

## DOCTORAL THESIS

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

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# CHAPTER ONE

## CONCEPTIONS OF ART HISTORY, TEACHING AND INTERPRETATION

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The review of literature reported in this chapter had four aims. The first was to carry out a theoretical overview of conceptions of art history from the past to the present so as to lay the foundations for the research before considering them in relation to other art learning domains. The second aim was to examine literature about philosophies of art education. While the main geographical context for this research was England, the review was broadened to include research and discourse in the United Kingdom and North America.

From an earlier review of literature undertaken for the research proposal, the ability to interpret art was identified as an essential skill for engaging with it and developing pupils' interpretive skills was understood as an initial step towards learning about art and artists. The third aim was therefore to review theories of interpreting and making meaning in art. This led to a close examination of the work of Panofsky (1955) and his theories of meaning making in the visual arts and communication through symbol reference.

The fourth aim was to examine literature about constructivist learning as the art education literature tended to stress children engaging with artworks as active participants who construct ideas based on prior and current knowledge and experience (Bruner, 1960).

### 1.1 CHANGING PARADIGMS OF ART HISTORY

Art history began as a Western concept, practiced mainly in Europe and later in North America (D'Alleva, 2005; Harris, 2006; Kleinbauer, 1971; Pointon, 1997; Zimmermann, 2003). Conceptions of art history are demonstrated through the actions of practitioners and these have evolved since its inception. Early conceptions were influenced by the sixteenth century writings of Giorgio Vasari (1555) and his Lives of the Artists. In Preziosi (1998:40), Davis calls Vasari's collection of biographical and anecdotal observations 'chronicles of artists' lives and commissions'. Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, a new conception emerged which emphasised the

role of connoisseurship in examining artists and artworks. According to Arnold (2004), connoisseurship as the name implied, was understood to represent specialist knowledge about works of art and artists. It also implied an aesthetic, refined and discriminating sensibility in art (Harris, 2006). Tasks included authentication, identification and attribution of artworks, by style and authorship. Identifying styles and establishing sources and influences was another occupation. Determining provenance or history of ownership of artworks was another and, according to Pointon (1997), this practice set art history apart from other disciplines. Evaluating and appreciating qualities in works of art (D'Alleva, 2006; Harris, 2006) were also aspects of art historical connoisseurship during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fernie (1995) maintains that together they represented the *traditional* view of art history that was practiced almost exclusively up to the last half of the twentieth century. Harris (2006) claims some people, for example the auction houses, continue to practice traditional art historical enquiry in the twenty-first century.

According to D'Alleva (2006:18), art history provides a distinct way of studying and explaining works of art and their creators by considering them through an historical perspective. Edwards (1999) considers this a unique characteristic. Harris (2006) highlights the tendency for art historians to view, organise and present works of art and artists through a linear, chronological, timeline sequence. He rationalises this approach by pointing out that biographical events in an artist's life unfold in chronological sequences of time. Moreover, movements, styles, influences and periods of artistic activity can be pinpointed by dates and timelines.

Chronological examination was understood to provide documentable accuracy (Fernie, 1995) and contributed to authenticity and attribution (Pooke, 2002). With ties to 'history' in its name, Edwards (1999:3) describes the early practice of art history as the presentation of 'a single narrative of evolutionary progress in art'. According to Edwards (1999), this linear timeline format with notions of progress represented a dominant framework or 'standard' for examining, analysing, teaching and writing about it up to the second half of the twentieth century. In 1993, Mason and Rawding suggested it continued to function as a dominant approach for presenting artists and artworks. Examples of instructional art history texts used by academic institutions in Europe and North America, such as those written by Hartt (1989); Honour and Fleming (1995) and Janson (1977) demonstrate this historical paradigm. Debates about the

relationship and impact of history on the examination and presentation of artworks and artists have provided ongoing challenges for art historians (Ferne, 1995). According to Gombrich (1960), in the 1950s there was a prevailing argument that art is embedded in the creation and culture of the times in which it is produced and not created in isolation.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, changes occurred to theoretical perspectives with an influx of new and diverse art forms and an increasingly globalised and multicultural worldview. Arnold (2004) claims art historians now consider, select, record and present artworks, artists and their histories in new ways, for example through the ahistorical approaches of thematic or theoretical analysis and interpretations.

