

Attitudes to Making Art in the Primary School

243

Robert Watts

Abstract

Recent research suggests that the majority of primary school teachers in the UK believe that the purpose of teaching art and design is to develop skills associated with creativity, communication and expression. This article is based on research into the attitudes held by primary school pupils towards making art. The reflective nature of many of the responses to the survey provides persuasive evidence of young children's capacity for absorbing relatively complex ideas, which in turn has implications for teacher expectations of pupil learning in art and design.

Introduction

The origins of this research lie in a visit to an exhibition of student work at the Royal College of Art. With me, sat on the gallery floor and working in their sketchbooks, were twenty pupils from a west London primary school. I remember watching them draw with a confidence and spontaneity lacking in the work around them, and with a conviction I believed only young children possessed. I assumed that many shared an ambition: 'When I grow up I want to be an artist.'

But when I questioned the children about their intentions and ambitions, art and design was a subject that featured peripherally, if at all: 'When I grow up I want to be a footballer.' 'When I grow up I want to be a vet.' 'When I grow up I want to be a scientist.' I was unsettled to find that few – and only the younger ones – were sufficiently enthusiastic about art to imagine pursuing the subject into adulthood. It was, it seemed, something to be enjoyed today but to be discarded at a later date. I questioned the pupils further: *Why do children make art? Why do adults make art? How is art important?* The range and the quality of the responses I received convinced me that further research was required into children's attitudes towards making art.

The status of art and design in the primary school

Recent research in this area [1] has focused firstly on the causes of changes in the status of art and design in the primary school and secondly on teachers' attitudes towards teaching the subject. A key influence on young children's attitudes to art and design is the importance allocated to the subject in primary schools. Herne [2] suggests that the recent renewed emphasis on raising attainment in literacy and numeracy has led to a marked decrease in the time allocated to teaching the foundation subjects [3]. The introduction of extra funding for 'booster' lessons in core subjects for struggling pupils has led to many receiving fewer lessons in foundation subjects such as art and design.

Herne also highlights the reduction in both the quantity of in-service training provided for primary teachers during this period, and of resources allocated towards the subject.

Whilst it was predictable that the pressure of raising attainment in national tests would restrict the time available for art and design in upper Key Stage 2 classes, it is disturbing to find evidence of a 'trickle-down effect' in primary schools towards younger classes: 'The only art I saw being made in my Year 1 class,' reported a trainee teacher in an infant school in 2003, 'was when the children were allowed to draw illustrations to their writing' [4]. A second student, placed in the foundation stage, saw even less: 'I was amazed,' she reports, 'for the seven weeks I was in school there was no art made in their Reception class' [5].

Those tempted to blame teachers for allowing art and design to become marginalised in the primary curriculum should be aware that the status of the subject is inevitably determined at a higher level. Herne [6] cites the 1998 revisions to the primary curriculum as the catalyst for a reduction in the amount of time schools devoted to art and design; Rogers [7] observes that, since 1998, students in initial teacher training are no longer required to study all areas of the curriculum, whilst Downing [8] highlights the roles played by the Department for Education and Science, local education authorities and the Office for Standards in Education, acknowledging that 'the pressure... from the DfES, LEAs and Ofsted to downgrade the importance of the arts [has led to]... a concentration on the core curriculum'. A 2001 survey calculated that the average amount spent in primary schools each year on art and design materials was around £1.25 per pupil [9]. Given these restrictions, it is arguable that recent moves to place creativity at the core of the curriculum [10] are destined to have a limited effect. It is certainly difficult to dispute that during the past ten years the gap in status between the core subjects and art and design has widened in primary schools.

Teachers' attitudes towards art and design in the primary school

Issues surrounding the status of art and design in primary schools are interwoven with those concerning its purpose. Aside from brief modules on initial teacher education courses, only a minority of primary school teachers have received an art education that extended beyond the age of 16. For the majority, opportunities for reflection on the complex range of reasons why art is taught are likely to be rare.

