

Amazing Grace and Powerful Medicine: A Case Study of an Elementary Teacher and the Arts

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This case study traces the development of one teacher as she participated in Teachers As Artist, a four-year professional development program for teachers. I have used transformation theory, an articulation of the complex processes involved in life-altering adult learning, to examine her development from early dispirited participation in the arts program to her new stance as ardent advocate for the arts in education. This case study illustrates how institutional, curricular, pedagogical, and personal issues combine to influence the course of teacher change in relationship to the arts. The lasting effects of this teacher's learning on her students, her school, and her own personal and professional life attest to the transformative potential of experiences with the arts.

Keywords: professional development, arts education, transformation theory, longitudinal case study

Cette étude de cas décrit l'évolution d'une enseignante qui a participé durant quatre ans à un programme de perfectionnement professionnel intitulé Teachers As Artist. L'enseignante dont il est question est l'auteure de cet article. Elle utilise la théorie de la transformation, qui cerne les processus complexes en jeu chez un adulte lors de l'apprentissage d'un savoir qui change sa vie, en vue de décrire son évolution, depuis sa participation dénuée d'enthousiasme au début jusqu'à l'émergence de sa conviction de l'importance des arts dans l'éducation. Cette étude de cas illustre comment des questions relatives à l'établissement, au programme, à la pédagogie et à la personne se combinent et influencent l'évolution de l'enseignant dans son rapport à l'art. Les effets durables de l'apprentissage de cette enseignante sur ses élèves, sur son école ainsi que sur sa vie personnelle et professionnelle témoignent du potentiel de transformation qu'offrent des expériences avec l'art.

Mots clés : perfectionnement professionnel, éducation artistique, théorie de la transformation, étude de cas longitudinale

Maxine Greene (1994) has said that, once a space is created for significant arts experiences to occur, something can be set loose that "radiates

throughout a school" (p. 503). So it was in the case of Heather,¹ an elementary school teacher who began to use her novice guitar-playing skills daily in her classroom. Heather's example inspired her students to learn to play guitar, and they went on to form a guitar choir in a school where few opportunities for arts experiences existed. Seven years later, music of many forms pulses through that school, even though Heather has now retired.

Heather's guitar playing began in the context of her participation in Teachers As Artists (TAA), a professional development program for teachers. In this article, I begin by indicating the current state of knowledge about teachers' experiences of professional development programs in the arts. I then use transformation theory, an articulation of the processes involved in life-altering adult learning, to examine the course of Heather's development from her early dispirited participation in TAA to her new stance as ardent advocate for the arts in education.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A brief review of the literature concerning teacher development in the arts and an overview of transformation theory provide a theoretical context for this case study.

Teacher Development in the Arts

Although still meagre, the body of research into the effects of professional development in the arts for North American teachers is growing, and independent inquiries have produced very similar results, noting that teacher development in the arts involves an intermingling of institutional, curricular, pedagogical, and personal issues (Oreck, 2002).

More often than not, it takes years to travel the road from conceiving of one's self as novice in the arts to feeling capable of conveying artistic skills and knowledge in a classroom setting (Patteson, Upitis, & Smithrim, 2002; Soren, 1997; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003; Upitis, Smithrim, & Soren, 1999). Research shows that the most effective way to develop teacher confidence in the arts is through sustained hands-on art making, and the best guides are practising artists who know their art form intimately and who are committed to sharing both their expertise and their passion for the arts (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Naples, 2001; Patteson, 2003a, 2003b; Patteson, Upitis, & Smithrim, 2002; Upitis, Smithrim, & Soren, 1999; Vagianos, 1999). Support from a school's administration and the

other teachers has a powerful influence on a teacher's willingness to use the arts in the classroom (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Harris, 2003; LeClair, 1998; Oreck, 2002; Upitis, Smithrim, & Soren, 1999; Vagianos, 1999).

