

“It’s Just Art”: Experiences of K-12 Visual Arts Teachers in the Era of Neoliberalism, Assessment, and Accountability

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Abstract

The U.S. educational system is largely shaped by neoliberal ideologies and practices that influence the experiences and outcomes of students, teachers, schools, and districts. In this article, we demonstrate how in the current educational climate, certain subjects – and by extension, teachers – may be prioritized over others. Using qualitative data from a survey of K-12 art teachers, we aim to reveal the lived experiences of teaching a subject that is rarely acknowledged in the discourse around standardized testing and accountability. In doing so, we highlight four themes: (1) the perceived devaluing of art education; (2) marginalization and instrumentality in the curriculum; (3) evaluation as a source of frustration; and (4) effects on job satisfaction. Overall, respondents expressed a dissonance between their love for the subject matter and the realities of their day-to-day experiences on the job, both of which have short- and long-term implications for continued inequities in American schools.

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Introduction

The U.S. educational system, much like other contemporary public institutions, is largely shaped by neoliberal ideologies and practices that influence the experiences and outcomes of students, families, teachers, schools, and districts (Chubb and Moe 1990; Harris 2007; Hursh 2007; Labaree 2012; Lipman 2011). Most of the scholarly literature on this topic focuses on how the educational landscape has transformed into a marketplace where families are

consumers, educational institutions are products, and choice, accountability, and assessment determine success or failure (Cucchiara 2013; Jennings 2010; Nygreen 2016). The discourse around neoliberalism’s effects on education, however, primarily highlight its between-school or between-district effects, as certain schools or districts thrive while others underperform in the face of market pressures.

We expand this discussion by exploring how neoliberal practices and policies may foster competition within schools, resulting in the prioritization of certain subjects – and by extension,

teachers – over others. While others have noted the degree to which high-stakes testing and state-mandated teacher evaluations have led to an increasingly narrow focus on “testable subjects” – i.e., math and English Language Arts (ELA) (Au 2007; Smith and Kovacs 2011) – we are interested in the effects of this climate on the lived experiences of those teachers whose subject expertise, often explicitly labeled “special” or “adjunctive,” may already render them marginalized (Adelman et al. 2017; Kimelberg et al. 2015). We offer the example of art teachers as a case study for considering how certain teachers may find themselves at the wrong end of an educational dynamic framed around winners and losers.

To do so, we analyze qualitative data from a population study of K-12 art teachers in Western New York designed to investigate job experiences, attitudes, and perceptions in the current educational climate. This region is an ideal location in which to explore these issues because New York State has been at the center of the high-stakes testing and educational reform debate (see e.g., Hursh 2013). To be clear, our objective is not to provide a quantitatively-based snapshot of the state of art education in Western New York (see Adelman et al. 2017; Kimelberg et al. 2015 for more on this) or to measure the impact of specific educational policies. Rather, we aim to reveal, in the words of our respondents, how teaching a subject rarely acknowledged in the neoliberal discourse around standardized testing and accountability measures is personally experienced.

In this way, we draw inspiration from Gerstl-Pepin and Woodside-Jerson (2007) who offered “counterstories” from a case study of a high-poverty school to “challenge the assumptions embedded in the dominant policy story” (p. 233) surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Here, we use the narrative form to illustrate how market-based approaches to education reform, while framed as necessary to achieve equity for students, may produce unintended consequences for visual arts teachers in the process. Specifically, the language of competition inherent in neoliberally-based policies (Connell 2013) reinforces the notion that certain subjects – and thus, certain teachers – have more value in the marketplace than others. We highlight four key themes from the data to illustrate: (1) the perceived devaluing of art education; (2) marginalization and instrumentality in the curriculum; (3) evaluation as a source of frustration; and (4) effects on job satisfaction and future outlook. Together, these themes underscore how curricular shifts in response to educational policy not only influence what is taught in schools, but they also can foster an atmosphere in which the teachers of devalued subjects come to feel devalued themselves.

