

DOCTORAL THESIS

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

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INTRODUCTION

The research developed from a series of long held, personal beliefs, supported in art history and art education literature, that art is a form of communication (Barrett, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Efland, 2002; Feldman, 1970; Freeland, 2004, Kieran, 2001) and through it we can come to better understand and appreciate our world and the worlds of others from different times and places (Dewey, 1934; The Getty Institute, 1996; Goodman, 1976; Panofsky, 1955) which makes it important in art education. The Getty Foundation for the Arts (2004), amongst others, advocates learning about art and artists for its potential to connect people with individuals, cultures and artefacts past and present and to expand their understanding of diverse social, historical and cultural contexts (Fernie, 1998; Freeland, 2001; D'Alleva, 2005; Taylor, 1999).

This research was centred on learning in the primary art curriculum. At this level, the National Curriculum for England (2005:120)¹ asserts that 'learning about art and artists in contemporary life and different times and cultures has potential to make valid contributions to pupils' general education'. However, Dorn, Madeja and Sabol (2004) report that in the UK and North America, most primary art education programmes (Key Stages One and Two assessment levels of the National Curriculum, 1999) focus on practical art making rather than reflective activities for engaging with art. Art educators such as Downing, Johnson and Kaur (2003); Eisner (2002); Perkins and Tishman (2003) and Tallack (2000) recommend children engage reflexively with artworks from an early age. This suggests learning to interpret them has a place in an infant school classroom with pupils as young as rising five years. According to Barrett (2002:200), Eisner (2002), Efland (2002) and Goodman (1968) interpreting, thinking and talking about art are cognitive endeavours that can appeal to young children.

I. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

More than thirty years ago, as an undergraduate art history student, I worked at weekends as a volunteer for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts where I took children on tours of the collection to talk about paintings. This was an informal, volunteer position, long before

¹Hallam, Lee and Gupta (2007:209) explain the National Curriculum for Art and Design in England 'embodies the official educational discourse about art supplied by the government' and the recommended programmes of study.

education programmes were an established tradition in museums and galleries. Years later, as a mother of four children I looked for opportunities to whet their appetites for looking at and talking about artworks. I hoped I could spark a passion for art in them. Between 2001 and 2004, I led many adult visits to public art institutions in England as an art history lecturer in the Open Studies programme at the University of Surrey and became aware that a significant number of school groups visited public galleries and museums². Children's enthusiastic responses to artworks, their interest in different kinds of subject matter and the personal histories evident in their conversations led me to question what was being offered to them in terms of learning about art and artists in mainstream education. Observations and informal discussions with museum and gallery education officers showed that they used various strategies to engage children with artworks in their collections. However, informal discussions with classroom teachers leading the visits established their perceived need for subject specific training, workable strategies and resources for classroom settings.

Between 2003 and 2005, as an art education co-ordinator of a trustee art gallery in Compton, Surrey, I collaborated with local primary and secondary schools to establish a programme of gallery and outreach educational visits for schools wanting to engage pupils reflectively with artworks in the collection. In conversations with these schoolteachers, the need for pupils to learn and develop skills of looking, analysing and interpreting artworks became evident. At the time, I was also a Local Authority (LA) governor of a small infant primary school in Guildford that was actively looking for ways to enrich the school curriculum and adapt the new Primary Strategy Initiatives (2003) focused on developing and embedding thinking skills such as problem solving, analysing, information processing, communication and sharing. In England, an infant school is one that consists of three year groups including Reception (Foundation stage) and Years One and Two (National Curriculum). When the research began, the Reception curriculum was in transition from the Foundation stage of learning to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Years One and Two followed the Key Stage One (KS1) assessment of the primary National Curriculum for England. Knowing that art was the in-focus subject for the school improvement plan (SIP) for 2006-2007, I approached the headteacher and governors at this

² British Galleries Source (2004) recorded more than one million school visit pupil numbers between 2002 and 2004 in London (National Gallery, 4.1m; Tate Britain, 1.2m; Tate Modern, 4.6m: British Galleries Source, 2004).

particular school with a proposal for an art project to improve the Key Stage One art curriculum. An agreement, which consequently included the Foundation Stage (Reception) teachers at their request, was reached to collaborate with this group of teachers in a year-long project. The focus was on developing pupils' interpretive thinking skills through a strategy that included disseminating art historical facts about art and artists as part of it.

