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CROSS-CURRICULAR COLLABORATION AND ART-MAKING WITH STUDENTS IMPACT AN ART TEACHER'S HAPPINESS AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

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Introduction/Statement of the Problem: Teacher Burn-Out

As an elementary art teacher, I have experienced a range of feelings and emotions day to day and even minute to minute. Unfortunately, with the stressors and reality of teaching in a pandemic, I am often faced with feelings of anxiety, sadness, and worry. When reflecting on the source of these heavy feelings, I recognize these emotions arise from two different places; one which is related to personal struggles and difficulties, and the other which comes from empathy for students I teach. For the past three years, teachers have been tasked with balancing the needs of the self with the needs of the students. During the 2020-2021 school year, Ford et al. states:

> The push to fully resume face-to-face operations in U.S. schools and institutions
> of higher education early in the pandemic was fraught with disorganization and
> failure on many levels and these challenges have not been isolated to the U.S.
> Preschools, K-12 schools, and universities were ordered closed at both local or
> national levels in 172 countries, impacting about 98.5% of the world's student
> population. (2021, p. 1)

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted 98.5% of the world's students. Thus, most of the world's teachers were faced with new challenges on top of an already demanding workload (Ford et al., 2021).

The data suggests that the increasing demands on teachers is a global problem, a collective challenge that most all educators have had to grapple. In the past, administrators, parents, and students have expected teachers to extend themselves for the needs of their students, but the pandemic has added extra demands and necessities (Ford et al., 2021). Teachers have become responsible for not only addressing academic needs, but also for the duty of keeping

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students safe from a virus, while simultaneously keeping themselves and families safe as well. Education scholar, Ulfiah et al., states:

> The Covid-19 pandemic has had a disastrous impact on the world of children…so don't be surprised if children need a mood booster from adults (parents, teachers and other families) to stay excited and have fun studying "at home". (2022, p. 4113)

Striving for a healthy work-life balance seems to be more challenging than ever. There are not enough teachers and staff prepared to address the increasing emotional needs of students, and their own emotional needs (Ulfiah et at., 2022).

With teacher retention being crucial with the number of teachers leaving the profession, investigating strategies for increasing contentment and quality of life is a necessity. In *Stopping the Revolving Door: Increasing Teacher Retention*, education scholars Sam Brill and Abby McCartney (2008) state: "The remedy to retaining teachers could also lie in an evaluation and reform of current working conditions in certain areas, as well as in improving the types of professional communities that are fostered in schools and districts" (p. 763). The challenges teachers have faced during the pandemic has led to a teacher exodus from the profession and the teacher shortage has impacted students, schools, and communities (Carver-Thomas, Leung, & Burns, 2021).

In addition to addressing the challenges of the pandemic, teachers are also facing other struggles, such as the need to support the social and emotional learning of students that have not known a normal school year for at least three years. For our youngest learners, never in their young lives have they experienced a school setting without social distancing and other precautions.[1] In the midst of the stress and burn-out, teachers are also being immersed in

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[1] Normal is referencing pre-pandemic conditions of teaching that excluded the use of masks, social distancing, or hybrid models of delivering instruction.

messages to partake in self-care and find ways to de-stress. Personally, I have wondered how to meaningfully engage in stress management while simultaneously maintaining an effective teaching practice. A recurring theme of being behind or feeling set-back has come up for me throughout the year, experiencing the difficulty of recovering from COVID-19 while continuing to make myself available for my students.

I have become curious about the moments in which I feel happiest, most successful, and experience the strongest sensations of joy. When I think about what helps me feel the most supported and successful, I find myself reflecting upon moments of connection and friendship. One of the elements that has been most impactful in maintaining a healthy, connected career has been the relationships and collaborations I have maintained with my colleagues. Leaning into the support of other teachers and learning from colleagues has served as an impactful form of professional development. In the process of rethinking my pedagogy and teaching style, I have turned to collaboration with other educators, specifically, the general music teacher at my school, Veronica Balestino.[2]

Ms. Balestino and I share the same students, and our weekly schedules mirror one another[3]. This has allowed us to use our common planning time to strategize, share stories of success and failure, and approach problem-solving as a team. In Spring 2021, we collaborated on a kindergarten unit revolving around the concept of identity and future-building through art and music. This collaboration planted a seed of curiosity about the ways in which we can collaborate

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[2]Balestino has given permission to use her name in the study. Because Balestino is not the focus of my research, Penn State's Institutional Review Board has determined my study does not meet the DHHS definition of research.