Even teachers who are committed to the arts in education, and who have administrative and collegial support, are likely to face barriers in infusing the arts into the curriculum. Current mandated curricula leave little time for arts activities; chronic shortage of arts materials and spaces for arts activities exist in most schools; and professional development programs take up the scant hours teachers have for their personal lives (Patteson, 2003a; Patteson, Upitis, & Smithrim, 2003; Soren, 1997; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003; Vagianos, 1999). Ultimately, it is primarily the commitment of the individual to a rather arduous, lonely, and risky road of learning and innovation that makes the difference between a teacher who teaches in and through the arts and one who does not (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Oreck, 2002; Patteson, 2003a; Patteson, Upitis, & Smithrim, 2003; Smithrim, Upitis, & LeClair, 1998, 1999; Upitis, Smithrim, & Soren, 1999). Teachers who do manage to overcome the myriad external and internal challenges in using the arts in their classrooms often report a renewed sense of commitment, energy, and joy in their teaching (Mitchell, 2000; Oreck, 2002; Patteson, 2003a; Patteson, Upitis, & Smithrim, 2003; Soren, 1997; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003).

In conducting a case study of Heather's progression through and beyond the TAA program, I gathered detailed information about the course and impact of an individual teacher's learning in the arts. This kind of information is often obscured when the results of professional development programs are discussed in broader terms.

Transformation Theory as a Theoretical Framework

Transformation theory originated in the mid-1970s with the work of Jack Mezirow (1975). Mezirow identified educators' failure to recognize how an adult's acquired belief systems determine and, in most cases, distort her or his interpretation of experience (Mezirow, 1989). According to Mezirow (1978), an adult's most important learning task is to cast a critical eye on "deep psychological structures of thought, feeling, and will" (p.108) that have developed through "cultural assimilation and the idiosyncratic influences of primary caregivers" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). This sort of critique has the potential to transform an individual's worldview and lead an adult to "a more inclusive, discriminatory, and integrative perspective" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 167). Such a transformation

prompts a positive increase in her or his ability to deal successfully with subsequent life experiences (Merriam & Clark, 1993).

Mezirow outlined 10 steps in the transformation process that may be broadly summarized as the following three stages. First, the adult encounters a new experience (a disorienting dilemma) that requires her or him to examine and alter previous notions of the self and of life. A period of experimentation follows the initial experience of disorientation. The adult "tries on" new roles and tests new learning, a phase characterized by paradoxical feelings such as insecurity and/or self-doubt combined with excitement and a sense of achievement, and social isolation combined with a feeling of community with like-minded learners. Reflection and communal discourse are important elements of this phase of the process. A teacher or facilitator and/or others in similar learning situations typically support adults in this phase of their learning. Finally, the adult emerges from the reflective, experimental stage with an enlarged sense of self and of the possibilities that his or her life holds (e.g., Mezirow, 1991, 2000).

Stated so succinctly, transformation theory may appear as a rather glib summary of the complex processes involved in what Mezirow has conceived as a radical disruption and reorientation of the adult psyche. However, Mezirow (1992, 2000), acknowledging the subtleties involved in each stage of transformative development, has urged others to contribute research that leads to the refinement of the theory. Currently, debate and discussion swirl around questions such as the nature of disorienting dilemmas, the reflective processes involved in appraisal and self-examination, the relationship of individual to social transformation, and the responsibilities of educators of adults. Some researchers have also contested the apparently linear thrust of Mezirow's articulation of the adult growth process, finding that transformative learning is more likely to be spiral and recursive (e.g., Brookfield, 2000; Coffman, 1989). In addition, much recent discussion has centered on how transformation theory fits into a postmodern orientation to adult learning and on what role the Other,² in its various manifestations, plays in transformation (e.g., Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997).

For the purposes of this article, I use transformation theory to highlight important aspects of Heather's growth in the arts. I do so with an eye to providing instructive information for those of us who are attending or who are involved in planning, implementing, and assessing opportunities for teacher development in the arts.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Researchers at Queen's University, Kingston, developed both the TAA professional development program and the research into its effects. I conducted the case study of Heather and her relationship to the arts as part of this broader inquiry.

The TAA program provides generalist elementary school teachers with artistic experiences in six after-school arts workshops a year, led by professional community artists.³ Personal art-making experiences in the company of one's peers, we originally postulated, would strengthen community, deepen all teachers' understanding of and commitment to the arts, and enhance teachers' confidence, willingness, and abilities to bring the arts into the classroom. An additional aspect of the program involves teachers' commitment to a sustained individual learning project in the arts. To keep teachers focused on their own artistic processes, we do not provide them with guidance how to transfer their workshop learning to their classroom practices.

