# A Deliberate Storying: Considerations of Well-Being among Experienced Canadian Secondary Visual Art Teachers

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of three experienced secondary Visual Arts teachers educated in Canada. Following grounded theory, interweaving qualitative in-depth interviews and research creation, the study investigates the well-being of two experienced secondary teachers - one employed at a local school in Montreal and the other at an international school in Shanghai. The insights gleaned from these teacher narratives are then compared to the author's own autoethnographic reflections serving to inform the author's art-making practice and storying. The findings reveal an imbalance in teacher satisfaction, raising concerns about teacher well-being within the secondary Visual Arts discipline in Canada.

**Keywords:** Art Education, Teacher Well-being, Secondary Visual Arts, Artist-Teacher, International Baccalaureate, Research Creation

As a secondary Visual Arts (VA) teacher, it is heartening to see growing attention being directed toward concerns about teacher well-being. A recent study conducted by Taylor et al. (2024), on behalf of the University of Oxford Wellbeing Research and commissioned by the International Baccalaureate (IB), found that K-12 teachers face significant levels of stress, depression, anxiety, and poor physical health. Among the most pressing contributors to these challenges is workload, which has been identified as a major factor driving teachers to leave the profession.

By analyzing the findings, Taylor et al. (2024) identified three key factors that significantly impact teacher well-being: satisfaction with their school lives, positive experiences and feelings about their work environments, and a belief that their work has purpose and meaning. However, the study also underscores the importance of considering structural differences within education systems, as these can shape teachers' experiences. Factors such as curricular decisions, age-level expectations, school governance, professional development opportunities, and the cultural context of each country, all play a role in influencing teachers' well-being.

Adding to these challenges, secondary VA teachers often grapple with the "othering" of the subject within the broader curriculum. Recent findings from the *Art Now* report, compiled by Broadhead et al. (2024), reveal that secondary VA teachers express greater concern than their primary counterparts about the diminishing profile and perceived devaluation of the VA subject. Broadhead et al. identify this issue as a crisis, advocating for greater attention to the responsibilities placed on VA teachers, improved resourcing for the subject, and the equitable recognition of its essential value within the curriculum.

The marginalization of VA education is not a new phenomenon. As far back as Siegsmund (1998), VA has been described as "a discipline with a peculiar problem" (p. 197). Consistently undervalued and underfunded, VA in schools remains a marginalized subject. Gregson (2024) highlights that being an art educator today often means navigating this

marginalization as VA teachers face numerous challenges, including the low status of the subject, professional isolation, limited access to professional development, and ongoing pressures related to time and resources (Cole & Thomson, 2024). Blair & Fitch (2015) further discuss the dual role of VA educators as both artists and teachers, noting the added stress of imposter syndrome, tensions arising from differing skill sets, and biases toward realism or traditional media, which exacerbate critical stereotyping.

These intersecting pressures underscore the urgency of addressing teacher well-being within the context of VA education, highlighting the need for systemic change to ensure that VA teachers are supported, empowered, and valued in their work.

**Taking it Personally**

Coming from over a decade of full-time secondary VA teaching, I can personally attest to the immense demands of the workload—time to pause, reflect, or engage with theoretical academic literature is a rare luxury. It wasn't until I embarked on a Ph.D. in Art Education at Concordia University that I found the space to immerse myself in the higher educational milieu and engage with feminist theorists. I gravitated toward the seminal works of Collins (1981) and Sandell (1991), whose writings provided a lens through which I could begin to make sense of my experiences. It was through the iterative process of reading and re-reading (St. Pierre et al., 2016) that I started to understand the persistent challenges I encountered as a teacher of a consistently "othered" subject (p. 102). This marginalization of the VA discipline, so deeply entrenched in the neo-positivist, methodocentric, and hegemonic frameworks of contemporary education (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013), led me to reflect on its broader implications for my own well-being as a secondary VA teacher.

As Rolling J.H. Jr. (2017) reminds us, research often begins with a "nagging problem" at its core (p. 49). For me, this problem was rooted in years of teaching as the sole VA educator in my school, confined to the non-core subject framework and surrounded by the pervasive marginalization of my discipline (Irwin, 2018; Johne, 2017). The implicit and explicit messages that my course was 'less than' core subjects required me to constantly advocate for its value, to 'sell' my course, and to fight for visibility within the broader curriculum. Over time, I came to realize that I had internalized this struggle, continually pushing myself to do more and be better, without fully acknowledging the broader systemic forces contributing to the subjugation of my discipline.

This realization brought forth a critical question: Why had I internalized this othering? Was it a personal issue, or does this insidious marginalization impact other VA teachers in similar ways? The "nagging problem" for me became an exploration of other secondary VA teacher experiences, examining how the marginalization of the subject affects teacher well-being and how these systemic forces shape professional and personal identities. This inquiry prompted a deeper investigation into the perspectives of secondary VA educators, seeking to unpack the effects of marginalization and its far-reaching implications for concepts of well-being within the context of teaching VA.

This paper traces the components of my inquiry into secondary VA teacher well-being, as it flows from a structured research-centric beginning to an intuitive practice of art-making and research creation. The paper first outlines the methodology and methods, detailing the use of in-depth interviews and the application of coding procedures and the impetus for research creation. It then discusses the thoughtful considerations involved in participant selection. After the data collection phase, the discussion shifts to the process of visualizing the data. This led to the thinking-making of art-making, and situating the landscape, culminating in the sharing of the creative writing work of research creation in the Storying. The paper concludes with the synthesis of key insights and reflections emerging from this multidimensional investigation of secondary VA teacher well-being.