Background

The rise of neoliberal education policies, particularly those concomitant with NCLB, placed increased emphasis on performance management, standards, and accountability in schools (Gamoran 2007; Hursh 2007). While attempts to rationalize education predate this landmark act (Mehta 2013), NCLB was noteworthy both because of its far-reaching federal oversight as well as its explicit goal to reduce educational inequality by holding schools accountable if they fail to improve student performance and reduce achievement and attainment gaps. Advocates of this approach contend that competition, accountability, choice, and self-interest will benefit disadvantaged students by broadening their access to quality schools (see e.g., Chubb and Moe 1990). However, critics counter that rather than reducing educational inequality, a competitive educational marketplace ultimately perpetuates or even exacerbates inequality by favoring those with the resources to navigate choice processes, and further marginalizing low-income students and families (Blakely 2017; Cucchiara 2013; Hursh and Martina 2003). For example, scholars note that neoliberal policies have led to greater school segregation (Brathwaite 2017); prompted advantaged families to enroll their children in high-performing schools at greater rates than their disadvantaged counterparts (Ravitch 2013); and ultimately enabled those with greater economic, social, and cultural capital to benefit disproportionately (Apple 2001).

Concerns about the injection of competition into education are not limited to inequities in school choice. Framing education as a marketplace requires that educational institutions acknowledge and accommodate economic norms (Messner and Rosenfeld 2013). As a consequence, some educational goals are subordinated to those that are more easily quantified and valued, resulting in what Merton (1938, 1949) would characterize as tension and imbalance within the social structure. One clear example of this can be found in the curricular decisions of districts and schools. In response to the use of high-stakes testing and state-mandated teacher evaluations to measure performance and signify educational quality, districts and schools have increasingly narrowed their curricular focus to those subjects featured on standardized tests – math and ELA – at the expense of other subjects (Au 2007; Smith and Kovacs 2011). Under pressure to improve test scores, administrators and teachers often report spending additional instructional time on testable subjects and less on areas like the fine arts (Catterall, Dumais, and Hampden-Thompson 2012; Smith and Kovacs 2011). While proposed decreases in arts instruction may be

worrisome given the positive effects that arts participation can have on academic performance, disciplinary rates, and social engagement (see e.g., Catterall 2009; Catterall et al. 2012; Coulibaly, Gregg and Gupta 2014; Deasy 2002; Kumar 2011; Thomas, Singh, and Klopfenstein 2014), they are especially concerning given that the students who potentially stand to benefit the most from exposure to the arts (e.g., students of color, students from disadvantaged backgrounds) may be the least likely to experience it (Hanley 2011; Kisida, Greene, and Bowen 2014).

Indeed, classroom time and resources devoted to arts education have declined in U.S. public schools over the last 25 years, particularly in those schools populated predominantly by students from low-income families (Catterall et al. 2012; Parsad and Spiegelman 2012; Rabkin and Hedberg 2011; Sabol 2013). Even when present in K-12 schools, however, “special” or non-core subjects are increasingly expected to serve “testable” subjects, by allocating precious time and resources to test preparation and related activities (Au 2011; Hursh 2007). Such changes can affect teachers’ sense of individual agency as they find themselves forced to tailor instruction to exam preparation in order to ensure their students hit assessment targets (Au 2007; Jennings and Bearak 2014; Lasky 2005; Murnane and Pappay 2010; Valli and Buese 2007). Thus, in the neoliberal environment, critics argue, instruction becomes akin to factory work, with teachers using prescribed materials and methods to mold students into test-taking commodities, which “dehumanizes” and “deskills” both students and teachers (Au 2011; Portelli 2013). At the same time, fewer school hours spent on the arts results in diminished opportunities for students to acquire valuable cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Kisida, Greene, and Bowen 2014). This matters not simply because some students – namely those from disadvantaged backgrounds – will be less likely to be exposed to or develop an appreciation for the “prestigious” or “high arts” (DiMaggio 1982), but also because forms of cultural capital have been linked to the ability to think critically (Bowen, Greene, and Kisida 2014) as well as to navigate important institutional contexts (Lareau and Weininger 2003).