The Teachers As Artists Program and Heather's School

Heather taught school in a medium-sized city in eastern Ontario. The school board superintendent, the school principal, and the teachers describe the student population as including a disproportionately large number of children who are challenged culturally, socially, behaviourally, and/or in terms of learning. Most families have little discretionary income for extracurricular activities for their children. Reflecting a contemporary trend in many Canadian elementary schools, Heather's school does not have an arts specialist. The school principal viewed TAA as a means of inspiring and enabling teachers to provide arts experiences for children who might otherwise never have them.

Researching the Effects of TAA

Researchers documented changes in teachers' personal and professional lives over the four years that the TAA program ran at Heather's school (1996–2000). An entrance survey, administered in the fall of 1996, provided demographic information, as well as baseline data about personal and professional beliefs and practices in the arts.⁴ We used a second-level survey,⁵ consisting of queries about beliefs, practices, and reactions to TAA program features in the fall of each subsequent year to gauge changes in

teachers' attitudes and behaviour concerning the arts. We conducted semi-standardized, audiotaped interviews,⁶ and teacher focus-group discussions during the spring of each year that the TAA program was at the school. We also collected written reflections throughout the program and used photo and video documentation in the arts workshop and with teacher artifacts. Teachers were observed as they took part in the arts workshops.

I conducted most of the interviews with Heather and analysed all of the documentation of her TAA experiences. For the purposes of triangulation in this case study (Patton, 2002; Yin, 1994), I also interviewed three graduates of Heather's class and distilled information from reflection papers that all of Heather's students wrote in the spring of 1999 about the learning they had valued most while in her grade-5 class.

HEATHER'S FIRST YEAR IN TAA

I followed Heather's progress through TAA with an eye to discerning if her learning reflected, contradicted, or enlarged understanding of transformation theory.

Setting the Stage: Heather's Disorienting Dilemma

Within the literature on transformation theory, researchers have generally accepted Mezirow's notion that discrete events act as catalysts to transformative adult learning (e.g., Courtney, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998; Taylor, 1997, 1998). However, some studies have suggested that disorientation can also be a process (e.g., Courtney, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998; Pope, 1996). Still others have found that, although a single event might be the catalyst to deep change, in most cases the shift was "long in coming and its possibility was prepared for in myriad ways, generally across years" (e.g., Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996, p. 106). Heather's disorientation, which fell into this last category, consisted of a long-held sense that there was a widening gap developing between her and her students. As will be seen below, the experience of attending an early workshop, which involved a timely comment from the TAA workshop leader, was the pivotal event that launched a transformational journey.

Heather's Early Program Experience

In 1996, as Heather prepared for the school year, she felt like a "burned out wreck." When her school principal announced his plan to have teachers take part in the TAA program, she thought that "the last thing" she needed

was "something extra." Not surprisingly, Heather's original attitude to the artists leading the TAA workshops was truculent, and her early experiences in the program were characterized by inner turmoil and outer resentment. As she was walking into an early guitar workshop with her daughter's guitar under her arm, she felt like "a fake," knowing she possessed no guitar skills (Interview, fall, 1997).⁷

Heather's interactions with Greg, the guitar workshop leader, were abrasive: "I must have been sending him the message that I'll never play the guitar and that he was from another planet . . . and that I was only there because I had to be." In response to Heather's obvious reluctance to participate, Greg said, "Isn't it sad, the baggage we carry with us?" (Interview, spring, 1998).

Heather reported later that, because the interaction with Greg had angered her so deeply, it caught her attention and became the catalyst that caused her to stop and reflect upon the nature and strength of her resistance to the TAA program. She began to admit the possibility that her feelings of inadequacy as a teacher, her belief that professional development interventions that were of limited practical use, and a long-held notion that she did not have the talent required to be an artist were self-defeating and open to revision. She made a cautious commitment to the program.

To her own surprise, Heather's enthusiasm for the arts workshops increased during the first year of the TAA program. She experienced the sensuality of art materials, the acquisition of new arts skills, and a sense of community with the other teachers and workshop artists. Although other teachers occasionally missed a workshop, Heather was always present, and she began to make insightful comments about her own learning and various artistic media. For example, her initial skepticism at using earth, sand, and melted wax to create a mixed media piece gave way to delight.