**Methodology**

I adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach, as outlined by Charmaz (2014), which allowed me to view my research as a construction to deepen my understanding of the issue of secondary VA well-being, while also leaving space for my personal experiences and "hunches" to guide the process (p. 30). To deepen this reflexive practice, I incorporated autoethnographic journaling (Leavy, 2020), which served as a critical tool for documenting my thoughts and experiences, and informed my act of storying throughout the research process.

The research methods of in-depth interviews (Yin, 2014) and research creation (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012), provided me with multiple ways to engage with the data, aligning with Charmaz's (2014) approach as a way of thinking about, constructing, and interacting with data throughout the research process. I approached this research not as a detached observer or "value-free expert" (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, p. 306), but as an experienced secondary VA teacher. My positionality provided me with access to shared understandings, thought patterns, and shared vernacular of VA educators—insights that may elude researchers outside the field. Grounded theorists often begin their studies with general empirical interests and loosely framed concepts to guide their inquiry (Charmaz, 2014). Similarly, my exploration was driven by my own experiences and "hunches" (p. 30). However, I remained open-minded and critically aware of how my positionality influenced the research process, ensuring that my values, privileges, and preconceptions were carefully examined and accounted for in the analysis and outcomes. The reflexive approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the research topic.

In-depth Interviews

For the initial research process, a series of in-depth interviews (Yin, 2014) were conducted over the Zoom online meeting platform (zoom.com, San Jose, USA) and recorded with two secondary VA teachers to gain data on each teacher's "lived experience, values and decisions, occupational ideology, cultural knowledge or perspective" (Gubrium et al. 2012, p. 106). Questions asked centered around initial (and current) motivations for being a VA teacher, education, artistic practice (inspirations, medium focus, possibilities and challenges of maintaining), logistical circumstances of teaching VA (classes taught/teaching, materials available, budget, facilities, support, salary/benefits), opinions on curriculum, ideas/opinions on teaching methods, skills and knowledge base required, as well as future goals.

Questions were posed in a form of dialogical conversation, enabling a reflexive re-engagement (Bohme, 2022) and taking into consideration Charmaz's (2014) strategy of following the flow of conversation, moving from open-ended questions to deeper reflective questioning as the conversation progresses. My positionality allowed me to relate with the interviewees and navigate the flow of conversation, sharing similar sentiments and experiences enabling a reflective meaningful experience

The recordings were digitally transcribed using Happy Scribe (happyscribe.com Barcelona) and then manually edited by the author. Transcriptions of the interviews were emailed to the participants to allow them to read over and omit any areas that they did not wish to include in the study. Sections flagged from participants at this stage were deleted and not included within the study.

Coding

The transcribed interview texts were carefully read and re-read to explore multiple meanings or perspectives (Roulston, 2010) and to deepen my understanding of the role of secondary VA teachers across differing educational settings. Following this iterative process,

I applied line-by-line coding (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020) to uncover patterns within the data that could reveal insights into the participants' lived experiences. This method allowed for a granular examination of the text, identifying recurring themes and underlying narratives.

To further refine the analysis, I employed in-vivo coding (Manning, 2017), focusing on the participants' actual words to capture their authentic voices. Specific phrases that indicated qualifiers, value judgments, or emotional responses—such as "don't have time," "very difficult," "too much," and "feel good"—were extracted from the transcripts. These recurring expressions provided a nuanced lens through which to interpret each participant's experience, enabling a deeper engagement with the emotional and contextual dimensions of their roles as secondary VA teachers. This layered approach to coding facilitated a richer understanding of the complexities embedded within their perspectives.

Research Creation

Haraway's call to action, "we need other kinds of stories" (Terranova, 2016), deeply resonated with me as I delved into my study. As the research evolved, I began to reflect on how I might explore and disseminate what I was uncovering—insights that felt more profound than mere data. I became drawn to storying as a form of research creation, seeing it as a means to disrupt the norm of academic writing and research (Ellis et al., 2011) while simultaneously "gathering and revealing through creation" (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012, p. 19). This approach provided a vehicle to validate the lived realities of secondary VA teachers (Iseke, 2013) and to legitimize their experiences, particularly those rooted in more nuanced and often overlooked ways of knowing (Matute, 2014). Eisner (2006) further advocated for the use of creative forms of inquiry, noting their ability to "capitalize on emotions" and to "make vivid" what is "obscured by the habits of ordinary life" (p. 12).

At the same time, I remained aware of the challenges inherent to research creation. Pariser (2009) warns that this practice often complicates the presentation of credible research, as it demands mastery of not one, but two rigorous disciplines. Despite this caution, I found myself drawn to research creation as both a familiar and provocative form of inquiry, embracing it as a "form of directed exploration through creative processes that includes experimentation, but also analysis, critique, and a profound engagement with theory and questions of method" (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012, p. 19).

Participant Selection Considerations

I chose to minimize variables by seeking out secondary VA teachers of a similar cultural and educational background. Jen and Anna (names are changed to protect the participants privacy) are of comparable lived experience to myself: Gen X (Twenge, 2018), Canadian female, educated in an art education or Visual Art related program from a Canadian university, beginning teaching in the early 2000's (see Table 1). A further connection could be made as Jen was hired by a private school in Canada directly after completing teaching certification and Anna was unable to secure employment in Canada so decided to teach internationally. Personally, I began teaching full time in a Canadian school and decided to move to the international school sector.