In proposing and negotiating this agreement my understanding, shared with the teachers, was that by providing early opportunities for these pupils to engage with artworks and artists they might derive a life-long pleasure from looking at, thinking about and interpreting artworks (Day and Hurwitz, 2001; Eisner, 2002, Marcousé, 1974; Perkins, 1994). My overarching aim was to engage these infant primary teachers' interest in teaching art history at this level so they might include it in the art curriculum.

II. WORKING DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

The following working definitions of key terms were used in this research:

II.i Art history

In the twenty-first century, art history is understood as the examination, interpretation and presentation of artworks and artists from different times and places (Ferne, 1995; Getty Foundation for the Arts, 2004; Zimmerman, 2003) through a broad range of traditional, atheoretical and theoretical approaches to interpretation. Its central concerns are identifying, categorising, interpreting, describing and thinking about works of art (Arnold, 2004). A widening scope of materials and art objects are under consideration (Cherry, 2004; Ferne, 1998) and it shares its concerns with other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology and psychology. In recent years art history has sometimes included the study of visual culture in its approach to understanding new forms of art and visual imagery (Cherry, 2004).

II. ii Art education

In the UK, in 2005 art and design education was a school subject in which students learned about designing, making and investigating art through a range of visual materials and processes and knowing and understanding art and artists from different times and cultures (National Curriculum, 1999). In the twenty-first century, art education has broadened its scope of learning to include visual culture.

II.iii Visual literacy

Giorgis *et al.* (1999:146) defined visual literacy as the ‘ability to construct meaning from visual images’. Raney (1999:38) defined it as the ‘history of thinking about what images and objects mean, how they are put together, how we respond to or interpret them, how they might function as modes of thought, and how they are seated within the societies which give rise to them.’ Preziosi (1998) identified visual literacy as a necessary skill for art historical enquiry.

III. BROAD PROBLEM AREA

When this research began in 2005, the National Curriculum for England placed emphasis on three core subjects (literacy, numeracy and science) complemented by the arts and sports and the development of six key skills of enquiry, reasoning, evaluating, information processing, creative thinking and problem solving and communication as outlined by the Primary Strategy Initiatives. At this time, the programme of studies and attainment targets for the primary art and design curriculum (National Curriculum, 2005:120) reflected the importance of learning about art and artists by designating one of four strands of learning in the art curriculum to ‘knowledge and understanding of art and artists from different times and cultures’. In 2009, the Labour government proposed an expansion of this strand to include ‘knowledge and understanding of how and why people from different times and cultures have used arts to express ideas and communicate meaning’ (QCA, 2009:2). This proposal reinforced the view that learning about art and artists was important in art education.

In this climate, funding opportunities and investment for the arts, including government backed schemes to create links between museum and gallery education, outreach programmes and schools increased steadily between 2004 and 2010. A culture of school, as well as museum based research collaborations was established. For example, Creative Partnerships, under the auspices of the Creativity, Culture and Education national charity, and funded by the Arts Council Education (ACE), were set up in 2002 to promote creativity and culture in, and out of schools and to improve standards in education across the curriculum. For the past decade these ‘flagship’ partnership programmes have brought

a range of specialists such as artists, architects and scientists into schools ‘to work with teachers to inspire young people and help them learn’ (Creative Partnerships, 2009). Set up originally in response to concern that the National Curriculum was too heavily focused on numeracy and literacy, to the detriment of opportunities for creativity and the arts in education, these partnerships aimed to promote collaborative initiatives between researchers, educators and specialists from various fields and to encourage and prepare pupils for the ‘challenges of the modern world of work’ (CCE, 2010: webpage).