[3] Ms. Balestino and I both identify as white females in our 20s.

on a larger scale, in a deeper process. Our initial collaboration captured the interest and support of our building principal, allowing us to confidently pursue our curiosity.

These opportunities for collaboration have also given me the chance to experience the feeling of connection and support in the school environment. As the only visual art teacher in the building, my work can often feel isolated and lonely. Ms. Balestino and I began to notice that we would actively look forward to the days on which we would be teaching or planning together.

While the challenges of teaching have certainly been prominent, I also find myself inquiring internally, searching for a solution. The time spent working collaboratively had me questioning the effect these opportunities were having on my well-being, in the midst of a school year that had been challenging. This led me to pursue action-research centered around my emotional fluctuations and whether time spent collaborating with another teacher, professional development, or other activities impacted my quality of life as an educator. Therefore, I sought to address two research questions that arose from my reflections on changes in my emotional state in my first cycle of action research:

- How does collaboration with another arts teacher increase my overall happiness and joy?

- How does participation in art-making alongside students contribute to well-being?

With the pandemic affecting many, if not most, students and educators, the issue of how to support and help teachers is a relevant concern. By identifying what makes teachers feel the most excited and happy to do their job, there is an opportunity to influence the culture of the school community and staff morale. In addition to benefiting teachers, there is potential for it to expand into an opportunity to examine how teacher well-being can impact students. When correlating teacher well-being to student success, applied linguistics scholars, Moskowitz and Dewaele state:

Given the reciprocal nature of the student/teacher relationship, there is a growing

realization that a consideration of the learner would be incomplete without due focus on

the teacher, as teachers themselves are often the defining variable in classroom language

learning. (2021, p. 1)

On a personal level, an inquiry into what makes me feel the most fulfilled at work is information

that could impact my career and the students that I teach.

Context and Background to the Study

This study took place in my elementary school art classroom over the course of three

weeks, utilizing a self-reflective, inquiry-based approach[4]. As this research is a self-exploration

into my own happiness and well-being as an art educator, the data centers around my personal

reflections and observations. Art education scholar Karen Keifer-Boyd states:

Arts-based research is a hybrid form of action research based in art processes, and/or art

based in action research processes. The hyphen used in the term appears to place art as a

base in a contiguous relationship with research. Arts-based research brought together

with the hyphen suggests a way to gain insight via art. (2011, p. 5)

In this study, I created art as a reflective documentation of my emotional fluctuations prior to,

during, and after cross-curricular collaborative planning and sharing of ideas for intersecting

visual and performing arts.

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[4] The elementary school consists of approximately 300 students. Approximately 55% of students identify as female with the remaining 45% identifying as male. As reported by parents/guardians on registration forms, the student diversity percentages of students consist of 59.4% white, 15.8% Asian or Pacific Islander, 9.6% Two or more races, 7.3% Black or African American, 7.3% Hispanic/Latino, 0.3% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.3% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. 23% of students are economically disadvantaged.

Following my curiosity surrounding the question of how collaboration impacts my mood as a teacher, I had to first organize situations for collaboration to take place. To help allow time and space for this to take place, I began by reaching out to my principal and the school district's assistant superintendent requesting professional development release time. With an afternoon of release time granted, Balestino and I created a thematic unit centered around the theme or concept of activism in art, or as the group, Anti-Racist Art Teachers, call it, *Artivism* (Anti-Racist Art Teachers, 2021). Anti-Racist Art Teachers is a volunteer group of full-time working art teachers that creates resources for educators. The group, Anti-Racist Art Teachers (2021), define artivism as, "using your art and actions to bring about social change" (para. 1). This three-week unit took place in the general art and music classes and provided the opportunity to co-teach several classes as well as teach the same content separately, but specific to our own domain of art. While the focus of my study is not co-teaching or on cross-curricular collaboration but rather on whether and how engaging in such teaching positively impacted my happiness and well-being as a teacher, I briefly describe the cross-curricular collaboration.

The structure of the collaboration took the shape of a kick-off lesson, co-taught by Balestino and myself in the gymnasium of the school, as we were easily able to combine two classes of third grade students into this space. We began by reading the picture book, "Change Sings" by Amanda Gorman (2021). The story follows a young girl as she carries a beautifully decorated guitar, gathering a diverse group of musicians to clean up a littered playground, build a ramp for a child in a wheelchair, offer a meal to a homeless mom and son, and finally march beneath a huge urban mural. This picture book served as a catalyst for student arts-based inquiry into issues of social justice in their own lives. Gorman's picture book generated conversation among students to reflect and take inventory of what issues they deemed important to them as individuals and what they would like to change about the world.