While acknowledging the importance of understanding the effects of neoliberal policies on students, our focus here is on illuminating how teachers – specifically, visual arts teachers – experience this environment. As numerous scholars have noted, decreased curricular control, coupled with

the pressures to meet aggressive test performance mandates, can contribute to a sense of frustration, anxiety, and low morale for those teachers whose subject matter (e.g., math, ELA) is constantly under the microscope (Murphy and Torff 2016; Smith and Kovacs 2011; Valli and Buese 2007). Less obvious, however, is how teachers of non-core, “special” subjects fare in a milieu in which their specialty is relatively absent from educational discourse and practice (Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus 2003; Lasky 2005; Sabol 2013; Wexler 2014). Our research aims to address this issue by exploring how visual arts teachers in one U.S. region reflect on their work and its perceived place in schools. Specifically, we consider to what extent the push to accommodate neoliberal norms may make art teachers themselves feel less valued in the classroom.

Data and Method

The data for this paper are based on qualitative responses to an open-ended question posed to K-12 visual arts teachers in the Western New York region. Participants in an online survey about the state of visual arts education in the region read the following prompt: “Please use the space below to share any additional thoughts or comments concerning the topics addressed in this survey or visual arts education in general.” At the time that we conducted the survey, we did not expect that the item would generate many responses, or that the responses would be as detailed or illustrative as they proved to be. Yet 106 teachers (36% of the total survey respondents) answered the question, often with quite long (i.e., multiple paragraphs) responses, providing us with a rich database of unstructured reflections on the experiences of visual arts teachers.

Two of the authors read through all of the comments independently, and inductively generated a list of relevant themes. A total of 25 themes emerged from this process.¹ The same two researchers then returned to the data and coded each response using the themes identified. To ensure inter-rater reliability, we compared the codes assigned by each of the researchers and discussed any areas of disagreement.² Next, we excluded any coded data that were not relevant to the primary focus of this paper (e.g., specific comments about the local art museum,

¹ Initially, one researcher identified 21 themes; the other researcher identified 24. After discussing concepts, wording, and scope, we agreed on a final set of 25 themes.

² The primary source of disparity concerned the total number of codes assigned to the responses; one researcher consistently applied more codes to each response than the other researcher (an average of 2.5 vs. an average of 2.0).

comments about the survey itself). Finally, as is shown in Table 1, we collapsed the remaining codes into four broad themes that reflect related but distinct aspects of art teachers' perceptions of, and attitudes toward, their work in the current educational climate. In the sections

below we draw on illustrative examples from the respondents to explore each of these themes in detail.

Table 1. Key Themes in Qualitative Data.

Original Codes	Mapping of Original Codes to Major Themes
1. Funding / funding cuts / budget	Devaluing
2. Importance of/attitudes toward art education	Devaluing; marginality and instrumentality
3. Standardized tests	Evaluation; marginality and instrumentality; job satisfaction
4. Governor Cuomo / NY State	Evaluation; job satisfaction
5. APPRs (Annual Professional Performance Reviews) / SLOs (Student Learning Objectives)	Evaluation
6. Common Core	Evaluation; marginality and instrumentality
7. Lack of curricular control	Marginality and instrumentality; job satisfaction
8. Job security / job cuts / position Cuts	Devaluing; job satisfaction
9. Field trips (lack of funding)	Devaluing
10. Cross-disciplinary curriculum	Marginality and instrumentality
11. Job satisfaction	Job satisfaction
12. STEM/STEAM	Devaluing
13. Field trips (limited by personnel)	Devaluing
14. Reduced time with students	Devaluing; marginality and instrumentality
15. Physical resources / space ("art on a cart")	Devaluing; job satisfaction
16. Paperwork / bureaucracy for Assessments	Evaluation; job satisfaction
17. Student workload	Devaluing; job satisfaction
18. Teacher certification /qualifications not appreciated	Devaluing
19. Comments about the survey	n/a
20. Field trips (specific comments about local museum)	n/a
21. Specific programs at local Museum	n/a
22. Field trips (distance to local museum)	n/a
23. Comments about other museums	n/a
24. Specific suggestions for local Museum	n/a
25. General experience with local Museum	n/a

Table 2. School and Teacher Characteristics for Universe, Full Sample, and Sub-Sample of Visual Arts Teachers in Western New York.