**Table 1**

*Comparison of Lived Experience Considerations of Participants and Author.*

| | **Author** | **Anna** | **Jen** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Canadian Origin | English Canadian | French/English Canadian | French Canadian |
| Gender | Female | Female | Female |
| Age | Gen X | Gen X | Gen X |
| Home Situation | Single | Married, Children | Married, Child, Dog |
| Education | Undergrad: University of Toronto/Sheridan College (Art & Art History) University of Wollongong (Graduate Diploma of Ed) Masters: University of San Francisco (Education Leadership) | Undergrad: University New Brunswick (History) Concordia (Art Education) Masters: University of Vancouver (Education Leadership) | Undergrad: Concordia (Art History) Concordia (Art Education) Masters: Concordia (Art Education) |
| VA Teaching Experience | 10+ years Public Schools: Canada, Singapore International Schools: Thailand, China | 10+years Public School: Wales International Schools: Thailand, Vietnam, Brazil, China | 10+years Private School: Canada |

Visualising the Data

Through the in-depth interviews, I began to sense an emotional imbalance between the experiences shared by the two secondary VA teachers. While both participants recounted similar instances of marginalization, I had a "hunch" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 30) that one participant's emotional experience carried a greater sense of frustration. Grodoski (2018) shares that visualizing research provides concise summaries and improved explanations when compared with written text, elevating the general understanding of patterns and implications generated by complex investigations. So, to explore this further, I utilized word clouds (wordclouds.com, Zygomatic, The Netherlands) as a visual tool to analyze and compare the language used by each participant. I created two series of word clouds and visually differentiated them by colour and shape. The first series (cool colours, oval shape) was generated using the full transcriptions of each interview (Figure 1), and the second (warm colours, diamond shape) was created by inputting only the in vivo coded words (Figure 2). In

this format of word clouds, the size of the words reflects their frequency of use, with larger words representing more often spoken terms.

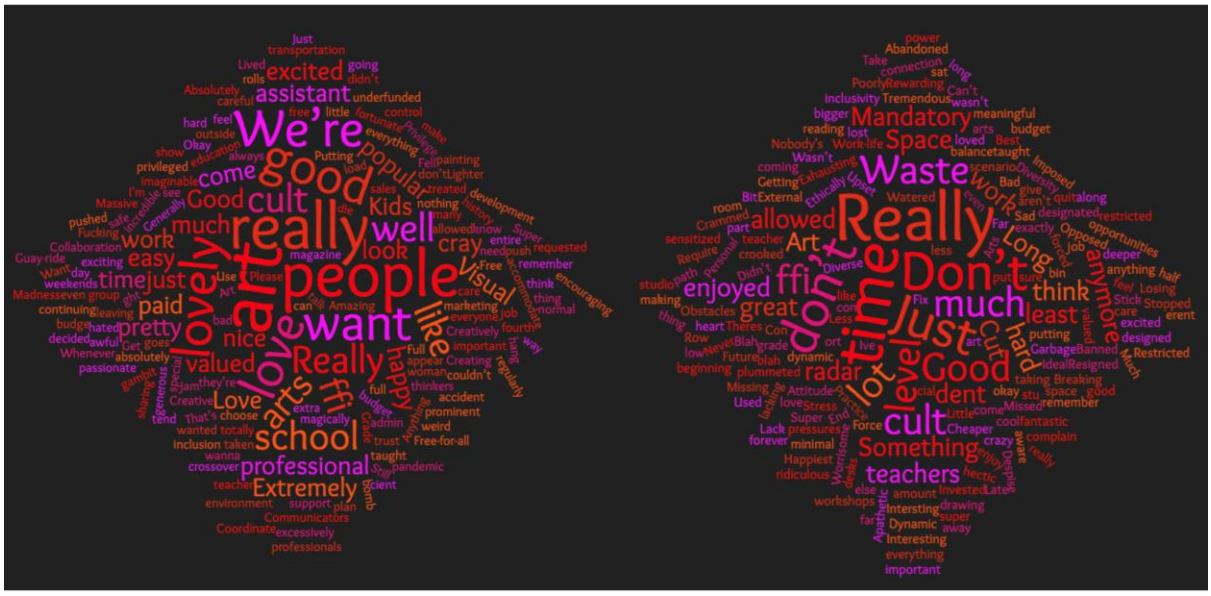
When comparing the word clouds of the two participants, Figure 1 highlights shared experiences, with words such as “art,” “like,” “really,” and “just” prominently appearing in both. This suggests a general commonality in their discussions. However, Figure 2 reveals more distinct and nuanced differences between their experiences. For instance, while both participants frequently used the word “really,” Anna’s word cloud shows larger words of positive or relational terms such as “art,” “want,” “people,” “good,” “lovely,” and “well.” In contrast, Jen’s word cloud reflects a tone of frustration and constraint, with words like “time,” “don’t,” “waste,” and “just” being larger. These contrasting patterns offer a visual representation of the emotional disparities emerging between the two participants experiences.

