DOCTORAL THESIS

Art history in an infant primary school
an intervention in the curriculum

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ART HISTORY IN AN INFANT PRIMARY SCHOOL:  
AN INTERVENTION IN THE CURRICULUM

Laura Pitfield Worsley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This research set out to introduce art history in the art curriculum in an infant primary school in England. The intention was to broaden the curriculum to include interpreting art alongside making it. At the time the research began the National Art and Design Curriculum (2005) for Key Stage One included an art historical strand of learning known as Attainment Target Two (AT2) which included learning about art and artists from different times and cultures. Previous research indicated this strand of the art curriculum was overlooked by generalist classroom teachers for various reasons.

A whole school action research project was undertaken lasting a full academic year. The participants were five teachers including the headteacher, three classroom teaching assistants, eighty four pupils, aged between four and seven years, and the researcher. The research tested out and evaluated a strategy for interpreting artworks. This was designed by the researcher and taught by the teachers in the classroom. The interpretive strategy for engaging and enquiring about art (known as the ISEE) included information about the art and artist in the final step of interpretation. The action research consisted of three cycles: i) preparation, planning and teacher training; ii) teachers implementing the ISEE and iii) teacher-designed lessons and research evaluation. Systematic reflection and evaluation of actions was carried out on two levels by the action team and the lead researcher and final reflective and thematic analyses were carried out by the latter in order to answer the research questions.

The main finding was that the ISEE facilitated art interpretation in the classroom. Other significant findings were that i) interpreting paintings was inclusive of all pupils across the age groups and learning ability spectra; ii) the pupils’ affective response (Iser, 2006) often drove their cognition and this challenged the theory underpinning the research that art is interpreted through symbol references in meaning making; iii) when pupils used their imagination and affective response they were able to accommodate the factual information they were given about the paintings and artists; iv) despite struggling to include this information in their teaching at times, the teachers recognised that it added value to the art curriculum and the pupils expressed great interest in it and iv) the teachers preferred to combine art interpretation with other subjects such as literacy, citizenship and PSHE.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to many people and Roehampton University for providing the opportunity, support and resources for me to conduct this research, reflect on it and reach conclusions that I hope will contribute to the work of others. In particular, I would like to express my thanks to my Director of Studies, Professor Rachel Mason, for opening my eyes to the world of art education and for her wisdom and guidance. I am also very grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Nicholas Houghton, for his big picture views, thoughtful insights, encouragement and useful and amusing analogies. As well, my thanks to Dr Dorothy Rowe for her help as 2nd supervisor, in the initials stages of this research.

Roehampton University provided a stimulating environment and I met and studied with a wide body of interesting and thought provoking academics. My fellow colleagues in the Centre for International Research on Creativity and Learning in Education (CIRCLE) with whom I shared and argued ideas back and forth provided a lifeline on many occasions and I wish them all the best of luck. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Maho Sato for her friendship.

For an entire year, I experienced life in a infant primary school alongside the headteacher, teachers, pupils and parents and I am enormously grateful for this opportunity and the friendships that it spawned; it was invaluable. My dear thanks to my mother, Di Pitfield McAvoy, who introduced me to Judkins and art history and Leslie Stratford, an artist and fellow art historian for the many times their insights and humour encouraged me on this journey.

Most of all, my great thanks to my dear husband and friend, Jonathan who made it possible for me to carry out this research and to each of our four children, Nicholas, Oliver, Hugo and Charlotte. They have supported, challenged and indulged me at every turn and I know they have waited patiently for this day to come. Above all, I hope they take from this example the value of pursuing challenges they believe are important.