	<i>Universe of Visual Arts Teachers (n=622)</i>	<i>Full Analytic Sample for Study (n=301)</i>	<i>Sub-Sample of Respondents with Open-Ended Responses (n=106)</i>
School Characteristics			
<i>Public (includes charter)</i>	84%	84%	85%
<i>Private/Parochial/Other</i>	16%	16%	15%
<i>Urban</i>	34%	27%	30%
<i>Suburban</i>	66%*	42%	40%
<i>Rural</i>	---**	31%	30%
<i>Lower Class</i>	---**	30%	36%
<i>Working Class</i>	---**	39%	33%
<i>Middle Class</i>	---**	24%	27%
<i>Upper Class</i>	---**	7%	4%
Teacher Characteristics			
<i>Gender</i>			
<i>Women</i>	---**	84%	89%
<i>Men</i>	---**	16%	11%
<i>Race</i>			
<i>White</i>	---**	98%	97%
<i>American Indian, Alaskan Native, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander</i>	---**	2%	3%
<i>Education</i>			
<i>Bachelor's Degree</i>	---**	8%	8%
<i>Master's Degree</i>	---**	91%	92%
<i>Doctoral Degree</i>	---**	1%	0%
<i>Age (mean)</i>	---**	46	47

Notes: * This percentage includes rural schools. ---** Data are unavailable.

Before turning to the findings, however, it is important to provide additional context on the survey that generated these qualitative responses and the

individuals who responded.³ To gain an understanding of how visual arts teachers perceive their working environment, we surveyed all K-12 art

³ We provide this background information on the full survey for the purposes of context only. As we reviewed

the quantitative findings from the study in other articles (Adelman et al. 2017; Kimelberg et al. 2015), we do not repeat them here.

teachers (N=622) in the eight counties of Western New York, a region that includes the city of Buffalo and its surrounding suburban and rural communities, as well as a broad mix of schools serving students from across the socioeconomic spectrum. In spring 2015, we invited teachers via email to complete an online survey designed to explore a range of topics related to the state of visual arts education in the region, including the frequency and staffing of art classes; budgets and funding sources; the availability of equipment and supplies; curricular design and control; and general perceptions of visual arts education in the region.⁴

A total of 301 teachers answered the survey, for a response rate of 48.4%.⁵ As detailed in Table 2, most respondents identified as white, non-Hispanic women. The mean age was 46 and 91% of the sample had attained at least a master's degree. The majority work in traditional public schools, with much smaller proportions employed in private, parochial, and charter schools. Respondents teach at a mix of suburban, urban, and rural schools, and serve students from across the socioeconomic spectrum.

To ensure that our qualitative sample of 106 was broadly representative of the 301 teachers who answered the survey, we compared the respondents who provided answers to the open-ended question and those who left that item blank. As seen in Table 2, no major dissimilarities in terms of gender, race, age, education level, school type, student social class, or school location are evident. Thus, while we cannot conclude definitively that the 106 qualitative respondents are representative of the overall sample, our analysis of the data did not provide any indication that these individuals differ in meaningful ways from the sample as a whole. In other words, it does not seem that certain teachers were more inclined to provide additional commentary on the survey than others, at least on the basis of the factors that we could identify.

We also sought to determine whether our qualitative sample was reflective of the general population of art teachers in Western New York. This question addresses the issue of whether certain kinds of art teachers – e.g., those who work in public schools, or those who work in an urban environment –

were more inclined to participate in the survey (and thus to have an opportunity to be a part of the qualitative analytic sample). Given that we did not have access to the demographic profiles of the teachers who chose not to participate in the survey, we cannot say whether survey responders and non-responders were similar on the basis of characteristics such as race or gender. However, as is shown in Table 2, it does not appear that survey respondents were dramatically different from non-responders in terms of the type of institution at which they work, or the location of their school.

Findings

The perceived devaluing of art education

A common sentiment revealed in our sample is the belief that the visual arts are no longer valued as an important component of K-12 education. Respondents expressed this concern in several ways. Some noted the lack of emphasis placed on art education relative to subjects like ELA or math; others reflected on the depletion of funds, staff positions, or instructional time devoted to the arts; a few highlighted the implicit message communicated by a lack of physical classroom space for art teachers. Although citing different evidence, all of these responses point to a perception that the study of visual arts – and, by extension, the work of art teachers – has been systematically devalued.