With students excited and hooked into the idea of advocating for social justice issues they felt a strong connection, we began diving into the process of linking visual and performing art. In art class, students were introduced to artists and activists including: Ai Weiwei, Favianna Rodriguez, Shephard Fairey, Hank Willis Thomas, Guerilla Girls, Jessica Sabogal, and more. These artists were selected as they all create art as a form of activism, addressing issues such as migration, gender and racial equity, climate change, democracy, and issues of human rights. Students spent the first art class cultivating a bank of words and visuals that they associated with their topic.[5] They then used these collections to inspire a drawing that would eventually become a relief print. The reasoning behind choosing printmaking as the medium for this project was to provide students the opportunity to create a work of art they could reproduce repeatedly to have their work serve as a form of poster. We discussed how we could use expressive imagery to convey a powerful message without words. Students were able to make many prints (see Figure 1), using these reproductions as posters or ways to communicate their message to a larger audience beyond the classroom.

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[5] See Appendix A for example of words associated with social justice issues relevant to students.

Figure 2. Student artivism relief prints; C. Latorre, 2022

Utilizing the same bank of words and images as they did in art class, students created poetry with their classroom teachers putting words and feelings behind their art, exploring the art form of ekphrasis.[6] With their visual art and poems prepared, Ms. Balestino introduced students to the musical portion of the unit, an exploration into the genre of rap. She began by reading the picture book, "The Roots of Rap" by Carole Boston Weatherford (2022). Students laid down beats and found a rhythm to recite their lyrics to, exploring passion and emphasis in their words. While the student process and work were meaningful and impressive, throughout this collaboration the questions I was exploring related to my own feelings throughout the duration of the project which led me to the design of my study.

Action Research Design

I conducted a mixed method analysis using the four layers of qualitative analysis introduced and piloted in the Master of Professional Study in Art Education course, AED 815: Action Research, which I enrolled in Spring 2021, along with descriptive statistical analysis using a two-tailed t-test. The tracking of emotion levels over the course of multiple days allowed for the calculation of the standard deviations. This allows for using the t-test, a well-known statistical technique, to calculate what is known as the p-value. When the p-value calculated from the t-test is less than 0.05, the difference between the emotional level felt on individual teaching days in comparison with co-teaching days can be considered to be statistically significant (Andrade, 2019). The use of the t-test to compare the effect of teaching methods on the emotional state of teachers has been done by others (Jang, 2007; Narayan, 2016). The four layers of qualitative analysis, as laid out by Karen Keifer-Boyd are:

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[6] Ekphrasis is writing inspired by art.

- Code to Dissemble and Reassemble – In this layer, I coded my original set of data, looking for patterns and or repetitions of action and thought.

- Inquiry Prose – In this step of the process, I wrote about the "codes/categories/metaphors/patterns" I found in the first layer of my work. This step of the process is used as discovery and a way to think about the original data while adding more from this discovery process.

- Reflexivity and Encompassing Metaphors – In this third layer of quantitative analysis, I interpretated my data and gave meaning to it through support by existing theory through literature review.

- Seeing Patterns as Major Themes – In this stage, I acknowledged my findings by producing theory-supported claims and explanation of my decisions throughout the process.

These four layers of qualitative analysis led me through the process to give value to my claims (Keifer-Boyd, 2014).

Over the course of the unit in piloting qualitative analysis in Spring 2021, I tracked my feelings through journaling and self-reflection. I was highly influenced and inspired by the "Dear Data" project style of data collection and presentation. "Dear Data" is a drawing project by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec (2016) in which a unique representation of weekly data is illustrated on a postcard, with the back of the postcard serving as a key, allowing viewers to decipher the picture and visualize the data on the front of the card.