For my father
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title page  
Abstract  
Acknowledgements  
Table of contents  
Bibliography  
List of Appendices  
List of Figures  
List of Tables

### INTRODUCTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. WORKING DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. i Art history</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. ii Art education</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. iii Visual literacy</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. BROAD PROBLEM AREA</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.i Locating the research</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. ii Art history in the twenty-first century</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. iii Why learn about art and artists in primary education?</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. iv Mainstream primary and secondary art education</td>
<td>xxi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. v. Critical studies in secondary education</td>
<td>xxii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SPECIFIC PROBLEM AREA</td>
<td>xxiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. SUMMARY PROBLEM STATEMENT</td>
<td>xxiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. i Purpose of study</td>
<td>xxv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.ii Research questions</td>
<td>xxv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. ORGANISATION OF THESIS</td>
<td>xxvi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CHAPTER ONE: CONCEPTIONS OF ART HISTORY, TEACHING AND INTERPRETATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.0 Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 CHANGING PARADIGMS OF ART HISTORY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.1 Twenty-first century</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.2 Implications for research</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.3 Relationship to art appreciation and criticism</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1.4 Implications for research</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ART EDUCATION IN THE USA AND UNITED KINGDOM</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 INTERPRETING AND MAKING MEANING IN ART</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1 Theories of meaning construction and interpretation</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2 Iconographical/Iconological meaning in art (Panofsky, 1955)</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.1 Step One: Primary or natural subject matter</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.2 Step Two: Secondary or conventional subject matter</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.3 Step Three: Iconological, intrinsic meaning or content</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2.4 Criticism</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3 Theories of art as communication</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3.1 Theory of symbolism</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.3.2 Theories of expression and emotion</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.4 Expression and reception</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.4.1 Reader response theory</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3.3 Cycle Three: Teachers’ lessons and research evaluation 53
   2.3.3.1 Aims and roles 53
   2.3.3.2 Action team 53
   2.3.3.3 Observation team 53
   2.3.3.4 Researcher 53
   2.3.3.5 Actions 54
   2.3.3.6 Activities 54

2.4 DESIGN OF DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS 54
   2.4.1 Instruments 55
   2.4.2 Diagnostic 56
      2.4.2.1 Staff questionnaire 56
      2.4.2.2 Piloting staff questionnaire 57
      2.4.2.3 Pupil interview schedule 57
      2.4.2.4 Piloting interview schedule 58
      2.4.2.5 Pupils’ group interview schedule 59
   2.4.3 Ongoing 59
      2.4.3.1 Teacher record form 59
      2.4.3.2 Observer record form 60
   2.4.4 Additional instruments for data gathering 61
      2.4.4.1 Tape recordings and transcripts 61
      2.4.4.2 Researcher’s fieldnotes 62
      2.4.4.3 Reflective journal 63
      2.4.4.4 Pupils’ work 65
      2.4.4.5 Photographs 65
   2.4.5 Summary of data collection instruments 65

2.5 DATA ANALYSIS 67
   2.5.1 Reflection and reflexivity 67
   2.5.2 Thematic analysis 68
   2.5.3 Process of data analysis 70

CHAPTER THREE: DEVELOPING THE ISEE STRATEGY 75
3.0 Introduction 75
3.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK 75
   3.1.2 Forms of knowledge 76

3.2 THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM AND OTHER FRAMEWORKS 76
   3.2.1 Historical/cultural 77
   3.2.2 Critical/analytical 78
   3.2.3 Sensory 79
   3.2.4 Art making 79
   3.2.5 Questioning frameworks 80

3.3 SUMMARY 81

3.4 DETAILS OF ISEE STRATEGY, ART INFORMATION
   AND PAINTINGS 84
   3.4.1 The Interpretive Strategy for Engaging and Enquiring
      about art (ISEE) 84
   3.4.2 Rationale 87
3.4.3 Step One: What do you see?
3.4.4 Step Two: What is in the painting? How do you feel about it?
   3.4.4.1 Part A: question and analyse
   3.4.4.2 Part B: relate to
3.4.5 Step Three: Interpreting with art information
   3.4.5.1 Selecting criteria for art information criteria

3.5 RESEARCH LESSONS
   3.5.1 Design

3.6 SELECTION OF ARTWORKS
   3.6.1 Using fine art ‘masterpiece’ paintings
   3.6.2 Informing the selection process
   3.6.3 Issues in selection
   3.6.4 Criteria for selection
   3.6.5 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