Recent research into student teachers' perception of arts provision in secondary education in England [11] identified the 'urgent need for research into arts provision in the primary sector', whilst recent research carried out in Cyprus [12] has explored the ways in which teachers' approaches to teaching art impact upon their pupils' attitudes to the subject.

Downing subsequently surveyed the attitudes and experiences of head teachers and class teachers in the UK towards teaching the arts in primary schools and concluded that:

The most highly endorsed purposes ... were to develop creative and thinking skills and ... communication and expressive skills. These were followed by purposes associated specifically with learning in the arts, which were ahead of purposes associated with personal development ... Many head teachers viewed the arts as central to raising standards in schools; also noted were the arts' impact on motivation, behaviour, attendance and self-esteem [13].

The report presents a picture in which the aims of well-meaning teachers are frustrated by the constraints of an unsympathetic system: the suggestion is that, given sufficient time and resources, a clear improvement in the provision for art and design in primary schools would take place:

While not revealed in any performance tables or end of key stage tests, head teachers and class teachers were convinced of the value of the arts in education and seemed determined to ensure their continued

contribution to the education of the whole child and the welfare of schools [14].

Downing's research raises several questions. Firstly, it is arguable that the 54 per cent of head teachers and 43 per cent of class teachers that responded to the survey would be more likely than not to demonstrate positive approaches towards teaching art and design. Those teachers that held the subject in low regard would be less likely to reflect upon their attitudes towards it for sufficient time to complete a questionnaire. Similarly, those who were positive about art and design, yet believed that they were making insufficient provision for their pupils, may have been disinclined to respond to the survey. Secondly, the survey does not explore the extent to which teachers' attitudes and opinions toward art and design affect their pupils' perception of the subject. Were those teachers who demonstrated a positive attitude towards art and design communicating this enthusiasm to their pupils?

The research design

Prompted by the findings of the Downing report and by my initial enquiries into children's attitudes towards art and design, I carried out a pilot study with a group of 20 Key Stage 2 pupils. The questions I asked were those prompted by the discussion with pupils following their gallery visit: 'Why do children make art?' 'Why do adults make art?' 'Do you think that you will make art when you are an adult?' 'How is art important?' The results of the pilot study were presented to groups of trainee teachers for discussion, and students were subsequently invited to carry out similar surveys within Key Stage 2 classes during their school placements. 316 individual responses were received from 15 trainee teachers [15].

Pupils were not offered a list of optional responses. Whilst such a list would have ensured that the process of categorising responses would have been less subjective and more reliable, the range of responses would inevitably have been less broad (the question 'Why do children make

art?’ for example, prompted 42 different responses; the breadth of the range of responses proved to be a key factor in the research, an issue discussed below). Consequently, pupil responses were categorised. For example, responses to the question ‘Why do children make art?’ were categorised as ‘to communicate / for self-expression’; responses categorised within this heading include: ‘To show how they are feeling’, ‘To express what they are thinking’ and ‘If you don’t speak English you can draw your feelings.’ Some responses could arguably have been categorised differently; however, all individual responses were retained and several are discussed below.

Several Key Stage 1 classes were also surveyed but data was not collated. The process of gathering responses from pupils too young to complete the questionnaire independently proved to be unreliable, with high levels of repetition within responses from some classes. However, some individual responses are referred to in the discussion below in order to illustrate specific points. Finally, it is arguable that the contrasting responses to the questions ‘Why do children make art?’ and ‘Why do adults make art?’ may in part be due to the fact that young children are often told that you cannot make the same response to two different questions!

The research data

Why do children make art?

The majority of pupils [57 per cent] suggested that the main reason why children make art is because it is fun. This response was highly typical of 7-year-olds [62 per cent], less so of 11-year-olds [49 per cent]. Reasons that related to personal development were also relatively frequent, with 20 per cent of pupils suggesting that children make art ‘Because they want to be artists’, ‘To be good at art’ or ‘To learn’.