For this action research project, I was curious about how I could visually represent data in multiple ways to illustrate my moods, emotions, and feelings throughout the cross-curricular collaboratively planned unit on Artivism. I created a daily journal template that segmented my

day into quarters: morning, lunch, afternoon, and evening. I rated my happiness, stress, productivity, and perceived value on a scale of 1-10 throughout each of those sections of the day.[7] I recorded data on both days I collaborated with Balestino as well as days I did not, noting whether the collaboration took place each day in the journal. Additionally, I provided a section for comments each day to provide brief explanations of events that occurred. See Figure 2.
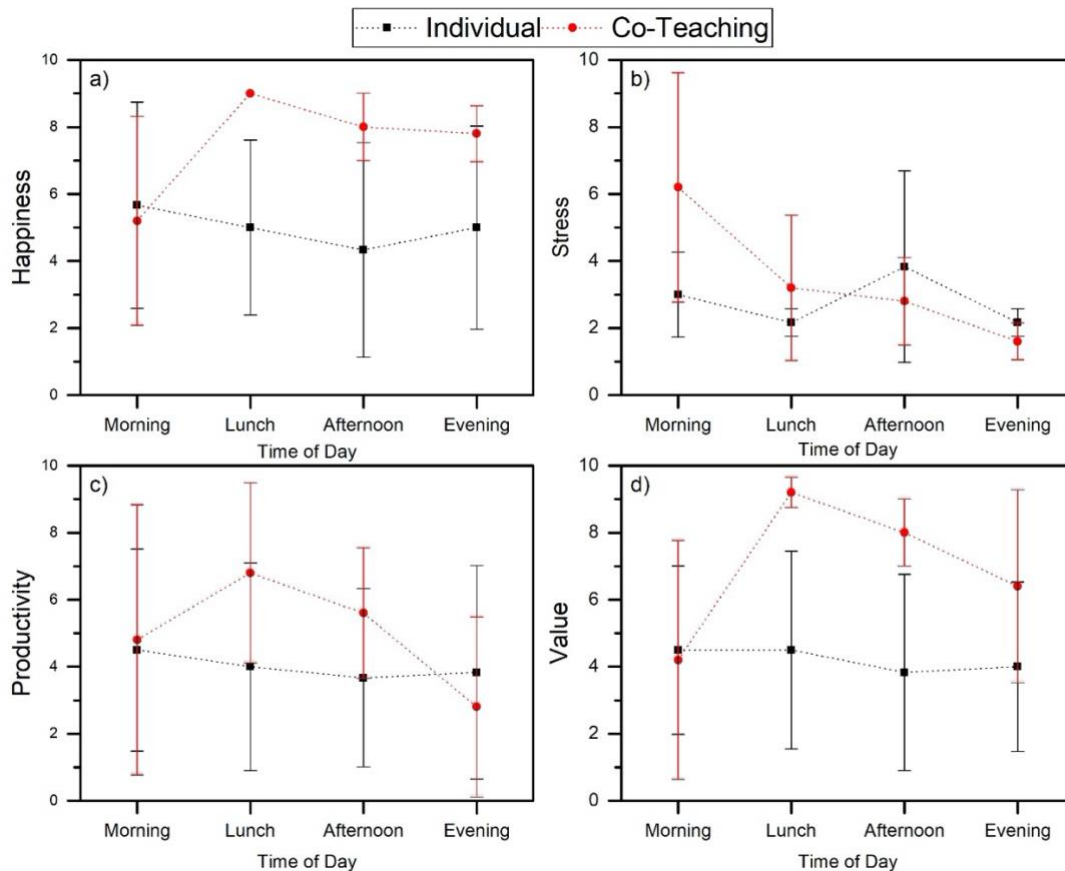

Figure 2. Average levels of emotions (a. happiness, b. stress, c. productivity, and d. value) reported for days taught individually and with co-teaching; C. Latorre, 2022

In addition to following the template for journaling and data collection that I created, as students create art across several disciplines and mediums, I also created art alongside them,

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[7] Value in this instance is meaning how valuable I felt as an educator.

using poetry and printmaking as a way to document my feelings and thoughts about the process of co-planning and co-teaching.

Study Limitations

Upon reflection, this action research was limited by certain restrictions that were beyond my control. For instance, as an elementary art teacher I teach 25, 50-minute classes a week operating on a five-day cycle. This means that my daily schedule is incredibly structured, limited to no room for flexibility or adjustments. This meant that we had to be sure to accomplish what we needed to within a 50-minute instructional block and remain on schedule with the proposed timeline as we would only see the classes once a week.

Additionally, the benefits of working with another teacher also brought some challenges as I had to consider not only my schedule and availability, but also those of another teacher. Balestino and I only share one common 50-minute planning block first thing in the morning, once a week. This required us to find time outside of the school day to meet and plan, an increasingly difficult task as the business of the end of the year consumed much of our time.