3.7 SELECTION OF PAINTINGS
   3.7.1 Rationale
   3.7.2 Tropical Storm, Surprised!
   3.7.3 Courtyard of a House in Delft
   3.7.4 Le Domaine d’Arnhem
   3.7.5 The Graham Children
   3.7.6 The Fall of Icarus
   3.7.7 The Portrait of Mr and Mrs Andrews
   3.7.8 Untitled: Grey and Brown

3.8 SUMMARY

CHAPTER FOUR: PREPARATION
   4.0 Introduction
   4.1 CYCLE ONE
      4.1.1 Aims
      4.1.2 Participants
      4.1.3 Details of actions
      4.1.4 Timetable of actions
   4.2 RESEARCHER PREPARATION
      4.2.1 Introduction
   4.3 DIAGNOSTIC
      4.3.1 Staff questionnaire
      4.3.2 Findings
         4.3.2.1 Past experience of art
         4.3.2.2 Strategies for engaging pupils with art
         4.3.2.3 Motivation to participate
         4.3.2.4 Confidence talking about art
         4.3.2.5 Identified resources required for teaching
      4.3.3 Pupil interviews
      4.3.4 Findings
         4.3.4.1 Experience, motivation and preference in art
         4.3.4.2 Disposition to talk about paintings
### 4.4 PARTICIPANTS’ PREPARATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 CPD training and ISEE practice sessions</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1.1 Description</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2 Demonstration lesson</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2.1 Description</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3 ISEE practice sessions (#1 and #2)</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3.1 Description</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.5 TEAM REFLECTION AND EVALUATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.6 RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1 Action research</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2 Researcher roles</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.3 Methodology for changing practice</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.4 Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.4.1 Teachers</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.4.2 Pupils</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.4.3 Art history subject knowledge</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.5 Selection of paintings</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.7 TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CYCLE TWO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLEMENTING THE ISEE STRATEGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.0 Introduction</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 CYCLE TWO</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1 Aims</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2 Timetable</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3 Participants</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3.1 Action team</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3.2 Observation team</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3.3 Pupils</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.3.4 Others</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.4 Details of actions</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5.2 RESEARCH LESSONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1 Lesson One</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1.1 Description</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1.2 Team reflection and evaluation</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 Lesson Two</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.1 Description</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2.2 Team reflection and evaluation</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3 Lesson Three</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3.1 Description</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3.2 Team reflection and evaluation</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.4 Lesson Four</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.4.1 Description</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.4.2 Team reflection and evaluation</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.5 Lesson Five</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.5.1 Description</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.5.2 Team reflection and evaluation</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.6 Lesson Six</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.6.1 Description</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.1 THEME ONE: TEACHER VARIABLE

7.1.0 Introduction
7.1.1 Impact of teacher variable and its ripple effect
7.1.2 Researcher presence
7.1.3 Teaching in observed settings
7.1.4 Attitudes, interest and beliefs about art
  7.1.4.1 Confidence
  7.1.4.2 Control
7.1.5 Ownership
7.1.6 Risk-taking and flexibility
7.1.7 Teachers’ diverse roles
  7.1.7.1 Scaffolding and guiding
  7.1.7.2 Participant in whole class discussion
  7.1.7.3 Provider of art information
7.1.8 Conclusion

7.2 THEME TWO: AFFECTIVE RESPONSE

7.2.0 Introduction
7.2.1 Changing theoretical assumptions
7.2.2 Expression theories
7.2.3 Reader reception and response
7.2.4 Demonstrating affective response
  7.2.4.1 Empathy and affect
  7.2.4.2 Placing oneself in a painting and conjectured feelings
7.2.5 Intense emotion and felt meaning
  7.2.5.1 Pupils’ experience of felt meaning
  7.2.5.2 Differences between felt and perceived meaning
7.2.6 Relationship between cognitive and affective thinking and response
7.2.7 Artist’s role in affective response
7.2.8 Supporting pupils’ affective response
7.2.9 Conclusion