According to Preziosi (1998), art history was first recognised as an academic discipline<sup>1</sup> by German universities in the 1840s and was a professional discipline (Cherry, 2004:479) by the end of the nineteenth century. For Zimmermann (2003), its underlying premise was, and remains the examination and presentation of the history of works of art and artists. Art historians have developed time sensitive categories to help them examine and classify stylistic movements, influences, ideologies and events through grouping works of art and artists into ‘schools’, ‘period’, ‘cycles’ and ‘movements’ (Ferne, 1995; Preziosi, 1998) and examples are the Barbizon School, the Hellenistic Period and German Expressionism.

In the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the time when Modern art was born, art history became a ‘kaleidoscope of isms’ (Ferne, 1995:349). They were created by art historians and members of the art community as a way of classifying, understanding and presenting artworks and artists. These labels, understood at the time by a prevailing Eurocentric art world that included art historians, critics, educators, connoisseurs, patrons, artists and the viewing public, were used to identify artworks and artists through their collective themes, manifestos and ideologies, for example Neoclassicism, Impressionism, Realism and Futurism.

According to D’Alleva (2006:152), the practice of art history underwent critical changes in the twentieth century as it elaborated on traditional conceptions and broadened its goals through interactions with other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology and other fields of art enquiry. Aesthetics, a branch of philosophy dating from the

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<sup>1</sup> Schwab (1969:2) defines a discipline as a ‘field of systematic intellectual activity’.

eighteenth century (D'Alleva, 2006) existed alongside the practice of art history and was also concerned with the study of artworks. According to D'Alleva (2006:20) aesthetic concerns related mainly to philosophical understandings of questions such as 'What is artistic and natural beauty?'; 'What is art?' and 'What is the nature of aesthetic judgement?' She claims (2006:20) 'philosophers working in aesthetics rarely engage in the kind of in-depth contextual analysis that characterises art history'. Furthermore, she distinguishes between them by the way they build arguments, one being hypothetical and the other based on historical facts. From a different perspective, Elkins (2003:8) claims aestheticism was understood to refer to the 'experiencing' of an artwork.

In the last quarter century, Gombrich (1973) claimed art historians made absolute, objective judgements in their selection and classification of writings about works of art. According to Ades (1986), Arnold (2004) and Fernie (1995:329) this has been the root of the criticism of the discipline for the past thirty years. It was criticised mainly for the narrowness of the range of subject matter it selected and examined and for elitism as it favoured Western male artists and promoted a Romanticist conception of the artist as creative genius. Edwards (1999) claims these criticisms centred on the canon of artworks art historians used as the standard to measure the quality of art works and select artists for examination. According to Edwards (1999), the canon has existed officially or unofficially since the beginning. Fernie (1995) maintains that underlying a canon is an implication that certain artworks, styles of art and artists are considered more valuable than others for study. Edwards (1999) points out that popular taste also plays a part. According to Arnold (2004: 8) a 'canon' is understood to represent art 'of the highest quality' selected by influential individuals and institutions at the time. It is these assumptions that have led to accusations of elitism versus quality.

In the past, D'Alleva (2005) claims the canon represented traditional values of art. According to Cherry (2004), painting, drawing and sculpture historically were favoured as the 'dominant objects' for art historical study. Arnold (2004:8) describes the traditional canon as hierarchical in its selection of 'masterpieces' and emphasis on 'individual genius'. Edwards (1999) maintains that canon[s] of art comprise assumptions, taste and values that extend into the narratives told about them by art historians which, according to Arnold (2004), makes them significant and influential. Pointon (1997:41) notes that 'almost without exception texts from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries favoured or reflected Western traditions of art' which

were understood to have originated in Greece and Rome and excluded non-Western art of China, Japan, Latin American, the Indian sub-continent, Oceania and Africa.

D'Alleva (2006:19) reports a split in the discipline in the eighteenth century when art criticism emerged as a strand of art history. She describes art criticism as the practice of 'evaluating works of art for their aesthetic and cultural worth rather than using them to tell history'. Preziosi (1998) suggests art criticism mainly entailed the ability to discern quality and skill in artworks. According to D'Alleva (2006), art critics viewed their role as establishing and defining universal standards of excellence in art. More recently, distinctions between the fields of history and criticism have been blurred due to changing views about what is art and what is relevant to art in a new and diverse canon (D'Alleva, 2006). While Pointon (1997) defends the practice of art history saying it embraces a new, robust canon, Harris (2006) reports a rumbling concern that art history continues to follow a course of privileging mainly Western male artists accredited against time and history.