**Figure 1**

*Word Clouds Using Full Transcripts*
*Created using wordclouds.com. Screenshot by Amy Atkinson*


**Figure 2**

*Words Clouds Using Coded Qualifiers*
*Created using wordclouds.com. Screenshot by: Amy Atkinson*




ANNA CODED QUALIFIERS JEN CODED QUALIFIERS

Thinking-Making

As the research process unfolded, I was inspired to make. Being an artist as well as a secondary VA teacher, I always have many different artworks on the go in my art classrooms. Having art around me in many stages of "becoming" (Springgay, 2019, p. 66) soothes me. As I read through the transcripts and my journal notes and reflected on the in-depth interviews, I felt inspired to stitch and collage, to entangle my research process through the act of "thinking-making-doing" (Springgay & Truman, 2018, p. 205). The act of cutting and pasting and stitching was in equal parts disruptive and soothing, with the act of tearing paper apart and then stitching it together, invoking the materials in a way they were not meant to be used, and holding things together with tape and a prayer seems almost metaphorical to me as I worked to generate a practice of writing, rendering "visible forces that are not themselves visible" (p. 204). I had a "nagging" thought that the data nor the word clouds revealed the sense of vibrancy, the "transcorporeality" ( Springgay, 2019, p. 59) of what was revealed through the zoom discussions and the emotional cardiogram that is the VA secondary teacher experience.

Situating the Landscape

In the early creational stage of my collage, I chose an image of a landscape as the base image. As an artist, I don't usually gravitate to landscapes, but within this context, landscape is integral, acting as a "force field" (Balık & Lokçe, 2019, p. 29), entangling the visual and metaphorical between Kantian notions of landscape as an aesthetic with capacities to "transmit affects and sensations in a Deleuzian sense" (Balık & Lokçe, 2019 p. 29). Its juxtaposition as an actual location marker and a cultural and contextual influence illuminates the diversity and fragmentation of social and educational structures, highlighting a complex interplay between individuals and the social and cultural worlds they dwell in (Lin et al. 2022), expressing meaning between person-place encounters and between the human and the non-human (Mitchell, 2002, p. 15).

Though all 3 teachers in the study teach secondary VA, their educational landscapes are cordoned within different curriculum frameworks. Private schools in Montreal follow the

Quebec VA curriculum (Secondary Visual Arts Program, 2024) and are dependent on both provincial and national government mandates. International schools may be for-profit, non-profit, or connected to a specific country such as Canadian International Schools. Schools may choose to follow host-country curriculums or curriculums designed specifically for international education (ISC, 2022) like Cambridge's International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2019), or in this case the International Baccalaureate (IB) (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2019). Within the IB curriculum, middle school or early secondary (grades 6-10) students work through the Middle Years Program (MYP) and senior secondary (grades 11-12) students work through the Diploma (DP) program.

The Storying

The storying intertwines four narratives (Schachtner, 2020) combining various episodes, points in time, and places, linking them to each other to create meaningful relationships with *(A) reflections on my making (in italics),* (B) my reflective memories of teaching informed by my journaling, (C) Jen's narrative informed by direct transcribed conversations, at times explained through my voice, (D) Anna's narrative informed by direct transcribed conversations, at times explained through my voice, and resulting in an overall meaning which may not be inherently definitive. In the storying, I changed VA to simply 'art' to offer an authentic rendering of the conversations. It is more likely in common speech to say, 'art teacher' rather than 'VA teacher'.

The order for the narratives follows: *A*, B, *A*, C, *A*, D, C, *A.*

*This time I found an old calendar page in my box of collected paper scraps. I was looking for thick paper. Something a bit different. I had been considering ways to make my art sustainable, and so I didn't just want to reach for a blank canvas and my oil paint like I usually do. The calendar page caught my eye because it was so old; as old as when companies used to hand out calendars with landscapes on them as free gifts. I've seen it many times before. I don't know why, but I kept it for years; packed it up and carted it off with me from country to country. This random calendar page has seen so many curious art students rummaging through my scrap paper box.*

*It's made of semi-thick glossy paper, not as thick as card stock, but thicker than regular printer paper. That's why I chose it today. Regular paper won't hold up to my design. I want to embroider onto the paper. I haven't done this before, but I think it could work. If I prep the sides with masking tape just like my grandmother showed me endless times with my squares of linen, it should make a secure frame. The paper won't fray, I know. But it might tear and that could be worse. With the edges lined in tape, it gives me some security. Now that I have a place to hold onto, this idea might just work.*

*The picture is a photograph of a waterfall. The water is cascading down a rock face and splashing onto a large outcropping of precambrian shield before it rushes to the bottom of the page. The ridge of the cliff is decorated with dark green fir trees. The sun dances over the rushing water, creating glistening droplets, making seductive promises of warm summer days while dark shadows haunt the jagged rock formations. The blue sky and the rushing water have faded I think, as they appear almost white.*

*I look through my painted tin of embroidery thread and choose three blue threads: a vibrant aqua, a dark grey and a light pale hue, almost the colour of the faded sky. As I look at the colours I have chosen and the waterfall, I decide I will create a flower. A peony. That's not a big surprise. Being drawn to artistically exploring the exuberant peony blossoms since I*

*began teaching internationally ten years ago in Singapore, I am just one in a long line of scholars and artists inspired by this majestic queen of flowers.*

I wasn't always an international teacher. I started teaching art in a local public high school in a small town in Ontario, Canada. At the time, due to the teacher surplus, I felt lucky to be hired with a 0.5 contract. Even after three years of teaching, I never did get a full (1.0) contract. Which means, I never had one of those apparently sublime summers of full pay that are cause of much discussion in public opinion. I like to think it was because I was stubborn. I was trained as an art teacher, and I was a working artist. Although, I did teach a variety of subjects and valued my inclusive classroom, I didn't want to be pigeon-holed into anything other than being the art teacher. I just had this feeling, that if I specialized myself into another field, perhaps I would get a full-time contract, but I would never teach art. So instead, I was declared surplus at the end of each school year.