The announcement of spending cuts and the withdrawal of funding for the Arts Council Education (ACE) in January, 2011 by the new Coalition government, will result in the closure of these Creative Partnership programmes by September, 2012. Coinciding with these plans, the Coalition government announced major reviews of the Early Years Foundation Stage (March, 2011) curriculum and the National Curriculum for England (January, 2011). In this changing educational context, reform for the National Curriculum was aimed at reintroducing a more content-driven (‘teaching facts’³) versus skilled-based curriculum, remodelled and focused on four core subjects of English, mathematics, science and physical education⁴. Prioritising and teaching of the arts and humanities was relegated to the discretion of schools. In the schools’ White Paper 2010, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, set out the government’s vision and review for education (www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/CM-79980.pdf, accessed 5/04/11).

Although this research began under the educational policies of the Labour government, it drew to a close amidst a radically and rapidly changing programme of educational reforms under the Coalition government. This particular research involved the testing out of a strategy for interpreting art that included art historical facts as part of the interpreting process. As such, it emphasised art history subject material and was therefore, to an extent content-(or facts) driven in its orientation.

³ Michael Gove, Secretary of State, Conservative Party Conference speech on education, 5th October, 2010 (reported in The Daily Telegraph, 5/10/10).

⁴ In November, 2010, the Coalition government announced a two phase review of the National Curriculum (primary and secondary). Phase One is focused on four core curriculum subjects, English, mathematics, science and physical education. Phase two will focus on the development of statutory and non-statutory programmes of study for other subjects, including art and design. Until the new National Curriculum is introduced in 2013, state schools are ‘legally required to continue to follow the current National Curriculum for primary and secondary schools’ (Department for Education, Crown, 2010, accessed from www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum.a0061710/review-of-the-national-curriculum-in-england, 23/3/11).

III.i Locating the research

This research was intended to contribute to pedagogy in the discipline of art history, within the broader field of art education. Since the introduction of a conceptual framework for art education called discipline-based art education (DBAE) in the United States in the 1980s, advocates of the four disciplines of art history, art criticism, aesthetics and studio art making have vied to differentiate their educational roles. In the twenty-first century, some tasks, functions and skills once associated primarily with art history are now shared across these disciplines. For example, Eisner (2002) and Feldman (1992) consider interpreting and analysing artworks to be part of the remit of art criticism rather than art history. In this research, however, I distinguished between art history and other art disciplines with the understanding that learning factual information about artworks and artists constituted art history education. Many of the assumptions and subsequent decisions I made for the design of the research and my general outlook reflected my art history background and training, in particular, my choice of underpinning theories and the design of an interpretive strategy, although I was not aware of the extent of this at the start. In this research, learning about ‘art and artists from different times and places’ was understood to relate to art history at primary level (Addison, 2003; Cox, 2000; Tallack, 2000 and Taylor, 1989). In the National Art and Design Curriculum, this strand of learning was known as attainment target two or AT2 at primary level and as *critical* or *contextual studies* (Taylor, 1999; Steers, 2009) in secondary education.

III.ii Art history in the twenty-first century

Art history is a changing discipline. Where once it involved a non-theoretical tradition of connoisseurship, classifying and making judgements about quality, taste and beauty in art (Arnold, 2004; Edwards, 2002; Fernie, 1998), it now embraces theoretical and often interdisciplinary approaches to examining, interpreting and understanding it. In the twenty-first century, art history broadened its scope of knowledge and investigation and the framework of what constitutes *art* in the new millennium. The shift towards the inclusion of visual cultural studies has been influenced by the emergence of trans-cultural studies, growing attention to the arts of Africa, Asia and Latin America and new forms of visual media such as television, film, web-cam and internet imagery, art and visual images not

otherwise embraced by traditional art historical practice (Arnold, 2004; de Bary, 2004). According to Cherry (2004), both traditional and progressive approaches to the study of visual arts co-exist in the discipline.

III.iii Why learn about art and artists in primary education?