7.3 THEME THREE: ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN INTERPRETATION

7.3.0 Introduction
7.3.1 Defining imagination
7.3.2 Sidestepping creativity discourse
7.3.3 Imagination in young children
7.3.4 Using imagination in art interpretation
7.3.5 Three ways of using imagination
  7.3.5.1 Reality versus fantasy
  7.3.5.2 Fantasy, make believe and silliness
  7.3.5.3 Imagination as play
  7.3.5.4 Supposing, speculating and thinking about possibilities
7.3.6 Conclusion

CHAPTER EIGHT: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

8.0 Introduction
8.1 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS
  8.1.1 Strengths and weaknesses of the ISEE
  8.1.2 Significance of the teacher variable
  8.1.3 How pupils engage with paintings using the ISEE
  8.1.4 The role of art interpretation in teaching and learning
8.2 REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGY 287
  8.2.1 Action research as a methodology for effecting change in practice 287
  8.2.2 Role of researcher 290
  8.2.3 Limitations of methodology 291

8.3 IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHING ABOUT ARTISTS FOR THE PRIMARY ART CURRICULUM 293
  8.3.1 Implications for classroom teachers 295
  8.3.2 Selected paintings 296
  8.3.3 Resources 297

8.4 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE 298

8.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH 300

8.6 POSTSCRIPT: Implications for my own practice as an art history educator 302

9.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY 305

10.0 LIST OF APPENDICES
  1. Observer record form 337
  2. Approved ethics proposal for Roehampton University Ethics Committee 338
  3. Participant informed consent form 346
  4. Glossary of coded names and terminology 347
  5. Amendments from piloted pupil interviews 348
  6. Staff questionnaire 349
  7. Profiles of staff and pupils 350
  8. Piloted staff questionnaire 351
  9. Amendments to staff questionnaire 352
  10. Comparison of paintings for Staff Questionnaire (Task Two) 353
  11. Pupil interview schedule 354
  12. Request for pupil’s permission to participate in interview 356
  13. Pre-selected group of twelve paintings for Task One 357
  14. Selected painting for pupil interview schedule, Allegro Streptiso 358
  15. Teacher record form 359
  16. Governor monitoring form 360
  17. Research lesson worksheets 361
  18. Coded patterns and categories sheet 364
  19. Colour and number coded lessons example 367
  20. Predetermined questions for Lesson Five 368
  21. Photograph of jigsaw puzzle pieces from The Fall of Icarus 369
  22. Cut out details from 26 selected artworks for Lesson Eight 370
  23. Selected paintings for InSET training and practice sessions 372
  24. Selected paintings for Research lesson 373
  25. InSET morning agenda 374
  26. InSET morning PowerPoint slides 375
  27. InSET morning demonstration lesson plan and training resources 376
  28. Evaluation criteria for research 377
29. School Improvement Plan (Key Action Priority) 379
30. Example of transcript from research lesson 381
31. Summative evaluation question sheet and teachers’ notes evaluation 383
32. Inuit art material 387
33. Legend of Sedna the Sea Goddess 388
34. Story picture planner worksheet example 389
35. Summary of findings from the research 390
36. Transcription of audio taped team reflection and evaluation meeting 393
37. Example of completed teacher record form 394
38. Example of research lesson with art information 395