In the midst of this collaboration, our community was still very much undergoing the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic, with many students and teachers falling ill and being out of school for five to ten days at a time. This proved a challenge to help ensure every third-grade student had the opportunity to engage in this meaningful learning. Additionally, it added a layer of stress and mental load that Balestino and I had not anticipated.

Data Analysis and Discussion

For 11 days, I tracked my levels of emotions throughout the days I taught individually (6 days) and days which had a co-teaching aspect between morning and lunch (5 days). An average

of the level of emotion reported along with the corresponding standard deviation are shown in Figure 2.

The level of happiness recorded throughout the day (Figure 2a), indicates co-teaching leads to higher levels of happiness for me in the lunch, afternoon, and evening times, but not in the morning. For co-teaching, my data tracking and analysis further suggests that throughout the day my happiness levels rise. Throughout the unit, co-teaching always took place from 10:15-11:05 a.m., in the late morning before lunch. My data analysis visualization shows that after co-teaching I became happier and this happiness lasted throughout the day. The same cannot be said for when teaching occurred individually, as my individual happiness actually decreased throughout the day.

When analyzing stress levels, I found that co-teaching leads to higher levels of stress in the morning and during lunch for me, but then results in lower levels of stress for me in the afternoon and evening. Co-teaching requires a combined effort from both teachers, which can lead to stress and worry that the other teacher may not have prepared for the class.

From my analysis of my sense of productivity, I found that I feel more productive in the days in which I am co-teaching, especially in the lunch and afternoon hours. It can be that the happiness that I felt after co-teaching with Balestino put me in a good mood and inspired me to be more productive.

When analyzing value, I noticed a similar trend to that of happiness. After co-teaching in the morning, I felt a significantly higher value during lunch and afternoon. The social justice aspect of the project, which happened as a part of this collaboration, also made me feel as if I was doing something important and I felt higher value teaching on these days.

The p-value resulting from the two-tailed t-test comparison of the average emotion levels recorded in this study are shown in Figure 3, which conveys $p < 0.05$ for happiness at lunch and afternoon, and value at lunch and afternoon. Figure 3 shows that there is statistical significance in this study to support the claim that co-teaching improved happiness and value levels during lunch and in the afternoon.

Group	HM	HL	HA	HE	SM	SL	SA	SE	PM	PL	PA	PE	VM	VL	VA	VE
p-value	0.808861	0.00789	0.037236	0.078326	0.060859	0.277682	0.477135	0.080493	0.890576	0.147896	0.210784	0.580228	0.873481	0.006739	0.014563	0.174957

Figure 3. Obtained p-values to show the effect of co-teaching vs. individual teaching on happiness (H), stress (S), productivity (P), and value (V) felt in the morning (M), lunchtime (L), afternoon (A), and evening (E); C. Latorre, 2022

In order to visualize the feelings that I described in my journal entries for each of the teaching days that data was recorded, I created word clouds using Gephi visualization software (see Figure 4). Words which were found more often in the journal entries are displayed with larger font, and the lines interconnected the words show that the words appeared in the same journal entries. Bolder lines between the words indicate that the words appeared in the same journal entry multiple times. Words associated with negative feelings, such as "alone", "isolated" and "sad" were present in journal entries during the days with individual teaching but were not found in journal entries written on the days of collaborative teaching. Words associated with positive feelings such as "impressed," "fun," and "proud" were present during the collaborative teaching journal entries but absent from the individual teaching journal entries.
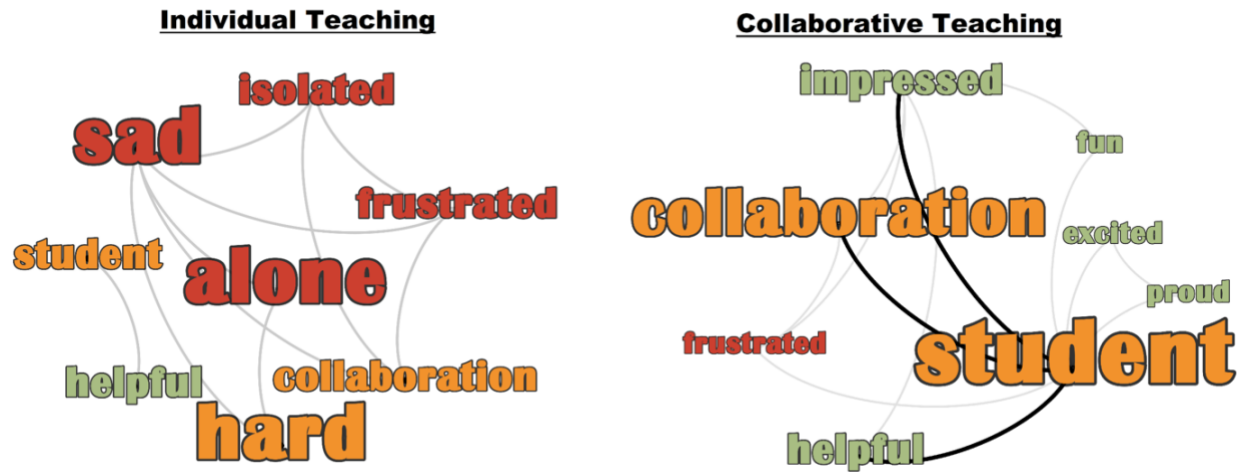
Figure 4. Word Cloud created with Gephi visualization software to illustrate frequently journaled words; C. Latorre, 2022