Many respondents implicated high-stakes testing, the Common Core, and/or a growing focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) for art education's diminished status. For example, given the need to ensure student success on standardized tests in English Language Arts and Math, R20 observed, art is simply not seen as worthy of instructional time: “[w]ith pressure on schools to improve math and English scores and the APPR [Annual Professional Performance Review], Art is the last thing anyone cares about.”⁶ Similarly, R96 explained that “[i]t seems like teaching to the test and English/Math are the major concerns. The arts don't seem like a huge priority.”

⁴ We worked with the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo to develop a full population frame of visual arts teachers. Participation in the study was anonymous; we captured no identifying information about the teacher or her school.

⁵ Excluding surveys with missing data, the final dataset contained 295 respondents.

⁶ We assigned all respondents a numerical identifier between R1-R106. Bracketed text [] indicates authors' clarification.

Other teachers focused not so much on the tests themselves, but rather on the academic standards embodied in the Common Core curriculum, in which art has a limited presence: “[t]he Common Core focuses so much on ELA and Math that the other subjects are thrown by the wayside ...” (R84). R32 essentially repeated this sentiment, noting “[w]ith the emphasis on the Common Core reading and math, I feel there will be even less emphasis on actual art education.” According to R99, the culprit was the trend toward elevating STEM-related subjects at the expense of non-STEM learning: “Visual (and other) arts are always the first programs to get short-shifted/cut. Our district would not dream of making STEM into STEAM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math], for example – as we are viewed by administration as a frill.”

This sense that the arts had decreased in importance, some respondents noted, was not merely reflected in attitudes, but also manifested in concrete institutional changes such as reduced staffing levels. As R56 observed, “the current trend in using standardized tests is expensive. It is forcing many districts to cut teachers in subjects that promote creativity and individualized instruction.” In R29’s district, “each time an art teacher has retired, their position has been eliminated.” R89 likewise highlighted the effect of staffing reductions on art teacher workloads: “When I started teaching, we had 5 art teachers ... Most high schools had 3 or more art teachers. Now I am the only art teacher with 850 students in the school. I average 30-40 students per class.”

Other teachers criticized what they saw as the erosion of classroom time for arts instruction. For example, R7 stated, “I see my program being chipped away. I have gone from teaching K-3 twice a week for a total of 70 minutes to 45 minutes once a week.” R104 reported a similar shift in her district, as “all the elementary classes went from art 2x per week to once per week this year, and they cut the art staff at the elementary level in ½ over the past few years.” One teacher noted that such changes actually run counter to state instructional guidelines:

Visual arts and music are being pushed aside in most NYS [New York State] public schools....I calculated out the number of hours in my district, and even with music added, and the general education teachers doing “art” with their own teaching time, the

students still fall short of meeting the requirements (R45).

Reduced classroom time coupled with funding cuts – mentioned by many teachers – led to a palpable sense that arts instruction was viewed as unimportant. For a handful of teachers, this belief was validated by a lack of permanent classroom space, which necessitates bringing their supplies into other teachers’ classrooms, a phenomenon known as “art on a cart.” R1 explained that in her district, “[s]ome teachers have lost their classrooms and are now ‘art on a cart.’ It can be disheartening for teachers ... some don’t want to have to deal with figuring out how to paint with students in another teacher’s classroom...” For R60, this challenge affects not only how she instructs students, but also how she feels about her job: “I teach at two schools and I do not have an art room at either one. Teaching ‘art on a cart’ ... causes different methods [by] which art can be taught. [It] is a terrible and demeaning experience, and it devalues any art program.”

In sum, when given an opportunity to share their thoughts, many teachers emphasized what they see as a devaluation of arts education in K-12 schools. As we discuss later, this was not a unanimous assessment; a few teachers acknowledged that they – and the subject matter they teach – are supported in their school and/or district. R85, for example, wrote: “Luckily, my [administrator] ... was a former art teacher and sees value in what we do in class. In fact, [administrator] spends time in my classroom frequently participating with the kids in my lesson. Art is valued.” It is telling, however, that even in this quote the teacher views herself as fortunate, recognizing that her situation is likely the exception rather than the normative experience.