A wide range of ideas surfaced in the responses made by older pupils: 11 per cent of 10-year-olds and 16 per cent of 11-year-olds, for example, suggested that children made art to communicate or to express themselves:

If a child knows what they want to say but they don't know how to say it they can draw a picture to show what they mean (Natasha, 10).

Art is a good way to express your feelings and the painting asks the viewer, 'What is this trying to say?' (Ellie, 10).

Relatively few suggested that the main reason for making art was the aesthetic value of the product itself:

You can decorate the house (Zahira, 9).

To put it on the wall if it is perfect (Paul, 11).

So the world is not dull (Anton, 8).

Similarly, only a small proportion of pupils, but one that remained consistent in size across the age range, cited reasons that concerned children’s talent, ability and creativity:

We make art because we have lots of ideas and we can bring them together in art (Immanuella, 7).

I think children make art because they have more imagination than adults do. Then they draw it (Georgie, 9).

Responses referring to the therapeutic value of art were concentrated in one particular class, suggesting that this was a theme that the class teacher may have explored with the pupils.

They do art because when they get angry they can't find the words to explain what they feel so they draw a picture to relate to it (Tamara, 10).

If you get angry you can do some art and you can make yourself calm (Mizan, 10).

The physicality of art and design materials was referred to by only a small percentage of pupils:

It is very messy and children like to be messy (Farshad, 10).

Whilst only a minority identified the value of art as a practical alternative to more academic subjects:

Table 1: Why do children make art?

	Age					Total%
	7	8	9	10	11	
For fun	62	53	57	56	49	57
Personal development	27	27	18	19	13	20
Communication / audience / evidence	6	3	8	11	16	9
Aesthetics / product	0	7	8	3	10	6
Demonstrate ability / talent / creativity	3	3	6	5	0	3
Therapy	0	0	0	5	5	2
Physicality	2	0	0	1	7	2
Don't know	0	7	3	0	0	2
	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 2: Why do adults make art?

	Age					Total%
	7	8	9	10	11	
Money	15	17	17	22	46	23
Fun	20	13	28	23	10	19
Personal development	24	20	8	19	13	17
Fame	6	13	18	13	5	11
Communication	12	3	12	9	10	9
To encourage others	17	10	5	8	7	9
Aesthetics / product	0	17	9	3	1	6
Therapy	2	0	3	3	7	3
Don't know	5	7	0	0	1	3
	100	100	100	100	100	100

It's easier than English and Maths (Arran, 7).

There's no numbers and words in it and I can do it (Daniel, 7).

Specific art and design processes were mentioned by only a very small number of pupils.

Why do adults make art?

Pupils' responses to this question were spread more evenly across a wider range of themes than the first. 23 per cent of pupils thought adults made art 'for money', 19 per cent 'for fun', 17 per cent for reasons relating to personal development and 11 per cent for fame. Within these figures there are variations according to the age of the pupils: only 15 per cent of 7-year-olds thought that money was

the main reason adults make art, whereas 46 per cent of 11-year-olds thought this to be the case; 20 per cent of 7-year-olds thought that fun and enjoyment was the factor that motivated adults, compared with only 10 per cent of 11-year-olds. Younger pupils were more likely to perceive a stronger continuity between reasons provided by children and those by adults, whereas older pupils were more likely to believe that the reasons why adults make art were different to the reasons why children made art.

Older pupils suggested a range of further reasons why adults make art and were more likely to understand that people make art for a variety of reasons:

Adults make art because they can make money out of it. Also because you can express your feelings when you draw. If they do make a good drawing they can sell it to a gallery and people can see what that person can do (Tamara, 10).