According to Holly (1984), art history became preoccupied by *form* in the 1920s due mainly to the influence of Swiss art historian, Wölfflin (1915) and his systematised theory of formal analysis (D'Alleva, 2006:34; Fernie, 1995; Pointon, 1997; Pooke, 2002). Wölfflin's (1888) theory of paired types was used to differentiate between stylistic periods and epochs, for example Renaissance or Baroque works of art, for the purpose of authenticating, identifying and attributing authorship and influences. According to Pooke (2002) his analysis contributed to an increasing body of artworks and content of art history. Form, or 'shape' as Fernie (1995: 339) describes it, was also used to establish the 'character' of an object and to help place it within a chronological or typological sequence. Art historians and critics, such as Roger Fry (1866- 1934), Henri Focillon (1881-1943) and later Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) examined artworks through their formal qualities of line, shape and colour.

According to Preziosi (1998: 227), a new interest in meaning and interpretation of artworks emerged in the early part of the twentieth century. This developed in part from a growing interest in humanism and cultural history in the works of Aby Warburg (1866-1929), Emile Mâle (1862-1954), Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) and Ernest Gombrich (1909-2001).

According to Fitzpatrick (1992:12), this interest manifested itself in the study of iconography which theorised that forms, symbols, events and colours could contribute to meaning in artworks. For example, Panofsky (1955) theorised that meaning was inferred by an artist and understood by a viewer through an examination of subject matter in an artwork.

Hermeneutics, defined as the 'theory of interpretation' (Literary Dictionary, 2009), originally developed from branches of theology, philosophy and literary theory to become social theory in the mid twentieth century through the work of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and reception theorist, Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007). D'Alleva (2005:125) claims art history developed a 'hermeneutic orientation' in the latter half of the twentieth century as art historians began to examine processes of interpretation. Hermeneutics brought about a change of focus from the artist's intentionality, the purposes of artworks and circumstances of production towards an aesthetic orientation which considered the audience or viewer's reception and interpretation. D'Alleva (2005) notes a split between those art historians who explored iconography as a way of interpreting works of art and those who explored aesthetic experience as a starting point. According to Harris (2006:138), hermeneutics became a 'serious aspect of art historical discourse' in the 1970s amidst the challenges of other theoretical perspectives at the time.

Pointon (1997) reports from the 1960s onwards art history practice was influenced by structuralist and post-structuralist theories in other disciplines such as anthropology, literature and psychology and by the works of Ferdinand Saussure (1857-1913) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). According to D'Alleva (2005), these scholars examined structures within human existence and experience, such as language, forms of life, representational systems and socio-psychological phenomena. Arnold (2004) suggests they identified structures within systems and organisations of a culture before using them to re-examine it. In art history, Harris (2006:304) claims emphasis was placed on historical change, for example, how meanings of art mutated over time while later post-structuralists such as Roland Barthes (1915-1980) concentrated on examining the process undertaken in these transformations.

According to Arnold (2004:82), critical theory, became a collective term used to include structuralist, post-structuralist and deconstructionist thinking from the mid-twentieth century and psychoanalysis, post-colonialism and semiotics in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Preziosi (1998) maintains these schools of thought sought to challenge notions of absolute truth and to examine cultural production, the conscious/subconscious mind and issues surrounding the colonial imperative. In particular, the discipline concerned itself with interventions from feminism, socialism and Marxism during the 1970s. Fernie (1995:19) contends art history 'shifted its centre of gravity' away from the historical side of art towards social context and ideology, for example in the works of Clark (1973). The deconstruction of concepts, social values and belief systems meant art historians considered issues surrounding language, cognition, reception and the conscious/unconscious drawing on literary, psychoanalytical and critical theories. According to Arnold (2004) and Pooke (2002) so-called new art historians such as Rees and Borzello (1986) applied these critical theories to the examination of visual art objects. Trafi (2004) reports that critical art history emphasised the subjective and discursive roles in interpretation and the presentation of art and artists.

Freeland (2001) and Harris (2006) suggest this period saw an expansion in theoretical discourse and in the numbers of people entering the profession. These influxes resulted in art historians questioning and reframing traditional constructs (Cherry, 2004). However, Freeland (2001) and Harris (2006) all suggest the discipline struggled with the relationship of theory to methodology. Hulks (1992:335) claims art history moved closer to an advanced form of art criticism when it addressed critical theory.