Mixed media allows the free flowing of thoughts that come from the media. For example, the mud reminds me of what it was used for. [It is] cold, rough, useful. The smell of the wax adds to the experience, as well as [does] the warmth. [It's] a very sensual experience. (Workshop Reflection Paper, fall, 1996)

Heather's comments about her experiences in the pinhole camera photography workshop conveyed her increasing artistic sensibilities and her joy in the activity.

Pinhole photography is amazing. [It's] like being in the dark and then seeing the light! Seriously, the perspective innuendos are great and mind-boggling. The flip-flop of images is fascinating. It's a riot. (Workshop Reflection Paper, winter, 1997)

The following comments indicate Heather's changing notions of the importance of process versus product in learning and illustrate how the artists' encouragement began to act as a foil to her professional life, allowing her to identify one source of discouragement.

The [workshop] artists were obviously very goal-oriented, but they took such joy in the process. They nurtured us. When you made a mistake, they almost celebrated it. . . . It's about the only nurturing I've had as a teacher. You have no idea what it's like to have someone say, "Hey, Heather, that's really good!" (Interview, spring, 1997)

In the midst of forming these insights, Heather took up what she perceived to be the gauntlet that Greg had earlier thrown down: she began to take guitar lessons.

Some of Heather's friends had assured her that the guitar was the easiest instrument in the world to play, but she found it difficult from the outset. She became convinced that she must have a disability that prevented her from mastering chord changes and the complexities of co-ordinating both hands. However, she soon experienced the joy of finally "getting" a chord, and, as she put it, of "being able to fret, strum, keep the beat with my feet, and chew gum at the same time" (Interview, spring, 1997).

Several grade-8 students at the school began to eavesdrop on Heather's guitar lessons, which took place in her classroom at the end of the school day. Noting their interest, Heather arranged to have the school finance a series of ten after-school guitar lessons for the grade-8 students, employing the services of Tom, her own guitar teacher. She scrounged together several guitars, borrowing from friends and other schools in her board. Heather described these student lessons as only somewhat successful because after school hours are important social times for young adolescents. The guitar students were torn between their desire to learn to play the guitar and their need to be with their friends. Even so, Heather began to notice some changes: "These students have re-visioned themselves as guitar players. They're better in the [school] yard. They praise the other kids. They're losing their toughness" (Interview, spring, 1997).

Transformation Theory and Heather's Early Program Experience

Several aspects of Heather's first-year experiences in TAA fit with transformation theory. She was predisposed to new learning by a sense of desperation about her life, and discrete events tipped the scales and acted as catalysts to new learning. The beginning stages of Heather's growth were uncomfortable. Mezirow (2000) has indicated that the

feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy, such as those Heather experienced as she entered the guitar workshop, often accompany the opening moments of a deep growth process for adult learners. For teachers, such feelings may be particularly dominant and difficult. For example, Brookfield (1994), another major contributor to transformation theory, conducted a study of educators' experiences of transformative learning and found that his participants felt like "impostors" as they contemplated the discordance between the culture's image of a professional teacher and their own feelings of disorientation, which resulted in a "daily sense of themselves as stumbling and struggling survivors" (p. 205). Indeed, Heather later confirmed that, for her as a teacher, the shift in role from teacher to learner was exceedingly difficult to navigate.

As she acquired new skills and attitudes, Heather experienced a paradoxical stew of frustration and reward, shame and pride. The company of like-minded colleagues and compassionate workshop leaders, who provided comfort, encouragement, and guidance, sustained her. In addition, it needs be said that the arts themselves appear to have been particularly suited for prompting and sustaining her learning: Heather's enthusiasm for the arts materials and processes suggests the capacity of the arts to engage and sustain the individual on the physical, cognitive, and emotional levels, even at the early stages of creative endeavor. As Csikzentmihalyi (1997) has suggested, when a person is so fed by what she is doing, she is enabled to focus energy and thought on the activity.