Marginality and instrumentality in the curriculum

Although faculty cuts and reduced instructional time are among the more visible signs of the perceived devaluing of art education, respondents also highlighted ways in which their work has been marginalized within the overall curriculum. According to several teachers, it is not simply that art education, unlike math or ELA, is viewed as “adjunctive curriculum” (R51) rather than a core part of a student’s educational experience. In some schools, art education has been rendered largely instrumental – i.e., a subject that exists primarily to serve the “core” subjects. As one respondent explained:

There is a strong emphasis on applying math and reading (vocabulary) concepts during art classes, but few are concerned with art for art's sake... There is a sentiment that if you can't test it or collect data on what's being done then what was done has no value or place in the classroom (R61).

To some, this use of art classroom time to reinforce skills and information taught in other subjects is a direct result of the pressures districts face to implement the Common Core and apply APPR evaluation standards. This was the view of R102, who argued: “[the Common Core] had the devastating effect of squeezing out everything except for math and ELA. Districts began asking Art and the other special areas how we can better serve math and ELA score improvement and sacrifice the essence of our disciplines in the process.” Notably, R102's main concern was not that her area of expertise was considered “special” rather than essential to her students' education. Rather, she decried that, in the district's eyes, art is only worthwhile insofar as it helps students perform better in the subjects that the district believes truly matter. R11 concurred, explaining, “[s]o much today is dictated by CCLS [Common Core Learning Standards], mandates, etc. They are the driving force. To be “relevant” an art teacher needs to show how they enhance these overall goals...”

Other respondents argued that the push to demonstrate the instrumental role that art can play in the mastery of other subjects had serious consequences for students and instruction. A few teachers, like R65, reflected on the loss of personal agency and control over the curriculum: “Over the past few years, art assessments, writing, and reading have taken over my art curriculum as per my district's requests and goals.” As a result of Common Core and APPR, R42 lamented, “I no longer have the ability to change my curriculum to meet my specific students' needs as I used to.” As one respondent maintained, this focus on how art can benefit other subjects serves to further undermine its status and devalue art teachers' work, rather than bolster its importance. “Trying to justify art as a way to teach other course content rather than concentrating on what unique learning visual art offers, does our programs a huge disservice and is part of the reason administrators do not take our contributions as seriously as they should” (R88).

Concerns about a lack of control over one's curriculum due to policy mandates are certainly not

limited to art teachers. A perceived loss of autonomy and flexibility would likely trouble teachers in any discipline. Coupled with the belief that the value of their work has been redefined in largely instrumental terms, however, anxiety about declining professional agency seems especially salient for visual arts teachers.

Evaluation as a source of frustration

Another set of concerns emphasized the implications that evaluations of student learning and teacher performance have for art teachers in particular. First, according to some respondents, the evaluation methods favored by most government-mandated policies ignore the distinctiveness of the visual arts, and thus adversely affect the learning process. As R13 explained:

The district's formalized testing ... is disheartening to say the least... We can't have a project-based final because of ludicrous state assessment protocols ... the district and the state want something easy to measure, toss Art production and creativity aside. Neither the teachers, students, nor parents like the Art test. It is like a disease that I wish would go away.

Similarly, R103 observed:

The impact of state APPR requirements (linking teachers keeping their jobs to their students' scores on a single multiple choice test...) over the past 3 years has been extremely detrimental to meaningful art learning. Teachers have been forced to narrow curriculum and hands-on experiences in order to allow more test prep time – review sheets/drill and grill of vocabulary and concept definitions.

Such examples reflect a belief that “the state is trying to fit art education into a box it doesn't fit in” (R38).

Second, some teachers pointed to what they believe is an unfair system of basing art teachers' evaluations, in part, on non-art factors, such as how well students perform on ELA or math tests. “Instead of assessing us as project/portfolio, we are forced to give written fill-in-the bubble tests... Or worse, be evaluated in subjects we don't teach directly through the Common Core state exams. I am all about accountability, but

teachers should be held accountable by their own job performance” (R84). As a few teachers argued, the practice of incorporating student standardized test scores for other (i.e., non-art) subjects into the evaluations of art teachers depressed their individual performance ratings. This was the view of R58, who felt that her talents and expertise went unrecognized: “I am [rated] a Highly Effective teacher until the school score is averaged in and then I drop to Effective ... I am a National Board Certified Art Teacher who will never be rated as Highly Effective.”