According to Elkins (2003), young children begin to develop as visual learners and understand and respond to visual images at an early age. There are a number of reasons to support young children's learning about visual art images and one significant rationale is The Getty's claim that learning about art and artists introduces them to the world around them and to themselves (D'Alleva, 2005; Fernie, 1998; Taylor, 1999; The Getty, 2004). Boughton and Mason (1999) suggest artefacts transmit culture and social attitudes and beliefs and this is what makes the study of them important in general education. According to Elkins (2003), Freedman (2003) and Mirzoeff (1998), studying about art and artists, has potential to enable pupils to make meaning of the visual world by connecting them with the times and cultures in which they were created. The National Art Education Association (NAEA, 2001) in the USA claims the study of artworks cultivates critical dispositions by promoting pupils' curiosity and encouraging their ability to question what they see. The Getty (2004) also suggests it contributes to the quality of overall education, in part because of its capacity to develop thinking skills. In studio art education, learning about art objects and researching artists and their techniques, themes and styles is important for pupils' artistic development as it can nurture their creativity and imagination for their own practical art making (Bowden, 2000; Lancaster, 1990; Perkins, 1994; Stephens, 1994).

Underlying many of these claims is an essentialist belief that pupils should learn about art for its own sake and for the pleasure that is derived from engaging with, looking at and talking about it (Arnold, 2004; Marcou  , 1974; Perkins, 1994; Stephens, 1999). The National Curriculum for England (2005:120) acknowledges this with the statement 'understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of the visual arts have the power to enrich our personal and public lives'. In spite of these claims, however, it is widely understood that the contribution of art to education is not fully understood or translated into practice in primary schools (Dowing *et al.*, 2003; Hollands, 1999; Jacobi, 2004; Morrison, 1994).

III.iv Mainstream primary and secondary art education

Programmes of study for the National Curriculum for England⁵ (1999) no longer require the teaching of art history, art criticism or art appreciation as discrete subjects but recommend the learning domain of ‘knowledge and understanding of artists from different times and cultures’ be included in the art and design curriculum at both primary and secondary levels. However, according to Addison (2003) and Downing *et al.* (2003) there was an ongoing tendency for generalist classroom teachers to overlook it. Addison (2003); Allison and Hausman (1998); Bowden (2000); Clement (2003); Cox (2000); Downing and Watson (2003); Piotrowski and Ivy (1998), Tallack (2000) and Taylor, (1999) all reported this strand of learning was limited because generalist classroom teachers perceived a lack of specialist art knowledge, training and models of good practice as obstacles. Classroom teachers, with no specialist art or art history training, teach the majority of art and design classes in primary schools (Downing *et al.*, 2003 and Tallack, 2000). According to Bowden (2000) and Jacobi (2004), primary pre-service teacher training courses do not offer any formal, subject-specific programmes for teaching ‘about art and artists’ in the UK. A survey of art teaching in primary schools carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 2003) found that teachers’ understanding of this strand of art education was limited or narrow in outlook, with the majority citing difficulties such as those noted above as factors leading to a lack of confidence in delivering this area of learning.

A preliminary review of literature on the research problem suggested there was a lack of art history pedagogy and theory for teaching about art and artists at primary level (Hooper-Greenhill, 1991; Jacobi, 2004, Stephens, 1999). Price (2005) highlighted the problem of finding appropriate keywords and terminology to initiate searches about teaching young children about art and artists. The majority of literature refers to *thinking* or *talking* about, *appreciating*, *experiencing*, *reflecting on*, *responding to* and *understanding* art and artists although these are not always the same. Honigman (1998:38) loosely summarised this type of teaching as ‘art education beyond production’. Because of the scarcity of literature targeted at primary school level, this review was widened to examine teaching about art and artists in secondary education where it was more visible.

⁵ Appendix list of art and design requirements of the National Curriculum (1999)

III. v Critical studies in secondary and post secondary education

The AT2 in primary education (Key Stages One and Two standards of assessment) was understood as a stepping stone towards *critical studies* in secondary (Key Stages Three and Four) and post-secondary (AS/A2) art education. The secondary and post-secondary programmes of study are mentioned here to provide an understanding of the perceived development of the AT2 and expected levels of attainment by secondary stage. According to Thistlewood in 1992, art history formed the basis of a critical studies component of the secondary and post secondary National Art and Design Curriculum for England at its inception. Tallack (2004) and Steers (2009) amongst other art educators continue to make this claim. By sixteen years of age, secondary (or Key Stage Four) pupils were required to conduct independent research, study and interpretation of researched information about the life and practice of artists and their artworks. In recent years it has become known as critical, or contextual studies and sometimes ‘critical, contextual and historical studies’ (Lo, 2003).