HEATHER'S SECOND YEAR IN TAA

Heather's second year in TAA was also typical of the middle phase of transformative learning, where the learner tests out applications of new learning: her exploration of the arts began to seep into her daily classroom practices, with mixed results. She put her acrylic paintings on display and had her students fold and unfold her origami work to understand the processes involved. Heather also arranged to take her class of nine-year-olds to a concert featuring a guitar concerto performed by a guest guitarist and the local symphony orchestra. In addition, she tried to incorporate her own guitar playing into her classroom routine, but described her class as not being "at all interested" in singing along. Heather attributed her students' lack of enthusiasm to the fact that her own playing was not advanced enough to engage her students' attention. Discouraged and embarrassed, she stopped playing in class while continuing with her private lessons.

Heather recounted the first two years in the TAA program as turbulent times of excitement and discouragement. Looking back on this time two and a half years later, Heather was able to see her process more clearly: "I used to think that, if someone was transformed, it would be like a flower blooming. It's not. It's more like a cyclone." She added, "It's that whole transformation thing: you die a thousand deaths first" (Interview, fall, 1999). Heather's comment indicted how each new level of accomplishment brought new challenges that catapulted her back into feelings of insecurity. For Heather, then, the learning was iterative, often involving a sensation that other studies of transformative learning have described as constantly taking "two steps forward and one step back" (Brookfield, 1994, p. 211).

Interestingly, it was Heather, not the researchers, who used the word "transformation" to describe her learning path. However, she applied the word once she had acquired some distance from her early experiences. She could then discern a growth process that eventually manifested in deep, permanent change. While in the early stages of her growth in the arts, she continued to feel the ground shift beneath her feet.

HEATHER'S THIRD YEAR IN TAA

During Heather's third year in TAA, profound changes began to manifest in her attitudes and practices concerning the arts. She still found some workshop media frustrating. For example, she deposited her first watercolour painting, with disgust, in the garbage pail. On the other hand, her immediate success with acrylic painting motivated Heather to begin to paint in her spare time. Her growing belief in her painting abilities gave her confidence to bring her canvasses to the arts workshops for critiquing by her colleagues and the visiting artists. Heather also began to give her art works as gifts to family members.

Heather described the grade-4 class she had at this time as a "more open . . . much kinder, more sensitive group of children" than had been her previous class (Interview, spring, 1998). She again found the courage to play the guitar in her classroom. In a reversal of roles, her students supported her.

The audience was a big key for me. Because they loved it, we had a ball. . . . I'd make a million mistakes and they'd say, "That's ok. Do it again." I used to think I'd never play again for my class again until I got it just right. But, now I played, mistakes and all. It's good for the kids to hear mistakes too. (Interview, spring, 1998).

Because Heather had taken the somewhat threatening step of modeling how to cope with mistakes, she became more tolerant of mistakes her students made in their learning.

Two years later I asked a grade-6 student, who had been in Heather's grade-4 class, about the effects of Heather's guitar playing.

We would sit there and our eyes would be glued to her fingers as she played. And she's get really nervous, and she'd make all these mistakes, but we didn't care. And she had a beautiful guitar. (Interview, spring, 2000)

Singing, with guitar accompaniment, became a daily feature of classroom life for Heather and her students.

HEATHER'S FOURTH YEAR IN TAA

By year four, Heather credited her involvement with TAA for her renewed energy for teaching and for changing some of her fundamental attitudes toward her students and their learning: "In the past, I was very structured and goal-oriented. Now I enjoy [teaching] more. I see that there are different ways to get there. It's more challenging." Recalling how the workshop artists nurtured her, she said, "When I do this with my kids now, they glow. They get warm and move a little closer" (Interview, fall 1999).

Heather counted herself fortunate to have been appointed to accompany her students on to grade 5: she would teach the same group for a second year. During that second year some of these students began to ask if they, too, could learn to play the guitar. Heather responded by engaging her guitar teacher, Tom, to help her team-teach a small group for one hour a week, during what would normally be her planning time and while the rest of the class was taking French. Soon others were clamouring to be included in the lessons, and another small group of guitar-playing students was established. By Christmas, the remainder of the class had lobbied for lessons, so that, by January, 24 out of 25 of Heather's students were taking part in a group guitar lesson that was now scheduled into regular class time. Eleven of those students had requested and received guitars for Christmas, something that Heather recognized as a sacrifice for most of these students' financially strapped parents. With invitations to play at school assemblies and then at graduation ceremonies, the class began to identify themselves as the school guitar choir.