Pointon (1997: 40) highlights the emergence of a new theory of social order and style called postmodernism which centres on the 'fragmentation' of human subjectivity. Moreover, she (1997:40) claims it dismissed 'established patterns of meaning' created in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries or the *grand narratives*, described by Lyotard (1979). Walliman (2006:211) attributes this change to an influx of mass media and a rise of 'increasingly interdependent world economies'. As a system of beliefs, Malpas and Wake (2005:5) claim postmodernism called into question existing hierarchies, structures and conceptions and its strength lies in its ability to 'open up debate about issues of the day'. D'Alleva (2006) maintains this perspective has affected the way in which works of art are considered and written about since the 1970s.

Richmond (2009:62) suggests there is skepticism in postmodern thought, an ‘anti-the grand narratives’ that once defined modernity. Hutcheon (1995) claims it is unavoidably political and confrontational at the same time in its discourse about power and knowledge and the impact of social forces (Efland *et al.*, 1996). Despite these assertions, Malpas and Wake (2005) salutes postmodern thought for its plurality and multifaceted nature and awareness of difference. Appignanesi, Garratt, Sardar and Curry (2004) and Malpas and Wake (2005) point out that from a postmodernist perspective, all interpretations of art are now considered subjective, in other words, there are no longer universals.

### **1.1.1 Twenty-first century**

More recently, Cherry (2004) identifies the emergence of a new paradigm of art history known as visual culture. Its focus is the study and understanding of new visual media and suggests culture, not history, as its roots (Mirzoeff, 2002). According to Cherry (2004), it has been welcomed by those in the discipline who perceive art history as having failed to engage with contemporary works of art or have moved on from its *historical* orientation. According to Malpas and Wake (2005), advocates of visual culture use postmodernist theories to find ways of understanding and explaining artworks. While postmodernist theory is enmeshed in contemporary art history and education, Malpas and Wake (2005) and Richmond (2009) suggest it is already showing signs of age, having turned back on itself by becoming its own *grand narrative*.

According to Cherry (2004:479), substantial re-appraisal and revision undertaken during the past forty years, has strengthened the practice and perception of art history. It continues to change in response to demographic adjustments and globalisation by diversifying strategies for examining and interpreting artworks (Cherry, 2004). According to Pointon (1997:99) these changes have resulted in an alternative, non-canon of both Western and non-Western works of art and the use of a broader social and cultural framework from which to examine them. Art history continues to negotiate its disciplinary and interdisciplinary boundaries with those of anthropology, philosophy, psychology, literary studies and sociology and to overlap with other fields of art enquiry such as art criticism, aesthetics and appreciation (Arnold, 2004; Cherry, 2004; D’Alleva, 2005; Fernie, 1995).

D'Alleva (2006), Pointon (1997), Pooke (2002) and Zimmermann (2003) make a distinction between professional and academic practice. They suggest professional art historians are more likely to carry out tasks aligned with connoisseurship, including oeuvre cataloguing, provenance, authenticating, attributing and identifying artworks, styles, movements, ideologies and artists. Fernie (1995) calls them specialists and experts in these fields and says they research, examine, analyse and write about works of art and artists. They also work with auctions and gallery sales and private collectors. Academic art historians work primarily in higher education institutions where they research, teach, write and talk about artworks and artists and their histories. To a lesser extent they also work and teach in art education programmes in schools and museums and galleries and as curators. Nowadays they are more likely to engage with theoretical, aesthetic and contextual approaches to the study, examination and presentation of art and artists (Haxthausen, 2002). As an academic discipline, art history has its own goals, content, methods of enquiry, recorded history of theory and instruction (Fitzpatrick, 1992; Preziosi, 1998).

Preziosi (1998:13) and Pooke (2002) suggest some art historians continue to view works of art as 'reflective, emblematic or representative' of their original time, place and circumstance of production. They consider information obtained from examination to be evidential and art works to be historical documents. For D'Alleva (2005:128), there are differing theoretical positions about whether works of art are fixed historically at the point of creation or reflective of the culture they occupy (Bal, 1999:110).