Younger pupils were more likely to link the idea of fame with money, whilst some older pupils were beginning to betray signs of suspicion of artists' motives:

*To make money and to be famous (Stacy, 7).
Not many painters do it for fun and enjoyment. They do it for money and fame, but not all painters do that, thankfully (Ellie, 10).*

Ideas about communicating ideas and feelings through art transcended age groups:

*Art is another way to express what they are thinking (Leon, 10).
Adults make art to remember things (Hannah, 7).*

Younger children were more likely to believe that adults make art for altruistic reasons:

*Because they want to show the children how to make things, so they can make them when they are older (Daniel, 7).
So children will read books (Sabrina, 7).*

Relatively few responses referred to the aesthetic value of the work itself, and the majority of these came from pupils in the same class:

*They might like all the different patterns (Zahirah, 10).
Because it's beautiful (Nathan, 10).*

The belief that making art can be a therapeutic process was referred to by a small number of children in each age group:

*Adults make art because they find it enjoyable after a stressful day (Joshua, 11).
To cheer themselves up (Michael, 7)*

Other reasons included:

*To communicate with people who don't speak the same language (Georgia, 8).
They didn't have a chance when they were a child (Hannah, 7)
To experiment (Daryl, 9)
They are inspired (Kevin, 10)*

These responses, although only made by only small numbers of pupils, are significant in that they demonstrate a capacity for absorbing a wide range of ideas, and are discussed below.

How is art important?

The perceptions of art as being something that is fun for children, in contrast to being lucrative for adults was referred to only rarely in responses to this question, which were dominated by themes of communication, aesthetics and personal development. 69 per cent of pupils made responses relating to these themes, whereas only 7 per cent suggested art was important because adults can make money from it and 6 per cent because it is fun. Older pupils most frequently identified communication as being the most important function of art, whilst younger pupils regarded personal development as the key issue.

Several responses raised new issues, whilst others develop earlier ideas. This question prompted the widest range of responses, with pupils suggesting a total of nearly sixty reasons why art is important, responses that are discussed below.

Do you think you will make art when you are an adult?

Older pupils were less likely to visualise themselves as making art as adults. 66 per cent of 7-year-olds said that they intended to make art when they grew up, compared to 34 per cent of 11-year-olds. Pupils were deliberately not asked whether they thought they would be artists when they grew up, but whether they would make art:

Table 3: How is art important?

	Age					Total%
	7	8	9	10	11	
Communication	15	13	26	31	33	23
Personal development	26	43	15	25	16	25
Aesthetics / product	21	17	30	16	21	21
Fun	12	3	8	6	0	6
Money	5	6	9	5	8	7
Therapy	5	0	1	5	8	4
Physicality	0	0	1	0	0	0
There's no right or wrong	0	0	2	3	3	2
Don't Know	17	17	8	9	10	12
	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table 4: Do you think you will make art when you are an adult?

	Age					Total%
	7	8	9	10	11	
Yes [fun, interested]	29	40	29	27	21	29
Yes [talent, progression, career]	32	23	28	19	13	23
Yes [useful in other areas]	5	0	5	0	0	2
Maybe	0	7	2	3	15	5
No [other interests]	12	10	20	14	18	15
No [not interested / talented]	22	20	17	38	33	26
	100	100	100	100	100	100

this is, however, a distinction that may not have been entirely clear to younger respondents:

Yes I will make art when I grow up because I love art. In fact after singing it is my favourite (Hannah, 7).

Yes I think I will make art because I have a big imagination, but I wouldn't do it as a job (Nathan, 10).

Around half of the 7-year-olds who expected to make art when they were older said 'Yes' because they thought it was fun or because they were interested in the subject; others referred either to their talent for art, to making progress with their skills or to the possibility of a career in art. Those who did not expect to make art when they were older explained that this was either because they had other, stronger interests or, more often, that

they were neither interested nor talented enough to continue:

I won't make art when I grow up because there are much more better things to do like be a fireman (Jordan, 7).

I don't want to be an artist, I want to be a scientist (Jasmine, 7).

Finally, 11-year-olds who thought that they would make art as adults were more likely to explain that this was because it was something that they enjoyed doing rather than because they had a talent for the subject or because they saw it as a career option. There is also evidence that older pupils were developing clearer ideas about their future careers and more likely to view art as a pastime:

I plan to be a doctor so all day I'll be busy with other people's problems. It would be nice to unwind with art (Nancy, 10).

I think I will make art but not for money. Nor fame. For my own enjoyment. A pastime, or a hobby (Ellie, 10).

