

What Makes Art Teachers Still Enjoy Teaching Art?

Summary of results from an empirical action research training project

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ABSTRACT. This article outlines the results of a research training project undertaken by four German academic institutions investigating the factors involved in art teachers' continued motivation to carry out their profession even after ten years or more of teaching art in schools. The study is based on interviews carried out by art students and targeting art teachers who have had a minimum of ten professional years of experience. The analysis of this study reveals interesting perspectives on the expectations and motivations leading to successful art teaching careers and offers particular consequences to be drawn for art teacher training in general. One important consequence is that the study provides a model for how scientific research can be included in the training of art teachers to promote their self-reflection.

Four German institutions, the Alanus University of Arts and Social Sciences near Bonn, the Universities of Flensburg and Leipzig as well as the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich coordinated and carried out an empirical research training project investigating what makes art teachers continue carrying out their profession even after ten years or more of teaching art in schools. Together with their teaching staff, eight art education students from these institutions participated in planning, implementing and analysing a total of sixteen interviews in which the expectations and motivations of art teachers with a minimum of ten professional years of experience were identified. The analysis of this study reveals interesting perspectives on the expectations and motivations leading to successful art teaching careers and offers particular consequences to be drawn for art teacher training in general.

Study Motive, Question and Goal

The study was initially motivated by a request submitted by Germany's leading art education journal *Kunst+Unterricht* (Art + Instruction) to carry out an empirical study as a follow-up to a survey titled "Becoming an Art Teacher" published in an earlier edition. The question formulated in the art journal's request was as follows:

How is it that art teachers continue to enjoy their work as art teachers even after many years in their profession?
What contributes to their positive professional motivation?

We took this as an occasion to ensure the participation of art education students in this project. Through their involvement in planning, implementing and analysing the interviews, our students would not only be able to acquire proficiency and skills in carrying out educational research. They would also be given an early opportunity in their studies to reflect on and compare their own motivation and expectations surrounding

their choice of profession with the accounts provided by the art teachers.

This question not least carries special relevance for art teacher training in particular: A certain dualism has traditionally existed specifically at art academies where art and the science of education are often considered to be in contradiction to each other, often to the point where it is assumed that students of art education cannot be – or do not want to be – real artists. The imperatives of keeping art independent seem to conflict with the imperatives of teaching, often resulting in a strained and even ambiguous understanding of the art teaching profession, making any subsequent professional identification very difficult (Krautz, 2010). Therefore, the question also involved finding out whether any conclusions could be drawn from the research project as well as from student participation relevant to art teacher training in general.

Methodology and Implementation

Participants in the survey were art education teaching staff and students from four universities in Germany. The study was concluded by a joint evaluation of the interviews and also engendered three thesis papers submitted by participating students as preliminary board exams for teachers, each involving an in-depth study of the interviews they carried out with individual art teachers.

Our study being explicitly explorative, we deliberately chose interview partners who after no less than ten years continued to enjoy carrying out their profession. In this way we wanted to identify factors contributing to art teachers' contentment and those felt to be stressful. During the interviews, art teachers were to provide insight into the following: What roles do professional motivation, training and expectations play in carrying out their work? How do they perceive their professional identity – and how does this affect their sense of professional satisfaction?

In sixteen open-narrative interviews, students asked art teachers from various types of schools to talk about their background, the positive and negative sides of their training, their professional expectations and experiences in professional reality. They also asked them to comment on the importance and purpose of art classes and their position as art teachers in school as well as their own artistic activity. The guiding question was: Do you still enjoy being an art teacher – and if so, why?

Summary of the Results from the Interview Analyses

While an in depth analysis of the interviews has been published in the journal *Kunst + Unterricht* (Heinritz & Krautz, 2010) this essay in particular reflects on the consequences to be drawn from the analysis with particular focus on the significance of research projects for the professionalisation of teachers during their training.

The study reveals for instance that the reasons for professional satisfaction are multifaceted. As a result, a simple list of beneficial factors cannot be compiled. However, the study also showed that professional satisfaction on the part of art teachers was dependent on their ability to find ways of achieving and maintaining positive professional identification specifically as *art teachers*, not just as artists. The following are some of the insights resulting from the analysis of the interviews.

- The starting point for beginning professional training as an art teacher may either lie in an individual's self-conception as an artist or in his/her desire to work in the field of education. Whatever one's starting point may be, the decisive factor determining individual success and satisfaction, however, is that in the first years of training a conscious decision has been made to become an art teacher without perceiving oneself as a 'failing artist' who must end up as a school teacher. Those teachers interviewed who had an initially primary interest in art developed pleasure in working with pupils and successfully combined their artistic ambitions with art instruction. Those with more educational ambitions had to bring an interest in art and acquire the appropriate training.
- The art teachers' expectation regarding the purpose of art instruction were exceedingly varied and can generally be grouped into three core areas: The teachers interviewed considered instruction in art and

culture to be important in contributing to general education, in furthering students' personal development through art reception and practical artistic activity, and finally in developing skills in aesthetic perception and judgement. A crucial factor in professional satisfaction seems to involve a high degree of identification with the significance and purpose of art instruction, which is often placed in an idealistic theoretical educational context and emphatically pursued contrary to the perceived dominant fashion of the time. What is essential, however, is that idealistic goals be appropriately connected to the reality of class instruction and school activity. High expectations and naive pedagogical ideas, such as the idea that students are always highly motivated in art class or do not need any instruction at all, are corrected by real conditions. Satisfied teachers, however, do not experience this as a disappointment but as a necessary learning process for themselves. One teacher said: 'In the beginning I stood in front of the class and said, "O.k. kids, do whatever you like", until I realized a child doesn't know what he/she wants. Children need to be guided. They need free space, but they do need guidance, too.' (M4)