At this time, Heather expressed her belief that, because she and her students were together engaged in an artistic pursuit, an unusual level of mutual support and understanding emerged in her classroom. Although she used to view the arts as somewhat extraneous to the tasks of education, she expressed a new belief in the importance of the arts to provide students and teachers with experiences of their common humanity.

What isn't happening today [in classrooms] is any common ground that the teacher and the children can work from. They're from a different world, and [to them] I'm from a totally different world, and there's hardly anything that we do the same. But in the arts you do . . . work from common ground. I don't see how anybody can live without the arts these days. (Interview, winter, 2000)

Because of the lessons she had learned from her own art-making, Heather began to allow her students longer periods of sustained art making mid-week: she said that the students needed the opportunity to experience art making at a depth that enabled them to encounter both victories and defeats and to learn how to deal with both. With visual arts, as well as music, in mind, Heather said, "I'm lucky to be a teacher because I could see the effects of the arts on my students and they could see it on me. We grew together" (Interview, spring, 2000).

Heather and Tom's teaching methods also helped bridge that gap between in-school and out-of-school worlds. They encouraged students to take charge of their own learning by experimenting with fitting chords to songs, trying to learn songs by ear from radio and television, and composing their own songs using one or two chords. Tom promoted a sense of community in learning by urging students to ask other guitar players, inside and outside of school, to help them. During the class lessons, it was very common to see a group of students huddled around and encouraging a single child who was having difficulty. Children could be heard calling out chord names and shouting such things as "Keep going. It's good!" to a solo player who had lost her or his way (Interview, spring, 2000).

For both Heather and Tom, the children's enjoyment in learning to play the guitar was of primary importance. Tom said,

If they can go home and learn two chords of a song [from listening to the radio], and then sit down and play the song, even if the song is "wrong," if they think they know it, then it's perfect as far as I'm concerned. (Interview, spring, 2000)

Heather stated that, because of the group guitar lessons, she and her students shared a “new tolerance level, compassion, and understanding of risk-takers” (Interview, spring, 2000)

By the time the TAA program was nearing its close, Heather felt that the guitar choir had worked its magic in the school as a whole. One day, a grade-8 student popped her head into Heather’s classroom as her students were playing recorders, saying, “I just had to stop and listen. You guys are so good” (Interview, spring, 2000). Previous to the existence of the guitar choir and the awareness of music that it aroused, Heather had witnessed few instances of grade-8 students bothering to praise the efforts of the younger children. Heather had, in fact, become a hero of sorts to the students. Once, when she asked a group of normally recalcitrant senior students to leave an out-of-bounds area of the playground, they complied without protest. She reported, with amazement, “They listen. I’m cool now because I play the guitar. . . . The change in my status is unbelievable” (Interview, spring, 2000).

Each school, however, has its own complex culture, and disruptions in that culture, even if they are ultimately beneficial, are often uncomfortable. Heather reported that, in the beginning stages of the TAA program, the school’s teachers had bonded over art-making. Nevertheless, Heather detected mixed reactions from her colleagues to her growing willingness to play the guitar in the classroom and to have the class guitar choir perform at public events. She wondered if the other teachers thought she was “stealing the spotlight.” Furthermore, Heather had embraced and applied her TAA learning with more intensity than had her colleagues, and she wondered, in retrospect, if they had read into that fact an implicit criticism and betrayal.

Oh, I think it’s really discomfoting. I guess it’s because people tend to pigeon-hole one another and are more secure if what they see is what they get sort of thing. So, if somebody that’s very solid, grounded, well-respected, like myself, is starting to change attitudes and so forth, then I’m (and it’s true) not so much aligned with them anymore. I’m aligned with something else. (Interview, winter 2003)

Crucial to Heather’s own persistence at this stage was the unwavering support of the school principal and the French teacher. The latter had made the original small-group lessons possible by allowing students to miss class. Then she would spend extra time the next day helping those students catch up on the work they had missed.