Steers (2009:146) suggested the original aim of critical studies was to extend the art curriculum in the UK ‘beyond practical making to include critical enquiry’. Hickman (2005) reported in critical studies, pupils are assessed on their analysis of codes and conventions representing ideas, beliefs and values. They are expected to evaluate the contexts of their own and others’ work and articulate similarities and differences in their views and practice and to develop their own ideas using insight gained from examination of others.

In 2000, Bowden (2000:27) expressed a general perception that some critical studies activities, in all phases (primary and secondary) had become superficial. His charge related mainly to secondary pupils’ as well as generalist teachers’ persistent and heavy reliance on copying or referencing works of *grand* masters with little understanding of context. According to Moon (2001:9), teachers understand this strand of the curriculum as a means to supporting pupils’ art making and he suggested this devalued opportunities to learn about art and artists from different times and cultures. Tallack (2000) claimed this strand has become a ‘servant to art production’ and has called for its role to be re-evaluated. Overall, in 2003, Downing *et al.* (2003) suggested teaching practice for AT2 was inconsistent and dependent on individual teachers’ training and interest. While a few art

educators such as Addison (2003) and Hubard (2008) have expressed interest in drawing on art history, semiotics, iconography and reader reception in classroom art practice, Addison (2003:177) admitted that critical studies was perceived as secondary to studio art making and typically used to inform it only.

Tallack (2004:105) argued the scarcity of models prevents teachers from considering this strand of art teaching. This supported teachers' claims of a lack of direction and support for teaching the AT2 (Downing *et al.*, 2003). While Bowden (2000:27) found increasing acceptance in art education that engaging reflectively with artwork 'is as important' as making it, he concluded that a lack of subject training and discourse may inhibit teachers from developing this area of learning. Overall, art in general has been under pressure for curriculum space in an overcrowded National Curriculum (Downing *et al.*, 2003; Steers, 2005) which prioritised art making rather than the reflective side of engaging with artworks (Addison, 2003).

IV. SPECIFIC PROBLEM AREA

Young children naturally respond to visual artwork (Elkins, 2003). From an early age they construct meaning about their surroundings through visual stimulus (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2003). They begin to read books using visual images (Raney, 1999). Art in the form of visual signs supports their construction of language from an early age (Arnheim, 1969). By the age of approximately seven years, pupils begin to read without the help of visual images as they are no longer dependent upon them. Learning to interpret visual codes and symbols is not a priority in art or general education. However, in the twenty-first century, it is generally understood that pupils need to be visually adept to decipher and interpret the increasingly visual world that surrounds them and this would indicate a need to develop interpretive skills for understanding visual images.

According to Wenham (2003:6), developing the habit of looking and seeing critically is the basis of understanding visual images. In keeping with art educators such as Holt (1983) and Hurwitz, Madeja and Katter (2003), Wenham (2003:7) promoted the acquisition of interpretive skills as a means to understand and make meaning of the 'plethora of visual images' individuals encounter daily. According to Meager (1993:7) 'what we learn is bound up with what we see' and he questioned why there is not more classroom time

‘devoted to teaching children to be visually perceptive’. Buchanan (1995), Charman and Ross (2004) and Cox (2000) all point out the need for young pupils to learn skills of visual literacy and meaning making. Charman and Ross (2004) claimed that skills of interpretation are necessary in order to engage meaningfully with the visual arts. Meager (2006:6) recommended the development of pupils’ interpretive skills from as early as Key Stage One and suggested this empowers young children to experience and understand the ‘richness of the visual world’. If, as stated above, interpreting art has potential to connect individuals with their own histories and those of others (The Getty, 2004) then interpreting art with information about art and artists is important for informing them. From Eisner’s (2002) viewpoint, this means pupils should be taught how to look at, question and analyse ideas and information about art and artists. However, in the UK, it is widely recognised that developing interpretive skills and teaching about art and artists are overlooked in visual arts education (Buchanan, 1995; Clement *et al.*, 1998; Cox, 2000; Downing *et al.*, 2003:29).