In addition to reinforcing the perception that art instruction exists primarily to improve learning in other subjects, the inclusion of math and ELA test scores in art teachers’ evaluations, some respondents claimed, is simply an ineffectual means of determining how well art teachers perform. As R40 wrote, “State testing has no bearing on my effectiveness in the classroom and I resent that it is being used to evaluate my performance.” Or as R41 stated succinctly, “Having 50% of my APPR based on 3-6 ELA and math scores is a bad joke.” As we examine below, these types of concerns appear to exact a toll on some teachers’ morale.

Effects on job satisfaction and future outlook

Many of the respondents expressed sadness, frustration, or even hopelessness. As acknowledged earlier, there were exceptions. A few teachers did report positive experiences or general job satisfaction, including two – R102 and R90 – who used the word “fortunate” to characterize the support they receive relative to their peers, and one (a teacher at a small private school) who noted, “I am aware of the problems ... but my school has its own vision away from the testing craze.” Overall, however, the survey appeared to elicit difficult feelings for many respondents. After R41 discussed what she portrayed as the “increasingly darkening landscape of art education,” she reported that she “felt sad and negative as [she] answered some of these questions.” Similarly, R5, who seemingly felt compelled to apologize for complaining, explained, “Sorry, my budget is \$200 less than it was 23 years ago, so I am upset by the current state of our schools.” Echoing the frustrations of other respondents who described feeling undervalued, R95 wrote:

I am sad that I do so much for my school
(create art fairs and art shows, field trips,
bring in local artists, and do projects that are

current and matter) but that it [has almost no impact] on my evaluation....It sounds as if things are only going to get worse.

At the heart of the problem, according to some respondents, is respect. As R88 opined: “I think the lack of pay and respect keeps the brightest from going into art education.” R93 related an experience that she saw as indicative of the lack of respect afforded art teachers:

Just today a Senior (12th grader) stated, “You shouldn’t get paid the same as a Science or Math teacher because they needed a degree to do that.” I’m sure that’s the mentality of a very high percentage of people. Most of the time the most disruptive students are placed in the art classroom because “it’s just art.”

Such examples, combined with the previously noted concerns about a lack of curricular control, increased workloads, and reduced resources, have “severely affect[ed] the energy and attitudes of even the most dedicated and honorable veteran teachers,” according to R17. As a consequence, some teachers reflected wistfully on their earlier experiences in the profession, and what has changed since. As R32 observed, “Art education is not what it was when I first started, and the children are not receiving the same experiences they used to years ago.” Similarly, R7 explained: “[t]he change [in her district] has made a significant difference in the quality of student work and the teacher-to-student relationship. It has made me want to retire from the job I used to love.” Even newer teachers, like R98, perceived that the situation for art teachers was not what it once was:

I haven’t been teaching that long, but I can tell that things are just getting crazier, based on the comments from other teachers in the region. That this is not always what it was like for them. People are thinking about alternate careers and moving out of NYS [New York State].

In one poignant illustration of how the current landscape has affected teacher morale, R58 ended her very lengthy response with this plea: “I have more to say and share but to what end or good? Is there any way you or anyone can help?”

Discussion

Neoliberal policies have framed the U.S. educational system as a marketplace in which schools and districts must compete for students, and in which the competition ethos permeates schools and curricula. In this brief article, we considered the potential spillover effects of this educational climate behind the schoolhouse doors, by listening to the voices of teachers whose subject matter expertise is often relegated to the sidelines. The K-12 art instructors in Western New York who shared their thoughts revealed an overall sense of concern and dismay about their professional status in this new educational arena. Respondents shared examples of what they perceive as a persistent devaluing of their work and a belief that the worth of art instruction should be measured primarily via its contributions to other, core academic subjects. Teachers reported feeling less control over curricular choices and a frustration with mandated evaluation systems that fail to acknowledge the unique aspects of art education and base portions of art teachers' performance ratings on how well students test in other subjects.