But oh, how I was stubborn. I held onto my one grade 9 art class and did everything I could to show my value. I painted murals around the school, designed, built and painted drama sets, set up and supervised art shows, led Arts Council, facilitated field trips to art galleries, brought my guitar and sang at Coffee Houses, chaperoned dances. I even organized the local cinema to host a special screening of Michael Jackson's epic 'This is It' for our whole school to take a special afternoon off to enjoy the arts. Any arts-based way I could get involved to prove my worth (and the value in arts education), I did it. At the end of my third year, I was declared surplus and offered a transfer to another secondary school to teach physical education. I decided instead to accept an offer from the Ministry of Education in Singapore.

My first year in a local Singaporean school felt like a slap of fresh air; a strange metaphoric connection, considering how utterly hot and humid it was. I thought I would melt in my art classroom with open windows, no air conditioning and 20 fans circulating on the ceiling. But to teach a full schedule of solely art classes, in a fully equipped art studio, with an adjoining painting room, a printmaking studio, and an outdoor workspace; to teach full classes of art students who chose to study art as one of their 6 equally scheduled classes. Not as an afterthought or a half course, but as a full course with the same allotted hours as all their other classes. And with students who had taken art seriously throughout their whole secondary school career, so they knew a range of technical skills, knew how to use tools and materials, and best of all, had confidence. I felt invigorated. I was engaged. I was inspired.

Don't get me wrong. I was busy. I was overworked. And I was ending most days in a pool of sweat and exhaustion. But it was worth it. And not just for the *roti prata* my students brought me every Friday afternoon, so I'd open the art studio for free art making time. I had never connected with students on such an artistic level before. I could sit with them and discuss their ideas, inspirations and process works. They would show me their sketch books, photos they had taken. I would show them my sketches and how I was interpreting their work. We would discuss possible directions for their art-making, experiment with techniques, critique and reflect, refine their compositions and then work through the minute details to realize their continually expanding creative goals. They taught me how to use the printmaking press, I taught them how to enjoy the music of Justin Beiber. Ha! That's an inside joke, as Beiber's early hit song 'Baby' was the signal that class was over and it was time to clean up. I don't think I ever got home before 7PM. And sometimes, as the IGCSE submissions neared, we'd get special permission to open the school on Saturdays, so we could work uninterrupted for hours. The work that my students produced in Singapore blew my mind. I had never seen secondary art students create such technically, considered and focused body of works before.

*The easiest way to separate threads is to hold one end between your teeth and pull apart the strands that you need from the whole. I decided to start with the darkest colour, dark blue-grey. If you rub the two threads between your thumb and finger, it slides through the eye of the needle like butter. Add a knot at the end and you are ready to go. An embroidery needle is thicker than a regular needle, so it creates a larger hole in the paper. I hadn't noticed it when I worked with linen, but I think that is because linen is malleable and molds itself back into the weave. Paper fibres are dry and glossed so the holes stay visible wherever you poke them.*

*As I worked in the first few stitches, the holes started to worry me. I noticed I couldn't get the stitches as close together as I wanted or the holes would join into one and create a tear. I knew that no one would be looking at the back, so I decided to use masking tape after every few stitches to reinforce the paper and secure the stitches in place. Then I could stitch through the tape and keep building layers, tape then stitches, then tape, then stitches. A good makeshift solution, I thought, proud of myself, until I had to push the needle through multiple layers of tape and the needle ended up pushing back into my finger. Being pierced by a needle is the strangest pain. You feel the needle pushing against the tough layer of your epiderm and you think it can withstand the pressure, but then there is a pop, as the skin gives way, like it gives up the fight. Then you feel the metal sink deep into the soft tissue underneath. It doesn't start to hurt until a few seconds after, when you see blood and realize that you have pricked yourself. After I pricked myself one too many times, I wound masking tape around my fingertip. Masking tape is really the most useful thing.*

Jen teaches at a private school in Montreal, Canada. She's been an art teacher for over 20 years. On paper. She was trained as an art teacher and she's on a full contract with her school to do so. But, Jen has literally taught everything; art in both French and English, from secondary 1 to secondary 5, Shop, Introduction to Technology, Physical Education, North American Literature, Media and Journalism, Cinema, Film Production, Debate, Integrative Project (which was a special course that the government mandated for two years, where every single student did a different project for the whole year, focusing on project management related activities), and Communication Studies. She even taught computers, which she proudly declares "back when printers were dot matrix".

Jen told me that she tried to do her own artwork during her prep class one year. She and her colleague, every day three, period two, both had a spare, so they decided they were going to work on their own art-making in the classroom. Sometimes when she was in a rush with her next class, her works in progress were left out around the art room.

"Miss, what's this?" Jen told me how her students would get so excited when they saw her artworks around the classroom.

"It's my art work. I'm working on a drawing."

"But why is it so good!"

"I'm an art teacher," she would laugh, "You want me to be good at this, don't you? You want me to know what I'm doing so I can help you. You don't want me to be mediocre. You want me to be good."

"But I'm never going to get this. I'll never be that good."

"You have to practice. You can't get to where I am without practice. I'm 100 years old."

She's really not 100 years old. But she's damn good at art. I have seen her work. She is so talented and patient with her craft, drawing with an intense realism that I both envy and admire.

"What are you working on now?" I asked

Jen laughed. "Who has the time?"

"Why is that?"