### **1.1.2 Implications for research**

The practice of art history has changed significantly since its invention in the nineteenth century; however these changes may not be fully appreciated by people unconnected to the discipline. They reflect changes in art practice, for example increasing interest by artists in the social context of their works from the 1970s and the increasing expansion of art forms from traditional painting, sculpture and architecture to encompass, for example to digital photography, film and installation. Negative perceptions of its purpose, methodology and content persist.

### 1.1.3 Relationship to art appreciation and criticism

From the initial review of literature I found a grey area between the practices of art history, appreciation and criticism and decided to compare them. This was necessary to ensure the research was located within the appropriate discipline. According to Stankiewicz (2001), in the first half of the twentieth century art history and appreciation shared instructional purpose with a *picture study* movement. This movement was aimed at the general public and promoted the study of 'valued artworks' for enjoyment and to encourage moral and righteous behaviour (Addiss and Erickson, 1993:97; Stankiewicz, 2001). European artistic values and traditions were emphasised. According to Stankiewicz (2001), educational goals for art history and appreciation were to teach individuals how to discriminate amongst artworks and select and appreciate the best. Exposure to *grand masters* was understood as a way to develop spiritual, moral and practical virtues. According to Siegesmund (1998), by the 1940s the progressivist movement in education began to link the study of art and artist to the aim of social adjustment and used a hidden curriculum as a way of helping people to conform to the social order. To cultivate these aspirations, viewers were encouraged to empathise with artists through emotion and imagination (Addis and Erickson, 1993).

According to Osborne (1970) art appreciation forged links with aesthetics in the 1970s. He suggests appreciating art contributed to viewers' experience of the aesthetic qualities of expressiveness in works of art. During the same period, Whelpton (1970:1) endorsed the practice of art appreciation for its appeal to the general public. In practice, she (1970:1) suggested it engaged viewers' general ideas and response to artworks and provided 'brief, accepted facts' about them. Efland (1998:203) proposes that art appreciation is based on curiosity and not concerned with art enquiry and Hurwitz, Madeja and Ketter (2003:2) define it as 'valuing, enjoying and appraising art'. For Arnold (2004:2), it requires 'no knowledge' of the history of art, artists or social, historical or cultural contexts of production but it may sometimes involve criticising art objects on the basis of their aesthetic merit, for example, style, composition and colour.

Art criticism became a splinter practice of art history near the end of the nineteenth century and Preziosi (1998) maintains it had close ties to connoisseurship for most of the twentieth century. In the shift towards a theoretically-based discipline, confusion sprang up between these two practices as goals and purpose were seen to merge

(Baxandall, 1985:135; Kemal and Gaskall, 1991). In the twenty-first century, art criticism is recognised as the practice of appreciating, analysing and judging the value of artworks (Harris, 2006:78). Whereas a general view holds that it is a specialised and separate practice from art history, some scholars claim their concerns overlap. Preziosi (1998) maintains a fundamental difference is the overt claim of judgement or evaluation in art criticism. Bann (1989:112) distinguishes art history from criticism on the grounds that it ‘follows the fortunes of an object in time’ while the latter ‘provide[s] an extratemporal evaluation of that object’. He suggests art criticism is primarily concerned with appraising and judging excellence in works of art. In contrast, he claims art historians seek to maintain objective views in their examination, interpretation and presentation of artworks and artists.

#### **1.1.4 Implications for research**

After studying the ideas presented above I adopted the view that art appreciation is concerned with personal enjoyment rather than finding out or considering information about artworks. This was an important part of the research as my initial, underpinning assumption was that teaching about artworks and artists would involve the dissemination of knowledge about them using factual information. This review persuaded me that the research was about art history, not appreciation.

Despite the finding that art criticism is, in part, about appreciating and analysing artworks and that boundaries between art history and criticism are sometimes merged, I supported Geahigan’s (2000) objection to using art criticism in the classroom, namely that young pupils are not generally equipped to make judgements about artworks. Therefore, I rejected art criticism and its emphasis on judgement and evaluation of art because the research was focused on interpreting art rather than evaluating it.