Consequently, many respondents expressed a dissonance between the love that they have for the subject matter and the realities of their day-to-day experiences on the job. As noted, respondents' comments were not universally negative. Some teachers expressed appreciation for the support they receive from their schools and administrators. Even these comments, however, tended to reflect an awareness that the broader outlook for art teachers in the region was less sanguine in a "marketplace" which devalued their "product."

Given that our data were generated by an optional, open-ended survey prompt, selection bias is a possibility. Those teachers who are the most disaffected, or who are experiencing the worst working conditions, may have been especially motivated to respond. If so, the snapshot that we presented could be an overly pessimistic one. Although we cannot rule this out, our comparison of respondents and non-respondents to the open-ended question revealed no noteworthy differences on the types of factors that one could assume might be influential in this regard. Thus, while our study may have captured the opinions of the most vocal teachers in our population, there are no obvious signs to suggest that those opinions are unrepresentative. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the types of issues

that our respondents identified are not entirely new; concerns about student performance and the policy prescriptions offered in response to those concerns have been salient since at least the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Thus, it is possible that the neoliberal approach dominant in the current era may simply be amplifying or reframing existing dynamics.

A related question concerns the degree to which our findings are generalizable outside of the region. New York State has been the epicenter of some of the largest organized protests against the Common Core and standardized testing in the U.S. (Harris and Fessenden 2015), underscoring the salience of and resistance to the current educational climate. Art teachers in states where neoliberal policies are not as entrenched, or public protest has been more muted, may not share all of the experiences of our respondents, or react to them in the same way. At the same time, New York spends more resources per pupil than any other state (Maciag 2016), and consistently ranks in the top quintile on various measures of student performance (Quality Counts 2016). Thus, it is possible that art teachers in states where funding is more restrictive and concerns about student proficiency are more stark, may face worse working conditions than our respondents do. A national study of the experiences of art teachers would help to determine the extent to which local and state-level differences in educational policy affect attitudes and job satisfaction. At a minimum, however, even if our portrait of Western New York art educators represents an atypical case, it is instructive as an example of how teachers of "special" subjects – a category that includes music and physical education – may feel marginalized in an environment and economy that privileges some subjects (and teachers) over others.

It is important to note that the findings from this study are not meant not imply that art teachers alone are dissatisfied with a working environment in which "outputs" are valued more than "inputs" and performance management takes precedence (Lynch Grummel, and Devine 2012). Indeed, the issues raised by our respondents – e.g., staffing cuts, concerns about evaluations – are likely not unique to art teachers at all, but rather are symptomatic of trends affecting the teaching profession as a whole. Nevertheless, the perceived repercussions are apt to be particularly worrisome for educators who find their subject expertise relegated to the sidelines of education policy debates that invoke the language of market value. As Connell (2013) argues, the hierarchical structures and "rationing" of education inherent in market-based

reforms inevitably produce an insecure workforce. Most insecure, it would seem, are those whose product is systematically devalued (Messner and Rosenfeld 2013). Given that we only studied art teachers, we cannot speak to whether our respondents' feelings of being "in competition" with other teachers and subjects is validated by teachers of "core" subjects. Further attention to this issue is warranted to ensure the health of the profession and the concomitant impact on students.

Overall, this research offers a glimpse into one potential negative consequence of the current neoliberal emphasis in K-12 education policy in the United States. Although the objective of accountability and standards initiatives is ostensibly to boost educational performance and reduce race- and class-based inequality, studies indicate that the effects on students have been mixed at best (Amrein and Berliner 2002; Gaddis and Lauen 2014; Hursh 2007; Jennings and Sohn 2014; Wei 2012). Similarly, the standardized, highly quantified approach to K-12 curricular development and performance assessment may produce uneven results within schools, further marginalizing subjects and teachers that fall outside the scope of its logic (Hursh and Martina 2003; Klaf and Kwan 2010). Given that arts education may be especially important for bolstering the academic achievement of low-income students and students of color, undercutting it may only serve to exacerbate rather than reduce educational inequities.

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