"A few years ago, the Ministry of Education in Quebec mandated that art subjects were mandatory, trying to encourage more arts in the schools. It used to be an elective and then they changed it so everyone must take an art subject. So, depending on which arts your school offers, you have to have a certain number of hours of arts in your high school career."

"That's what you want isn't it?"

"I mean, it's great in principle. When the ministry first announced this change, we were so excited. But it wasn't terribly thought out, because if all students had to take an art subject every year, that means that the number of hours of core subjects would have to be reduced. And no one is willing to do that. Imagine science giving up hours so students can do an art subject."

"Oh yeah. True. But why didn't they change the course choices? Have students choose less courses?"

"What they did was they shuffled things around a little bit, and they cut the arts, even though they imposed it. The school decided that they would keep the government mandate but students would only do art once a week for an hour. I mean, the fact that everybody has to take VA is great," Jen paused, "I just think, it's not super meaningful in the end, because there's not a lot of time dedicated to it."

"One hour a week?"

"At first, I thought it could work, but it's just that I find because there's such a little amount of time that we have, that it really impacts what we can teach. I have done critical analysis less and less. We have two competencies that we have to master by the end of the year; the making and the analysis. It's mandatory that you do some sort of analytical, but it's so watered down because there's so little time to do art-making in school that we will often do the analytical part as homework. I just don't have the time to go in-depth and have really great discussions, like I used to when art was an option, so we do fairly watered-down things. We do a lot of self-reflection, like, what do you think worked? What are you proud of in this? How would you do it differently? Those kind of self-reflective things, but we do a lot less talking about art that's out in the public. It's not that I don't want to, I just don't give it as much time to it as I used to.

I used to design a lesson around either a movement or a theme or a technique, and then involve some sort of meaningful aspect, personal connection to whatever it is that we

were doing. I would also do technique-based stuff, but with an interesting twist, so that it wasn't just the technique and a still life. But adding more and more, trying to make it a little bit more personal and meaningful to the student as opposed to just exploring a technique. The short answer is, I don't feel great about the last few years of my teaching. I really don't. Everyone's coming at it from such a different perspective, and the diversity and inclusivity that's talked about so much, and that is so, so, so important, I feel was so lacking in my school, in my teaching, because I had to manage 250 bodies, once a week. It was really, really difficult to get to know the students. You know, sometimes it'd be like, December and I still wouldn't know their names because it's just so many."

"250 students for an hour every week. That must be a whirlwind! The amount of paperwork, attendance, assessments, giving feedback."

"Right! And you lose that personal connection. I find that you can really get a lot more out of a student when you engage with them on a personal level or on a level that is not just teacher to student. That happens with doing clubs and coming in at lunch and doing other stuff, but that just wasn't happening. I find that the art class and my teaching really, really plummeted in the last few years."

"But the artwork that was created with all the students taking art, must have been so creative, so much variety?"

"With only an hour a week, we didn't really make anything substantial. There is a lot of waste. A lot of work gets left behind or tossed out. I would get kind of upset at the students for doing it, and then I would try to make them take it with them. 'Like, seriously, can you at least take a picture of it and show all your parents what you're doing in school?'"

"We tried to get them to do an end of year portfolio, so at least they would have a record of stuff that they did, even if they weren't super happy with it. At the end of a project, after we've critiqued and talked about it, grades were done, I tried to make them take it home, or at least take it with them, and sure enough, in the locker room, there's a garbage bin of art stuff. I'll never forget one time, a student came in, I forget who it was, projects were done, and she had come into the class to do something else. I said, 'oh, do you want to collect your project?' She just looked at it and was like, 'no'. I said, 'you know, you did such a good job, you got a 100% on this project'. 'Oh, OK', she said. And so then, she took the artwork with her. I remember thinking, 'No no, no! It's not the grade that's important. It's the artwork.'"

"But then with all those students, don't you have art exhibitions to show parents and the rest of the school?"

"I used to, I don't anymore. We don't anymore. It's just time. It's lack of time, and then the last few years that we did do it, there weren't a lot of people coming, because again, the school isn't really super art focused. The last few times, our tactic was to have it at the same time as the science fair so that people would show up. I mean, the first years that I was there, we had the students design invitations on paper, we would hand out leaflets and had prizes for every grade. It was a much bigger thing at the very, very beginning. And then slowly, that trickled down into where we just don't have time and nobody's coming and the arts aren't that valued. It's a tremendous amount of work to have, I couldn't tell you the numbers, but just very few people show up, not even the students themselves who were exhibiting. The students were like 'meh.' Well, I don't know, I can't say that that was

actually their attitude, but they didn't come either. But, also in some of their defense, it's not a neighbourhood school. There were kids coming from all over the city and the suburbs, so that was another factor. If anything was held on a Thursday night and the students live in the suburbs, they're not going to drive all the way back into the city just for an hour and then go home. So, there was that."

