not a single artist suggested that this was a benefit of an education rich in the arts. Rather, all of the benefits they identified had to do with attitudes and dispositions, physical and emotional knowledge, artistic skill development, and social cohesiveness of communities.

Implications for Professional Development Programs in the Arts

In what is now a classic work on educational change, Fullan (1982) made a number of recommendations for successful professional development that, while entirely predictable and somewhat banal, still ring true in the present context. He noted, for example, that work with teachers should include theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback, and several sessions are important, with appropriate intervals between follow-up sessions. He stressed the importance of both formal and informal interchanges between teachers (and in our case, this can be extended to teachers and artists), and that professional development should be considered as a continuous undertaking. These kinds of sentiments were expressed by the artists and artist-teachers and it would appear the more that the arts partnerships encompass these features, the more likely they will be successful—to a point.

The one observation made by Fullan that is particularly problematic in the context of arts partnerships is that successful programs should focus on job-related tasks teachers must complete. Certainly, it was the view of many of the artists that their work was more effective when they were able to make curricular links with the teachers. Ironically, the need to connect professional learning to job-related tasks may be the very thing that distances authentic art-making from art-making in the classroom. There is little doubt that “authentic learning” experiences, which allow students to genuinely engage in the processes of practitioners, can lead to meaningful and long-lasting learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Yet, moving toward more authentic learning practices is fraught with challenges, given the present political and social realities of schools (Meban, 2002). This makes educational partnerships with artists all the more

important in bringing the arts to students and teachers in ways that resonate with authentic artistic practices.

Given the complexities of the artists' roles, it is not surprising that artist selection was something all the administrators felt was a crucial element to the success of their professional development programs. All four administrators who were interviewed indicated they had refined their criteria for selection over time. Administrators suggested that successful artists had to be willing take on the role of an artist-educator, to engage in professional development, and to understand their art form well enough to be able to share it with teachers and children. Administrators also indicated that the artists needed to be willing to build relationships with teachers and students and, as one administrator stated, "check their egos at the door". Finally, given the complementary curricular goals of both of the programs described in the present paper, the artists had to be willing and able to read, understand, and interpret state and provincial curriculum documents, and work along with teachers to find suitable means to approach the mandated curricula. As indicated in the results, there were fewer conflicts between the realities of schooling and artists' worlds than might be expected based on other research. For example, Bresler, Wasser, and Herzog describe with sad eloquence the ways in which school versions of art can stultify creativity in students (Bresler, Wasser, & Hertzog, 1997), something that one would expect would have been of concern to the artists involved in the present study. That this was not a prevalent issue may have been due to the fact that the administrators did not select artists whose worlds might not accord well with school structures. Alternately, because the programs were so well established and clearly described to artists, artists who may have felt that the programs would impose troublesome boundaries on artistic expression may have simply chosen not to apply to take part.

I will close with the observation that professional development programs for artists and teachers will undoubtedly be more effective if the physical settings provided in schools support the arts. At present, schools favor the teaching of subjects like mathematics and language over subjects like music, dance, and the visual arts, and while teachers may wish to do more with the arts, sometimes the buildings at their disposal limit their possibilities (Upitis, 2004). For this reason alone, we should consider seriously the advice of Sullivan (1993) who claimed that in order to understand authentic practices, "there is a need to cast a net beyond the classroom to incorporate the wider realm of professional art and the local context of everyday experiences" (p. 16, cited in Meban, 2002). Not only will the casting of a wider net give students and their teachers a more realistic sense of artistic practices, it will also begin to counteract the physical limitations of most educational settings that circumscribe the ways in which artists and teachers are able to work with the students they influence.

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About the Author

Rena Upitis is Professor of Arts Education and former Dean of Education at Queen's University, Kingston, Canada. She is presently serving as National Research Co-director for *Learning Through the Arts*, a multi-year project involving over 100,000 students. Her research projects have explored teacher, artist, and student transformation through the arts and the use of electronic games in mathematics education. Rena's current interest—framed by notions of complexity—is on how school architecture both constrains and opens up possibilities for learning.

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