## **1.2 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ART EDUCATION IN THE USA AND UNITED KINGDOM**

Hickman (2005) suggests debates in art and design education have mirrored those in general education in each country throughout much of its history. According to Efland (1990), widely held purposes for teaching art in general education in the USA in the nineteenth century were to improve skills of handwriting and vocational training for industrial design as well as to encourage moral values. Hallam, Lee and Gupta

(2007:207) summarise the traditional nineteenth century view of learners as 'blank slates to be filled with knowledge', a perspective which has re-emerged over the past thirty years. In nineteenth century art education this meant training in technique by copying fine art exemplars. By the twentieth century, Siegesmund (1998) suggests art education was being promoted as experiential knowledge (Dewey, 1934), as self expression (Cizek, 1865-1946); for societal change, for its contribution to psychological welfare (Lowenfeld, 1947) and to the development of latent mental capacities (Gardner, 1990).

A dominant philosophy of art education from the 1930s to 1960s arose from the work of Austrian painter, Franz Cizek (1920s). His view of child art proposed the purpose of art education was to protect and nurture the autonomous, imaginative life of the child (Efland, 1990; Hickman, 2005). Lowenfeld (1957) encouraged this with the proposal that art is an emotional outlet for the child and provides access to the emotions. Siegesmund (1998) suggests the child art movement, which emphasised creative self expression, understood art education as a refuge from the pressures of a cognitive curriculum emerging in the USA and UK. Osborne (1970) and later, Eisner (1988) understood art to contribute an essential, unique aspect of knowledge that was inaccessible through purely cognitive encounters (Hallam *et al.*, 2007). Teaching and learning in general and art education during the 1950s and 1960s aligned itself with developmental theory (Bruner, 1960; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). These views contrasted sharply with reconstructivist philosophies emerging in the 1970s and 1980s that conceptualised art as a transformative tool for historical and moral instruction (Siegesmund, 1998). More recent reconstructivists such as Freedman and Stuhr (1994) and Wilson (2004) continue to claim art education can act as an agent of social change.

According to Siegesmund (1998), the idea that art is a cognitive endeavour was first addressed by the philosopher, Goodman (1968) when he wrote about a new arts curriculum in the 1970s and developmental psychologists such as Gardner (1993) who maintain that art gives access to a 'particular type of cognitive intelligence' (Siegesmund, 1998: 208). At the beginning of the 1970s, there was a shift in art education towards a subject-centred approach as general education came under pressure to provide measurable outcomes of school performance (Hickman, 2005:20).

Sahasrabudhe (2006) notes the arrival of a discipline-based art education (DBAE) framework which conceived of the subject of art through its four core disciplines of art

history, aesthetics, art criticism and studio art production as a result of these educational demands. Hamblen (2003), describes DBAE as a perspective on art education and links it with Broudy's (1950) theories of aesthetic education and Bruner's (1960) educational theory that pupils learn best when they experience scholarly rigours of a particular discipline. In DBAE, Barkan (1966) explains the practice and subject content of each discipline is founded on the role of its practitioner or expert. For example, in art criticism, learners were expected to simulate the role of art critic when they analysed artworks. In the twenty-first century this continues to be the standard normative practice in K-12 art education in the USA. According to Allison (1998) and Hickman (2005), similar changes towards subject-centred, domain driven art educational programmes occurred in the UK with the creation of a National Curriculum for England and Wales in the 1980s.

For Tavin (2005), a new paradigm of visual culture emerged in the USA in the 1990s. In keeping with postmodern trends for teaching and learning in general education, it included new media of youth culture. Tavin (2005) reports that visual culture is changing art curriculum content and goals in the USA in the twenty-first century.

According to Hickman (2005), two philosophical views continue to frame teaching and learning in art in the USA and UK. These perspectives relate to notions of education *in* art and education *through* art. Hickman (2005:20-22) defines education *in* art as essentialist and relating to a subject-centred approach to learning that emphasises declarative knowledge or 'knowing that'. By comparison, education *through* art is based on an instrumentalist notion that general education or learning is the most important factor. Hence, it is learner-centred and characterised as procedural knowledge or 'knowing how'. Recognising these differing concepts of art education is important (Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Hickman, 2005) because they influence the way art is conceived and taught. According to Eisner (1988), when art is used to teach across disciplines it becomes an instrument through which enquiry is carried out, rather than the subject of enquiry. Alternatively, when art is the focus it becomes essential to enquiry, exists in its own right and art education promotes it for its own sake.