*I sat back and set my needle down. I had been working for four hours straight. I unwound the tape around my finger. Small holes dotted the epiderm, but it felt like an accomplishment, not an injury. Working the stitches through the paper, I was punching holes blind, hoping I was in the right place, designing and trying to visualize how the finished composition will look, where the petals curl, where the sun hits. The stitches look surprisingly neat, and I was happy that I managed to get them all flowing in a relatively organic direction. But I don't see it continuing. I want to change the direction. I think it will be too predictable, too orderly if I do the whole flower with the same stitching pattern. The flaws in my stitches will be too obvious. And my fingers will not be happy. I put the thread away and reached for my paper box again.*

*When we did a school order from Blick's at my international school in China, for $5 you could request a package of paper scraps and they send you the most glorious collection of luxurious paper squares decorated with textural accoutrements; glitter, fabric, velvet and a rainbow of colours. As I sift through the papers in the box, I pull out any squares that are bluish, teal, and light blue. Using tracing paper, I outline the remaining petals and use that to mark then cut out the shapes from the scrap patterns I chose. I glue as I work, no rhythm, no plan, just this intuitive vision that it will work out. The patterns will match precisely because they don't match. In their chaos, it will become beauty.*

Anna teaches art (and only art) at an international school in Shanghai. She graduated from Art Education teacher training at a similar time in Canada as Jen, but was not able to secure a permanent teaching post. She decided to travel and teach, first teaching art in a public school in Wales and then moving onto to teach art in international schools in Thailand, Vietnam and Brazil. When I spoke with her, she was in the middle of setting up her Shanghai school's IB DP VA exhibition, which is a requirement for the grade 12 IB DP VA students. Being just named Head of the Visual Arts Department for the school, Anna decided to combine the IB DP VA exhibition with all the other art classes to create a school-wide art show. As we talked, she showed me the paintings that she was working on to show in the teacher section of the art show.

"Absolutely, I do my own art. I've got five paintings of mine right here. I am regularly painting. I use the art classroom as my studio. I can come in on the weekends whenever I want, or in the evenings. I am painting a lot of stuff in order to really show the students how an efficient way of going about it is like. Do I plan it out? Do I just go for it? What equipment am I using? How do I treat my equipment? I'm constantly painting in front of students. I do a lot of example pieces, which end up very much like, I'd love to say that, we just do art lessons that are totally for the students. But if I don't like doing it, I'm not going to make them do it. It's amazing how many people come in and have a look at what I'm doing. All of the teachers and the headmasters and the principals come to our shows and are super encouraging. They want us to be passionate about what we do. If there's no passion, yeah, it would be weird to have an art teacher that didn't like art."

"You'd be surprised," I laughed, shaking my head, "I worked once with an art teacher that didn't like doing art. She told the students that on the first day. Point blank. I

don't do art. What is the point of that? The students didn't know what to make of her. It didn't work out so well for her. I had to take over her senior classes because her senior students revolted and refused to continue with her class. So I agree, it's useful when art teachers like to create art."

"Very much so," Anna laughed. "No, this is my jam. I love teaching art. I like that we get to be the people that teach students how to create and how to really think systematically about how to express themselves. And we're almost teaching a different language that's accessible to everyone. All of a sudden, those colours and those elements of art and design, they say something, they mean something, there's a formula, and then you can just go *cray-cray* and splatter all over the formula and still do well and still feel good. And the art room is a safe environment. I'm always in this safe space where people can say what they want. They can come in and they can see me and go 'Oh, miss, I've had a fucking awful day.' And I can go, 'Oh, so it's been an f-bomb day.' And that's okay," Anna shrugged. "I'm not sending them to the principal's office. That's not the way it works. I live in a safe space here."

"How is your school set up? How many classes do you teach? Or what levels?"

"I teach," Anna paused, "I teach four different courses, grade eight, grade nine, grade 11 and 12. 11 and 12 are separate, but together. It's like a two-year course, so it's pretty easy. I mean, it's easy to plan. Well, it's not easy to plan, but it rolls. Grade eight is a collaboration. We are always doing the same units and collaborating with drama, music and dance, so that at the end of our 12-week unit, we do a massive sharing and we've gone from the same point and work together. And then grade nine is free-for-all and MYP madness. I have a very open schedule, so that I have time to plan and mark inside school hours.

"And then how many times do you see your grade 8's? Or your grade 11's? Like how many times do you see them in a week?"

"It goes over two weeks, and I see grade eight, five times in two weeks. I see grade nine, five times in two weeks, I see grade 11 and 12 more. There's one week I see them six periods, and one week is five, so I think they have 11 or 12 periods. They tend to be a little bit heavier and if they have a spare period, they just magically appear. But grade nine is lovely because they're in art because they choose to be in art. And then grade 11, they can choose two Group 4 or two Sciences. Unfortunately, we are the only department in the IB that is skippable, which sucks. But art at my school is popular. I suppose I'm a good saleswoman."

"Do you find that you have to be? I always joke that my job is half art teacher and half salesperson. Do you find that?"

"Yeah, there's definitely that. You feel like that. I think art is not always as valued as I think it should be. You feel like you're constantly trying to sell your subject. Don't get me wrong. I'm in a school where they love the arts and they have given me an amazing budget. We are also really valued because they use us in marketing and they're putting us in the magazines, but at the same time, academically, parents don't really get it. A business school will take somebody who did art in grade 11 and 12, before they will take somebody who did a science course, because somebody who did art can think creatively. They can put an idea into the physical. And that's what is incredible. So, this year, I have a bit of a lighter

load. Well, that's not true. I tell myself I have a lighter load because I'm the head of department, which means I control the budget and I hang all the work. I say, I hang all the work, but I have a full-time assistant, so she does all of the wheeling and dealings."

"I totally understand. I had an amazing assistant last year at my international school, it was like she knew my thoughts. I'd think 'I need this done.' And then, she had already done it."