- A formative factor in the professional identity of art educators is also the expectation that a certain degree of autonomy and independence in carrying out instruction exists. Guidelines, grading, cooperation with colleagues, school bureaucracy, etc, are often felt to obstruct and even contradict the teachers' own instruction goals. Creative solutions to what is felt to be restrictive outer conditions and an aggressive promotion of their artistic activities in school seem to be important factors contributing to professional enjoyment and satisfaction.
- Another factor playing an important role in how art teachers view their profession is their relationship to students. In the interviews it was often mentioned that the relationship to their own art teachers at school was felt to be exemplary. Some of the art teachers considered their personal relationship to students as the most decisive and emotionally uplifting element in their work. Art class's more open structure seems to also provide art teachers better opportunities for supporting and being more responsive to individual students: 'An entirely different relationship develops, and I think it's really important, if you want to do this work that you're open and willing to relate to your students.' (FL4)
- The often delicate question concerning their own artistic activity as art teachers is resolved in various ways: For some it is essential, others switch their emphasis on the appreciation of art, others again consider their instruction to be an artistic activity and do not miss studio work. What this indicates is that professional contentment is based on the ability to find real and personally satisfying answers to the issue.

Results on the Question of Incorporating Educational Research in Art Teacher Training

Another area touched upon by the study reveals the importance of incorporating educational research in teacher training to promote reflection on professional identification. Developing identification with a specific profession is - according to Dreyer (2005) and Seydel (2005) - predicated on conscious biographical reflection. More explicitly, this reflection forms the basis upon which a substantiated choice between professional alternatives – being an art teacher or independent artist – can be made.

Particularly in art academies, where art students and art education students study together and where the alternatives between being 'a free artist' or 'an art teacher' are closely intertwined, it appears to be particularly important to provide personal stock-taking opportunities. In previous seminars, for instance, art education students were asked to carry out interviews with Alanus alumni who had become artists. As a result they were able to reflect on their own understanding of what it means to be an independent artist. Now they were subsequently given the opportunity to examine the lives and professional reality of art teachers.

Participating students especially appreciated the chance to become acquainted with and compare different professional biographies in a research context. In this manner they became aware of the significance of undergoing the kind of self-reflection carried out in their teacher interview: 'It was fascinating to experience how after so many years a teacher was suddenly able to see meaningful correlations where they had been ignored or not realized before'. (S1)

An important insight was that as long as they were determined, pursuing their own artistic activity remained a possibility: 'One insight I think I gained was that you shouldn't underestimate being an art teacher, but that, if you really wanted to, you could still take deliberate time to work as an artist.' (S2)

The students' choice of a particular profession seems already to have been well established and was not fundamentally altered during the interview process. Yet they reported being additionally motivated and encouraged to become art teachers through their experience. Existing fears regarding professional demands were confirmed. Others however were dissipated, such as the fear of being unable to exert enough authority in class: 'It was nonetheless encouraging to see that most teachers did not give up but continued to persistently promote their position in art'. (S3) Occasionally, deeper personal concerns were reflected and touched upon: 'Deep inside there is the fear I could "end up" like my own art teacher'. (S4)

Moreover, students evaluated the early opportunity to carry out independent academic research positively: 'It was motivating to be able to contribute to academic research and see it being published and read'. One student even decided to pursue a doctoral degree.

Students also gained a new perspective on their course of study: Their contact with professional reality not only revealed the multifarious opportunities offered by academic study but also the unavoidably distinct nature of school practice. One student realized that the true significance of what he had learned during his university training would unfold only in practice: 'Being a teacher requires you to maintain a reflective approach to your work. As a result, I need to be willing to critically analyse the things that affect me personally.'

What Consequences Are Relevant For (Art) Teacher Training?

Integrating professional biographic research in teacher training can contribute to early professional reflection and positioning. As part of a systematic examination of professional identity and reality, it promotes professionalisation based not only on specialized training but also on personal development.

The study reveals that in the conflictual arena of art teacher training it is necessary to combine the fields of art, education science and didactics while studying. Otherwise entrance into professional practice will be experienced as a shock, requiring formidable personal efforts of compensation on the part of young teachers, which often leads to failure time and again. As a consequence, it is essential to dismantle the oftentimes mythological superelevation of artistry, by which the 'true artist' is at the same time the 'best teacher', but the teacher in turn can never be a true artist. According to Dreyer's study of 2005, this one-sided emphasis on art in teacher training runs contrary to the professionalisation of art teachers.

In fact, art teachers who have successfully acquired a positive professional identification answer the question 'Do you still enjoy being an art teacher?' with the following: 'I'm proud of being an art teacher. It's wonderful to see how everything around me can become – and indeed becomes – the object of what I teach. I have to say, this work is life itself.' (L1)

This pilot study showed that it effectively initiated students' own reflection on their professional aptitude through examining the art teacher interviews. Upon publication, it also generated a great deal of positive response, especially among university teachers and teacher training staff in particular.

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