LIST OF FIGURES

1.1 Ashoona Pitseolak, *Facing the Wind* 18
1.2 Registered trademark of authenticity, Government of Canada, 1958 19
2.1 Elliott’s model (1991) of action research 40
2.2 The action research model 44
3.1 Conceptual framework for informed interpretation 75
3.2 The ISEE Steps 87
3.3 Marc Chagall, *The Birthday* 90
3.4 Henri Rousseau, *Tropical Storm, Surprised!* 104
3.5 Pieter de Hooch, *Courtyard of a House in Delft* 105
3.6 René Magritte, *Le Domaine d’Arnheim* 106
3.7 William Hogarth, *The Graham Children* 106
3.8 Pieter Brueghel, *The Fall of Icarus* 107
3.9 Thomas Gainsborough, *Portrait of Mr and Mrs Andrews* 108
3.10 Fiona Rae, *Untitled, Grey and Brown* 108
4.1 Cycle One: Two strands of action research 111
4.2 Carel Weight, *Allegro Strepitoso* 116
4.3 J E Millais, *The Carpenter’s Shop. Christ in the House of His Parents* 123
4.4 G F Watts, *The Minotaur* 124
4.5 Unknown Mughal artist, *Elephant Fed by his Keeper* 124
4.6 John Constable, *The Cornfield* 126
4.7 Chris Ofili, *No Woman, No Cry* 126
5.1 Cycle Two: Two strands of action research 143
5.2 Henri Rousseau, *Tropical Storm, Surprised!* 144
5.3 Pieter de Hooch, *Courtyard of a House in Delft* 148
5.4 Pieter de Hooch, *Courtyard of a House in Delft* 152
5.5 Pieter de Hooch, *Courtyard of a House in Delft* 156
5.6 René Magritte, *Le Domaine, d’Arnheim* 159
5.7 Year Two voting game results 160
5.8 William Hogarth, *The Graham Children* 163
5.9 Pieter Brueghel, *The Fall of Icarus* 167
5.10 Cut out jigsaw pieces for activity 167
5.11 Thomas Gainsborough, *Portrait of Mr and Mrs Andrews* 170
5.12 Assortment of 26 cut out details from artwork in public collections 171
5.13 Fiona Rae, *Untitled, Grey and Brown* 174
6.1 Cycle Three: Two strands of action research 194
6.2 Ningeokuluk Teevee, *Silarjuaq (The Whole World)* 195
6.3 Reception pupils’ artwork illustrating their ‘world’ 197
6.4 Year One pupils planning artwork 199
6.5 Year Two pupil’s completed story picture planner 203
6.6 Year Two pupils making clay models of Sedna 204
6.7 Year Two pupils’ clay models 204
6.8 Eugene-Louis Boudin, *The Approaching Storm* 207
6.9 Photographs of Reception pupils at seaside 209
6.10 André Dérain, *Boats in Collioure* 210
6.11 Year One pupils discussing *Boats in Collioure* 211
6.12 Year One pupils making pictures after *Boats in Collioure* 212
6.13 Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Children’s Games* 212
6.14 Detail of pupils cut out photographs 215
6.15 Detail of pupils’ sketches of playground activities 215
6.16 Pupils’ newspaper copy 216
6.17 Changing roles and responsibilities by cycle 224
8.1 Final revised conceptual framework model 284

**LIST OF TABLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Panofsky’s stages of interpreting meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Data Collection Instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Additional instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Cycle actions and data gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Process of data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Research questions and mode of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The ISEE strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Categories for art information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Nine research lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Inclusion and exclusion criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Selection of paintings for data collection instruments and research lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Preselected group of 12 artworks for Task One (Q &amp; interview sheet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Timetable for Cycle One actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Pupils’ selection of artwork from Task One in interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Timetable for Cycle Two actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Lesson One: How do pupils make meaning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Lesson Two: Learning the ISEE (Step One)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Lesson Three: Learning the ISEE (Step Two)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Lesson Four: Learning the ISEE (Step Three)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Lesson Five: Multiple Interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Lesson Six: Learning about the past from a painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Lesson Seven: The sum of the parts helps you understand the whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Lesson Eight: Which animal suits the context?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Lesson Nine: Interpreting a non figurative painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Summary of TAs’ observational comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Timetable for Cycle Three actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Lesson plan written by Reception teachers (A and B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Lesson plan written by Year Two teacher (D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Timetable for Year Two lesson (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
30. Group interview schedule (pupils)  219
31. Agenda for final summative meeting  222
32. Sorting data for analysis  227