"Yes," Anna laughed. "I really can't function without my assistant. But yet, even with all this great support, as art teachers, we're always trying to figure out, where do we come in? How do we approach this? Art teachers are very strange creatures, because when you work inside a school together, you want to have this camaraderie, but often it does end up being very competitive. The older I get and the more experience I get, and the different people I end up working with, I started to learn how to elevate others and still do well. Toot my own horn, but make sure to toot the other guys' horns so that everybody can do well together, and everybody can celebrate it together. Communities are super important. When I get together with the other art teachers in my area, it's like a house on fire! We're talking art, and it's exciting. 'Oh my gosh, she's doing that? That's amazing. Could I take that? Can you send me that? What are you doing?' I have no plans to leave this school[1]. I'm really happy here. And my family is so well taken care of. And I think, that there's a lot of stuff that we do in the classroom that's elevating education and could be used in other subjects. I'm still also working on really being a very good head of department and getting these whole school art events going. The more I get art teachers together, the more we are going to further our section of education. I think because of that, we're at a very, very exciting time."

Jen just told me she resigned.

"For many reasons", Jen said, "I just, I wasn't that great at the end compared to how I started. And even in mid-career, by the end, the demands, like, the management demands were too much and it was counter to my research. I was pushing for grades because that was what was required, I always needed a mark for the report card, and so that whole idea of engaging in the process, it just wasn't happening. And to have art only once a week? It's hard to get the students to care, and it was sort of breaking my heart more and more. Obviously, it's not about me, but it's something that's so, so dear to me that I just, I can't handle 35 people that are apathetic in an art room, I can't. And all the managing and the parents, and it was just getting to be overwhelming, trying to teach seven different subjects. The joy was leaving me and where I was happiest, honestly, was teaching film, just because they had classes more often."

*There is a hole on the top of my calendar page above the waterfall where it was meant to be hung on a nail on a bulletin board. I'm not sure what to do with it, but it ruins the flow of the sky. As I rummage back through my paper box, I am looking for something gold. I don't know why, but I love using gold in my work. I love how it contrasts with the other works and changes the light at certain angles reflecting radiance back at the viewer. But maybe a bird could work, or a cloud, or a part of a sky. I pick out a photo of the earth, of our blue and green globe. The blue matches my colour scheme and unexpectedly, as I place it over the hole, it seems to work, like the earth was meant to hang in the clear sky over my collaged embroidered peony within my strange hybrid landscape that rests at the bottom of a waterfall in an unknown but familiar land, that I created while I was reflecting about my journey as an art teacher. A fitting metaphor I think; for those who always miss home when*

*they are away, but when at home, they are itching to get away. For those who always feel like they are looking for their home, but never at home. It's important to be happy where you are, I guess.*

**Figure 3**

*Blue Peony. [embroidery thread, found paper on paper, 24 x 24 cm] - Amy Atkinson. (2021).*

*Photo by Amy Atkinson*

**Concluding Thoughts and References**

Through the research, it became evident that all three secondary VA teachers in this study, struggled at various points with "being satisfied with their school lives, having positive experiences and feelings about school," and, most troubling, "believing that what they do at school gives them some purpose and meaning" (Taylor et al., 2024, p. 10). These findings align with current global research on teacher well-being, highlighting significant challenges within the profession.

What struck me most was how closely the experiences of Jen and Anna mirrored my own. As a Canadian art teacher, this is deeply troubling. To witness secondary VA teachers—passionate about their subject and committed to their students—become thwarted and frustrated within the constraints of the education system is disheartening. The contrast between those who remain in Canada and those who choose to work internationally is also significant. Teachers who leave often sacrifice security and stability but, in turn, find positions that align more closely with their passions, offering greater opportunities and professional satisfaction. Hearing one dedicated and passionate secondary VA teacher describe how teaching VA was "sort of breaking [her] heart more and more" to the point of resignation is profoundly saddening.

This study has raised crucial questions for me: How can we better support secondary VA teachers? What systemic changes are needed within the Canadian educational landscape to ensure that skilled, passionate teachers do not feel forced to resign? Addressing these issues is vital, not only for the well-being of teachers but for the sustainability and integrity of VA education. These questions point to an area of research that I am eager to explore further, as it is clear that meaningful change is needed to retain and empower teachers in this field.

Forever cognizant of Pariser's (2019) caution, yet drawn to research creation as a method that felt both familiar and provocative, I discovered that my meandering process of researching, creating, reflecting, and connecting across different modalities unearthed unforeseen understandings. Working within these in-between spaces allowed me to unpack "nagging" issues and stretch my thinking in unexpected ways. Rather than pursuing mastery, I embraced the process as a means of illumination, finding myself more engaged, connected, and motivated to explore further. In crafting the storying, I did not set out to explain every metaphor or word choice that I consciously included. Instead, I invite readers to interpret the narrative, make personal connections, and find "the stories within" their own stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 18). I aimed only to weave a compelling yarn and shed light on some educational factors that impact the well-being of secondary VA teachers, perhaps offering an empathetic and human-centred understanding of these experiences. As Barone and Eisner (2012) remind us, attempting to describe everything would only create confusion. Instead, I focused on whether the story illuminates, and "elevates the discourse" (p. 100).

That said, this study is not without its limitations. There is a notable lack of research surrounding secondary VA teacher voices, particularly those of teachers working in international schools (Bunnell, 2017). Motivations for teaching VA often differ across school contexts, and the personal and professional identities of teachers may be less clearly defined in international settings (Bailey & Cooker, 2019).

These distinctions highlight the need for further research into the well-being of secondary VA teachers, with particular attention to how their experiences differ across educational contexts. Exploring these nuances will be essential for providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by VA educators.

[1] Anna moved at the end of the school year from China, accepting a VA teaching post in an international school in Saudi Arabia.

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