### **1.3 INTERPRETING AND MAKING MEANING IN ART**

The Oxford English Dictionary (2005) and Collins Concise Dictionary (2000) defined *interpretation* as the explanation of something or phenomena with the aim of

understanding what it means. In this research, I accepted that explanation, meaning making and understanding are outcomes of the act of interpreting. The review of literature on interpretation raised questions about intentionality (artist's intended meaning) and personally constructed meaning. For example, Buchanan (1995:26) claimed that interpreting art was about 'meaning making' with the aim of discovering or establishing intentionality. In the twenty-first century, Freeland (2001) and Pooke (2002), amongst others, report a shift away from the intentionality of the 1950s and 1960s towards the emergence of reception theory in the mid 1980s and more recently postmodernist theory. The latter asserts a 'plurality' of meanings may be gained from interpreting artworks from the site of production, as well as reception (Efland *et al.*, 1996:294). Rose (2001) theorises that interpreting artworks may be framed by three *sites*, namely the image or artwork itself; the site where it is seen by an audience and the site of production. According to Kristeva (1980:69), interpreting art is about *interconnectedness* or *intertextuality* and the merging of two or more 'texts' or sites of interpretation to form an understanding. In her view, interpretation occurs when one text, produced by an artist or viewer, merges with that of another.

In the review, I found three purposes for interpreting artworks in art history and art education:

- i) to discover intended meaning;
- ii) to recognise conveyed meaning and
- iii) to understand it through personal constructs.

In the twenty-first century, the dominant view held by art educators such as Barrett (2003); Duncum (2002); Efland (2002) and Freedman (2004) is that interpretations are personally constructed. Moreover, there is general recognition that they carry with them an individual's past, cultural background and upbringing; 'the baggage they bring to the understanding of given situations' (Claxton, 1990:23). In a similar way, Evans (1998) concludes that meanings individuals give to artworks and texts are, in part, determined by cultural factors such as race, gender, education and class. According to Barnes (2002:181) they are 'enculturated'. Sociologists of education such as Lave and Wenger (1990) claim that communities of practice and situated learning environments contribute to the way phenomena are interpreted and this view is increasingly prominent in general

and art education. These factors influence the way individuals make sense of facts, subject matter, events and experiences around them.

Writing about art education, Trafi (2004:28) suggests individuals produce interpretations by reflecting on and re-constructing previous meanings they have ascribed to other images and artefacts and by connecting them to experiences 'relevant in their biographies'. In other words, they understand and explain a work of art using prior knowledge and past associations and experiences with artworks and by connecting them to personal life experiences. Trafi (2004:28) calls this 'subjective positioning' and claims critical art historians and advocates of postmodernist art criticism use this as a starting point for relating theory to individual constructs in art interpretation. Neisser (1976) explains how individuals draw on knowledge and experience from their everyday lives to provide a knowledge-based reference for their interpretations and calls this a framing strategy for interpretation.

For Barrett (2003:198), artworks are 'always about something' but viewers receive and respond to stimuli through different lenses and life experiences and for these reasons interpretations vary from one person to the next. In recent years, postmodern theorists have argued that interpretations are no longer fixed (Efland, 2002; Malpas and Wake, 2005) and are always contradictory, multiple, open-ended and unstable (Charman and Ross, 2006). Although artworks 'attract' multiple interpretations, Barrett (2003:198) suggests some are better than others. He maintains there is a range of interpretations any artwork allows and they are no longer *limited* to an artist's intended meaning. In this, Barrett (2003) recognises the artist's intention remains one of the interpretations of an artwork.

According to Dewey (1938) and Goodman (1968), art communicates knowledge about the world around us. Goodman (1968:258) claims that works of art are messages conveying 'facts, thoughts and feelings'. Underpinning his analysis of the structures of symbols and their impact on meaning making in art is the view, supported by Eisner (2002), that interpretation is a cognitive venture. He contends that words and images are used to construct thought (cognition) and recommends that art education support pupils' visual literacy by teaching them to read and decode symbol systems in language (verbal and visual).

### **1.3.1 Theories for meaning construction and interpretation**

In art history, D'Alleva (2005:17) claims that two theories consider how meaning is constructed in visual arts: iconography and semiotics. In my search for a theory that explains how meaning is constructed and interpreted in art I examined them both. I recognised common links between semiotics and iconography in the understanding that a sign or symbol stands for, or refers to an idea or *something* and that meaning is socially and/or culturally-based. Moreover, both theories rely on associative links drawn between symbols and what they represent. However, after reviewing two dominant theories by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), I rejected semiotic theory because I judged it to be too complex for young children and did not think the teachers would find it easy to communicate or explain the notion of 'signs', 'signifiers' (the form which a sign takes) and 'signified' (the concept it represents) that Saussure talks about. For the same reason, I thought Peirce's notion of a triad relationship between a 'representamen' (the form that a sign takes), an 'interpretant' (the sense made of that sign) and an 'object' (that which the sign refers to) would be unrealistic for children of this age range to comprehend. I concluded it would also be difficult for the teachers and me to determine pupils' referential understandings in their interpretations.