Eventually, Heather’s isolation began to dissipate as the other teachers became more comfortable with the changes she had wrought. Heather

began to jam after school with the school custodian who also played guitar, engaging in conversation with the Xerox repairman who revealed that he owned a Gibson guitar and played in a band, and listening to the stories parents told her about their own experiences with music. The Special Education teacher commented on the effects of the guitar playing of Heather and her students: "I think that this school needed something like this to make it very special" (Interview with Special Education teacher, spring, 2000).

Transformation Theory and Heather's Late Program Experience

The kind of social isolation that Heather experienced in her determination to raise the profile of the arts in her own classroom and in the school has been described as a common feature of transformative individual change within the structure of an organization. Indeed, often transformations in individual perceptions of how things are or should be do not manifest in action at all, given the perceived costs to collegiality and careers (e.g., Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow, 1989). However, when teachers deeply feel the possibility and benefits of change, with support from organizational leaders such as school principals, and even one or two colleagues, the results can be dramatic.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE HEATHER'S STUDENTS

In late February or early March of each school year, the teachers at Heather's school have students write reflections about the aspects of their school experiences that they have most enjoyed. Most of Heather's grade-5 students identified learning to play the guitar as the highlight of their year. Several themes emerged in their writing. As the following comments indicate, many of the children acknowledged that the music lessons involved a combination of hard work and pleasure, or, as it has been called by students elsewhere, "hard fun" (Upitis, 1990).

I like learning to play the guitar. Tom and [Heather] teach me on Tuesdays. I have learned some chords like E minor, E major, A minor, D major, G, and C. I find guitar hard, but I keep learning. (Student Reflection Paper, winter, 2000)

In grade 5, I've learned that people are the same, but different. I've learned how to play the guitar. The first song I learned was "Amazing Grace." I felt so happy! (Student Reflection Paper, winter, 2000)

The year after these comments were written, I interviewed three grade-6 “graduates” of Heather’s grade-5 class — two girls and a boy. They indicated that they and many of their classmates were still playing guitar and cited several reasons for persisting: it made their parents proud, it banished sadness and boredom, it made them happy, and they loved and identified with their instruments. Indeed, the pride and ownership these three students felt about their guitars was obvious. One girl had decorated her instrument with daisies and a peace symbol. Another said that she had almost outgrown her three-quarter-sized guitar: soon, it would be “just like a little kitten curled up in my lap” (Student Interview, spring, 2001). All three students said that they continued to compose their own songs.

By spring 2000, the TAA program had run its course at Heather’s school. The next fall Heather was faced with a new group of needy grade-4 students: 13 special needs students, 5 new Canadians who had a tentative grasp of the English language, and only 6 others who were working at grade level. Although the guitar choir was opened up as an all-grade group, because of Heather’s onerous teaching duties, Tom led the choir. Graduates of Heather’s class and many of her current students, at her encouragement, formed the majority of members.

HEATHER’S REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE ARTS AND EDUCATION

Over her four years in TAA, Heather often articulated dismay at the growing pressures on students and teachers, and expressed her belief that involvement in the arts could provide needed respite.

We’re pumping up everything. We’re turning them into little adults, and it’s only through the arts that we can slow them down a bit and allow them to breathe. . . . That’s what they have to do, or they’re going to crash. . . . They’ll just do it earlier. (Interview, fall, 2000)

Interestingly, Heather was not very concerned about the effects of the arts on children’s learning in non-arts-related subjects: she felt that the primary benefits of the arts were the positive effects on students’ sense of community and self-esteem, as well as the easing of the perpetual tension that exists in the contemporary classroom.

Heather also expressed concern for the profound changes that have taken place in her profession. She grew to understand that she was not alone in her earlier experiences of fatigue and discouragement: “Teaching used to allow us to be very creative. It was the most creative job in the world” (Interview, fall, 2000). Heather identified the existence of

standardized assessment measures, the pressures to deliver overly demanding curricula, and recent moves to test teachers on their teaching skills as having disenfranchised Ontario teachers. The result, according to Heather, was an atmosphere of free-floating anxiety, rigidity, and conformity that pervaded the profession. She lamented the fact that teachers just entering the profession appeared to be accepting of these conditions while struggling to comply. Heather stressed the importance of welcoming the arts and artists into schools, for they are reminders of “the benefits of non-conformity and spontaneity” (Interview, fall, 2000).