Discussion

That younger pupils would demonstrate more positive attitudes towards making art than older pupils is an outcome of this research that may reasonably have been anticipated. Less easy to predict was the range of the responses made by many pupils, responses that provide persuasive evidence of young children's capacity to absorb relatively complex ideas. The reflective nature of many of these responses has, I believe, implications for teachers' expectations of their pupils.

The Downing report concludes that the majority of teachers believe that the purpose of teaching art and design is to develop skills associated with creativity, communication and expression. However, the outcomes of this research suggest that teachers fail to communicate these learning outcomes are with the majority of pupils. Whilst many children suggested that they make art because they enjoy it and adults because they want to earn money, children viewed neither of these reasons as *important* compared to issues of creativity, communication and expression.

The findings of this research indicate the majority of children assume that the concerns of adult artists are far removed from their own; that adults make art for fame and money whilst children make art for fun. The belief that adults make art primarily for money is one that, though widely held amongst the pupils, is largely untrue. However, the minority of artists – dead or alive – who attract acclaim, admiration or notoriety are also those whose work is sold for substantial sums, and those whom children are likely to learn about. Consequently, it is understandable that children associate adult artists with fame and wealth rather than obscurity and poverty.

It is to be expected, perhaps, that younger pupils regard the main reason for making art as to have fun. It may be unwise to discourage pupils from perceiving art as a 'fun' subject, as fun is, arguably, an increasingly rare and precious commodity in the primary school curriculum. What makes the subject 'fun' is, in itself, another question. Had it been possible to challenge pupils making this response, more may have been learned about their attitudes to, for example, particular materials or processes. It may be that children regard art as a subject that is enjoyable *in comparison* with other subjects; perhaps because, as suggested by a small number of older pupils, *'there's no right or wrong'* – a point raised by Eisner:

The arts teach children that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer. The arts celebrate diversity. While the teacher of spelling is not particularly interested in ingenuity of response from students, the arts teacher seeks it. The arts celebrate multiple conceptions of virtue. They teach that there are many ways to see and interpret the world and that people can look through more than one window. Furthermore, this lesson is seldom taught in schools [16].

When asked 'Why do adults make art?' a response from one pupil was 'for the same reasons as children'. Few other professions demonstrate such strong, tangible and practical links between the practice of young children and that of adults: the processes children experience in the classroom are often identical or closely related to those employed by artists. There is a visibility, a physicality and a continuity to an artist's practice that children recognise: 'I may not be able to draw as well as her,' a child could argue, 'but that's because I'm not big enough yet.'

Whilst many pupils said that children make art mainly because they enjoy it, and adults primarily for money, they think that art is *important* for other reasons. Almost three-quarters of responses to the question 'How is art important?' raised themes of communication, aesthetics and



personal development, whilst only a minority referred to either money or enjoyment. The suggestion here is that many children are content to ascribe to adults a rationale for making art to which they themselves feel they are not entitled. Perhaps, in anticipation of not being taken seriously by adults, they do not take themselves seriously. Essentially, the children are saying that art is important because it communicates ideas and feelings, because it provides opportunities to develop practical skills, because it changes our lives, because it is beautiful – but the reason why / make art is because I enjoy it.

Implications for teachers

Teachers surveyed by Downing provided thoughtful reasons why art and design is important and

provided a convincing rationale for the subject's place in the curriculum; however, on the evidence of this survey these learning outcomes are not being efficiently communicated to pupils. Should children's reasons for studying art and design not correspond more closely with their teachers' reasons for teaching it? Less than one third of pupils identified the development of creative, thinking, communication or expressive skills as reasons why they made art, compared with 60 per cent of teachers. This raises the question of how effectively teachers share their reasons for teaching art with pupils. If the majority of teachers believe that the most important reason for making art is to develop creative and thinking skills, then more pupils should be aware of this.

It is hard not to be impressed by the range of pupil responses to this survey. The richness and variety of children's ideas are a clear indication of the level of reflective thinking of which they are capable, with many of the responses forming a coherent rationale for the subject:

We make art to remember things especially when something good or bad has happened (Sam, 10).