Holmes et al. (2019) investigated teacher retention in hard to staff schools, citing leadership and school culture as an important factor in retaining highly qualified teachers. "Factors such as appreciation and support, environments that encourage collegial learning opportunities and school cultures where accomplished teaching can flourish and grow may be critical to extended teaching careers" (Holmes et al., 2019, p. 29). These findings align with my experience in engaging in collegial learning and collaboration in the elementary school setting.

With the Covid-19 pandemic being a unifying experience for our global community, other teacher-researchers have questioned the impact of Covid-19 on teacher resiliency. *The National Forum of Teacher Education Journal* published a study of teacher resiliency as a result of the pandemic. In this study, Parker and Hopper (2021) state that the role of the school environment may be a key factor in determining teacher positivity. "Teachers are often seen as the "glue" during these times, binding students to their academic studies and becoming a front-line defense against isolation although teachers often had no direct training on how to accomplish this" (Parker & Hooper, 2021, p.5). Asking educators to act as the "glue" as described by Parker & Hooper (2021), is an example of the emotional labor teachers are asked to

do on a daily basis. As an educator, I experience on a daily basis the process of guiding students through de-escalation, emotional reflections, and restorative practices, all while maintaining my own mental health. Throughout my research, I experienced first-hand the impact of affective labor and the influence it has on my emotions and well-being.

In *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012) defines emotional labor as work that is done to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (p. 7). If a teacher is struggling with a personal issue, they must do the labor of managing their own emotions out of the need to be emotionally available to their students. This labor is known as immaterial labor, or labor that produces relationships and emotions (Hardt and Negri, 2004). A subcategory of this labor is known as affective labor. Hardt and Negri define affective labor as, "labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (2004, p. 108). I found that the experience of collaborating with another teacher provides opportunity for affective labor to be shared, potentially resulting in less of a negative impact on the individual teacher.

Conclusion and Implications of the Study

As Parker and Hopper (2021) state: "Educational decision makers cannot just think of the teacher in isolation. Examination of the overall learning environment is a key element in developing teaching with resilience" (p. 8). Teaching, specifically in the elementary art setting can be isolating, overwhelming, and challenging. Having the opportunity to collaborate, share, and connect with other educators could be a key factor in teacher satisfaction and mental well-being. Through action research, I found that my value and happiness were impacted by the

collaborative Artivism curricular unit and the time spent working collectively toward a common goal.

Beyond the data collected and analyzed, an impactful takeaway from this research is the amount of joy I experienced from teaching something I self-identified as meaningful and relevant. Observing students use their voice and advocate for important issues of social justice made this project feel valuable. The confidence I felt to take on the planning and implementation of this unit was also because of the ability to share the labor and have another teacher hold me accountable. In the future, I will continue to explore opportunities to collaborate and co-teach. The assistant superintendent even offered to help us write grant proposals to make this happen.

Often, I have felt lonely as the art teacher. This study answered inquiries into how co-teaching impacted that feeling of isolation, and in this instance, it was a positive relationship. My experience in conducting this study helped me realize that students and administrators can support an approach to cross-disciplinary arts education, which may decrease teacher stress and lead to increased levels of happiness by feeling productive and valued as an art educator.

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Appendix A: Word Bank Example

Artivism:
Brainstorming, Planning, & Preparing
Artivism is using your art and actions to bring about social change.

What is your topic?

hunger

What images and words capture your feelings about this topic?

Images:

help
Others

Words:
- Food
- Drinks
- give
- people
- help
- others
- Franklend rosovelt
- Food Bank
- Activism