One aspect of the arts, however, made Heather uncomfortable. Although her students clearly enjoyed and benefited from their involvement in the visual arts and music, Heather expressed concern that teachers recognize that the arts “go deep” and can “hit a raw nerve.” She pointed to the strong reaction of her students to songs that had “that powerful center.” For example, an emotional tide was released during the singing of “Amazing Grace”: “The girls would cry. . . . You could feel [the music]! [Holding her fist to her heart.] It was just such a powerful feeling.” Heather went on to describe the presence of both the visual arts and music in her students’ lives as “very powerful medicine” (Interview, fall, 2000).

Heather was concerned that the emotional response to music was sometimes related to the life traumas of her students and that she was ill-equipped to deal with the crises that threatened to erupt. Heather’s feelings about the power of the arts to arouse strong feelings remained conflicted throughout the rest of her career. She felt that she did not have the training to help her students, nor did her school have enough services in place to which she could refer the most troubled of them. Yet, Heather recognized that to curtail the power of the arts was to resort to a counterproductive “paint-by-numbers” approach and to deny to individuals the potential experience of healing.

CLOSING COMMENT

Heather has now retired. As for many people, the transition from career to a time that has “more open space” has not been without difficulty. Heather recently described her sense that teaching was like being on a train that was hurtling through space: when you retire, you “fall off the train and role down the embankment, and the train just keeps on going without you.” She attributes her own art-making with providing meaning and structure to her first year of retirement, and she continues to apply her arts learning to the broader context of her life. For example,

in a recent interview, Heather told me about her new commitment to a physical fitness routine, a commitment she was able to make and keep because of her TAA experiences. She recalled that “yucky time” between knowing that she needed to do something and the moment when she began to take action that had characterized her early years in TAA. She attributed her persistence with the workouts to the lessons she had learned from art-making; “I learned that it’s a process. You don’t have to be good at it right away. You will learn and grow by just keeping going” (Interview, winter 2003).

Heather’s experiences accord with the processes outlined in transformation theory, and they do much to inform researchers about professional development in the arts for teachers. Her passion, confidence, and skills in the arts took years to truly take root and to blossom. Once firmly established, in her new learning, Heather experienced changes to her notions of herself, her students, her profession, and beyond. Transformation theory suggests that Heather’s story, with all its valleys and peaks, is not unusual for the profound affect deep learning can have on an adult’s life. The theory also predicts the complexity of the adult learning journey and the contextual conditions that impede or propel the implementation of new learning (e.g. Brookfield, 1994; Mezirow & Associates, 2000, Peddigrew, 2001). Brookfield (1994) has said that educators of adults must be more honest about the darker side of transformation, that is, those aspects of deep learning experiences that require an adult to step shakily beyond the familiar into the unknown. Because of the complexity of transformative learning, teachers who are learning within the arts require emotional support, expert guidance, and the awareness of school administration that there are many challenges and rewards in applying that learning in the classroom.

Because of her involvement in a sustained professional development program in the arts, support from a few colleagues and the administration, and her own personal courage and grit, Heather has been able to effect far-reaching changes in her own life, as well as those of her students and her school as a whole. Heather continues to believe that art-making can renew and re-energize other teachers and that arts experiences help students combat the relentless drive toward the focus on factual knowledge that currently pervades the educational system, often at the expense of more humane values. Now, as an occasional relief teacher, Heather “pounces” on opportunities to explore the arts with students (Interview, spring, 2004). She knows that the arts create the space where children and teachers can learn together and breathe deeply of life.

NOTES

1. All individuals involved in this case study have been given pseudonyms.
2. The relationship between otherness, the arts, and transformative adult learning is explored in Patteson (2004).
3. Schools now make a three-year commitment to the TAA program, with the option of continuing longer. The program is still organized, but no longer funded by the research team at Queen's University. Instead, individual schools raise funds, and school boards make financial contributions. For more information on the TAA program, visit <http://www.educ.queensu.ca/~arts>.
4. This survey contained 34 closed items and 7 open-ended items.
5. This survey contained 11 closed items and 13 open-ended items.
6. Nine open-ended questions were posed during these semi-standardized interviews.
7. Unless otherwise stated, all interviews are with Heather. Some of Heather's comments were made in retrospect; thus, the timeline of quotes is not consistently sequential.

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