Adults make art to communicate with people who don't speak the same language (George, 8).

Art sometimes shows things from the other way (Immanuella, 7).

These responses are proof that young children are able to think reflectively about the value of art and suggest that teachers should have high expectations of their pupils' capacity for generating and sharing challenging concepts. Those pupils that are taught a range of practical art and design processes will be more likely to discover ways of engaging with the subject; similarly, those prompted to consider a wide range of reasons why artists make art may be more inclined to reflect on the value of the subject and on their own attitude towards it.

Finally, the research suggests that teachers should encourage children to recognise connections between their own and artists' work. In his

Above:
Figure 1
Drawing at the Royal
College of Art

famous assertion that he spent his life trying to draw like a child, Picasso demonstrated his understanding of the bond between children's work and adults' work, as well as of the value of art shared across generations. One 8-year-old pupil surveyed was also observed during a drawing lesson. He was heard to declare at the start, unprompted, that he intended 'to do a Picasso', and proceeded to make a distorted yet recognisable portrait of a classmate. Providing pupils with opportunities to make connections between their own and artists' work may prompt them to reflect more carefully on their reasons for making art.

Conclusions

The research raises further questions. Many pupils made positive, creative and articulate responses to the questions in the survey: is this the result of specific experiences of learning in art and design in school, or evidence of a broader capacity for assimilating and evaluating a range of arguments? Are these pupils offered a broad and balanced art curriculum, opportunities to engage directly with artists' work, to discuss creativity, motivation or communication? Are teachers identifying specific learning outcomes for art and design and sharing them with pupils?

Whilst the results of this survey suggest that, as they get older, some pupils lose interest in art and design, individual responses are evidence of a capacity for a mature and powerful engagement with the subject. The interesting and important aspects of this research lie in the margins of the data: the wide range of responses from pupils suggests that young children are fully capable of developing an awareness of the breadth of valid reasons why art is taught.

'Learning in the arts', suggests Eisner [17], 'is not a monologue but a conversation.' The conversations that take place between children and their teachers help to shape and define children's approaches to learning, and the reasons for making art offered to children by teachers may have a significant impact upon their attitudes to the subject. Do we want all children to believe

that they will make art when they are adults? No, but we do want schools to encourage children to develop, extend and retain their curiosity in the visual world. And even though almost all of the children in the survey may eventually stop making art, the early years of an art education can provide for them valuable lessons, both practical and philosophical, that other subjects cannot provide. Of the many reasons for making art provided by these children, none is simpler yet more challenging than that provided by Gloria, aged 11: 'Art is important because you're never wrong.'

References

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2. Herne, S. *op. cit.*
3. In UK schools the Foundation subjects are those outside of the core subjects of English (Literacy), Mathematics and Science. The Foundation *Stage* is the curriculum followed by 3–5 year-olds; subsequently they progress through Key Stages 1 (5–7), 2 (7–11), 3 (11–14) and 4 (14–16) of the National Curriculum.
4. Interview, PGCE student, Roehampton University, 2003.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Herne, S. *op. cit.*, p. 218.
7. Rogers, R. *op. cit.*
8. Downing, D. *et al, op. cit.*
9. Rogers, R. *et al* (2001) *Artworks Survey of Art and Design Resources in Primary and Secondary Schools*. Corsham: NSEAD.
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13. Downing, D. *et al, op. cit.*, p. 13.
14. *Ibid.*
15. The rate of returns was not considered to be an important issue as students were regarded as ‘messengers’ of data rather than respondents themselves. It could be argued that, as with the Downing report, those students with a particular interest in art and design would be more likely to carry out the survey; however, these students would have had very limited time in which to influence their pupils towards demonstrating positive approaches towards the subject.
16. Eisner, E. (2003) What Do the Arts Teach? *International Journal of Arts Education*, Taiwan, Vol 1, No. 1, pp. 7–17.
17. *Ibid.* p. 10.