V. SUMMARY PROBLEM STATEMENT

In England, learning about artists and artworks was encouraged and supported by the primary National Curriculum (1999/2010) beginning in infant school. However, literature indicates this was seldom translated into practice in these classrooms (Downing *et al.*, 2003; Jacobi, 2004; Tallack, 2000 and as such, learning about art and artists was rarely taught to younger pupils. Art objects such as paintings were often used superficially to examine and compare techniques or styles only and to support pupils’ own art making (Moon, 2001). Lack of confidence, inadequate subject knowledge and appropriate strategies and resources to teach about art and artists were cited as factors inhibiting teachers’ delivery (Bowden, 2000; Cox, 2000; Downing *et al.*, 2003; Tallack, 2000). From my experience working as a gallery art-education co-ordinator with Key Stages One to Four (infant, primary and secondary school) teachers, I identified a need for teachers to develop pupils’ interpretive skills of looking carefully at, reflecting on and interpreting artworks as a first step in teaching them knowledge and understanding about art and artists from different times and places.

V.i Purpose of study

The overarching aim of this research was to introduce art history in the art curriculum of an infant primary school. As an art historian, I hoped by engaging reflectively with the histories of artworks and artists to encourage pupils to cultivate a disposition for thinking about, interpreting and enjoying art from an early age. The purpose was to build a foundation for future engagement. My belief that learning *about* art and artists is important in formal art education, beginning at an early age, is shared by art educators, for example, Eisner (2002); Taylor (1999), The Getty (2004) and writers of the primary National Art and Design Curriculum for England (2005).

In 2004, I attended the Association of Art Historians (AAH) annual general meeting in Birmingham, as a member. In an open forum, I heard talk of concerns about declining admissions for art history at university level. I spoke out about the lack of art history pedagogy for teaching ‘about art and artists’ in school art education despite its inclusion in both the primary and secondary art and design curricula and found myself part of a likeminded group of art historians. Between 2004 and 2011, this group (latterly known of as the ‘Schools Group’ within the AAH) has expanded its work towards the development of art history pedagogy in education. In 2005, my proposal to develop pedagogy for teaching art history in an infant primary classroom received considerable support from this community and led me to undertake this research study.

As such, the research set out to engage a group of generalist infant school teachers in teaching art history in their art classrooms. The focus was on developing pupils’ interpretive skills to engage with artworks and to this end, I designed a strategy for interpreting paintings using factual art historical information in part, for the teachers to test out and evaluate with me in art lessons.

V.ii Research questions

One overarching research question and five further ones were developed for this study and they were:

1. What happens when generalist classroom teachers introduce art history through a strategy for interpreting artworks, in an infant primary school?

2. Does this experimental strategy help teachers to interpret paintings using information about art and artists in the classroom and if so, how?
3. Which key variable impacted on the strategy and the way pupils interpret paintings?
4. How do pupils engage with paintings and does the strategy support them?
5. What are the implications for teaching and learning when pupils interpret paintings using the strategy?
6. What are the strengths and limitations of action research as a methodology for changing art education practice?

VI. ORGANISATION OF THESIS

Chapter One reported on the literature review that examined conceptions of art history and art education and theories of interpreting meaning in art. At the end, there is a short review of the educational theories that underpinned the research.

Chapter Two explained the choice of research method and design of action research cycles of action, reflection and evaluation. The data collection instruments were described along with changes made as a result of piloting them prior to the start of the action research.

Chapter Three presented the conceptual framework and design of the research. Existing teaching models for engaging young children with artworks were reported before I presented my designed strategy and rationale. Categories for art information and selection criteria for artworks for the research were reported and discussed.

Chapter Four presented the actions, reflection and evaluation undertaken in Cycle One of the action research.

Chapter Five presented the actions, reflection and evaluation undertaken in Cycle Two.

Chapter Six presented the actions, reflection and evaluation of Cycle Three and reported on a final summative evaluation of the action research. My overall researcher reflection followed. From this reflection, three themes were identified for analysis in the following chapter.

Chapter Seven discussed the thematic analysis of three themes intended to help me answer research questions in the final chapter.

Chapter Eight answered the six research questions and summarised findings and conclusions drawn for the research as a whole. Contributions to knowledge and dissemination plans were reported at the end. Finally, in a postscript I reflected on my future plans and drew the thesis to a close.