By comparison, Preziosi (1998:231) notes that in iconographic analysis 'levels of signification are not distinct categories of meaning' as those found in semiotic theory. From this, I understood that Panofsky's theory (1955) was less rigid in terms of an enculturated vocabulary. This persuaded me to consider iconography, a recognised and accepted theory from art history with which I was familiar.

### **1.3.2 Iconographical/Iconological meaning in art**

According to Holly (1984), the art historians, Warburg (1866-1929), Panofsky (1892-1968) and Mâle (1862-1954) were iconographers and influenced by theories of communication, in particular the notion that art is the embodiment of ideas and carries clues that contribute to its meaning. Iconography, rooted in the Greek word 'ikon' meaning 'object', is the study or examination of objects depicted in art. Panofsky (1955) defined objects or icons as the animate or inanimate subject matter of artworks. He also considered expressions and gestures of people in artwork and colours to be subject matter. Van Leeuwen (2001) summarised subject matter as the 'objects, people, places,

things and events’ in a work of art. According to Holly (1984:30), Panofsky’s theory of iconography/iconology is a twofold process of meaning making that assumes there is a single, intrinsic meaning for an artwork. It was developed as an analytic tool for looking at and interpreting images ‘in the Italian tradition’ (Alpers, 1983:xix).

Panofsky’s (1955) theory of iconography and three step method of visual analysis emphasises meaning in art through the study of subject matter. As a theory, it emerged in the early twentieth century in contrast to theories of formal analysis which privileged form, composition, shape, colour and technique in art over meaning.

In Panofsky’s theory (1955), meaning in art is constructed on three levels. In the first level, a primary, literal or factual meaning is derived from describing and analysing subject matter in an artwork. In the next, the recognition that this subject matter represents, stands for or refers to something raises meaning to a secondary level. At this level, motifs of representation are identified and they become carriers of meaning; for example, in the legend of St George, a man depicted slaying a dragon is understood to represent the saint.

Iconography is underpinned by an assumption that art should be interpreted from within its historical context (Holly, 1984:13) and Panofsky (1955:47) theorised that viewers bring ‘cultural equipment’ to the process of interpreting art. In his view, they apprehend meaning that is intrinsic and carries a worldview, understood by those who share a similar vocabulary of cultural references. Holly (1984:40) describes Panofsky’s method of analysis as three ‘formal and empirically controlled stages that progress from part to whole’. Panofsky’s (1955:66-67) three stages of meaning are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Panofsky’s stages of interpreting meaning**

Object of Interpretation	Act of Interpretation	Equipment for Interpretation
1. Primary or natural subject matter – (A) factual, (B) expressional – constituting the world of artists’ motifs	Pre-iconological description (and pseudo-formal analysis)	Practical experience (familiarity with objects and events)
2. Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories, and allegories	Iconographical analysis	Knowledge of literary or other sources (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).

3. Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of 'symbolical' values	Iconological interpretation	Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind) conditioned by personal psychology and 'worldview'
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Panofsky's theory was central to my research so I attempt to demonstrate how his three step strategy can be applied to interpreting meaning in an artwork in the following explanation of an Inuit print by Ashoona Pitseolak (see Fig.1.1).

Fig.1.1: Ashoona Pitseolak, *Facing the Wind*, 1982, Stonecut/stencil print, 15 x 19 in./ 38.1cm. x 48.3cm., Cape Dorset.



### 1.3.2.1 Step One: Primary or natural subject matter

This step involves the simple identification of subject matter to recognise objects, people, places and events. It relies on identifying pure forms and certain configurations of lines and/or colours or shapes as physical objects. In Figure 1.1, I can see two figures dressed for the outdoors, wearing hooded jackets, leggings and boots, shielding their faces with one arm and holding hands with the other as they move across the foreground of the print. In the background there is a black lined outline of a building. The top of a fishing stick is shown beside the entrance to the building in the background.

At this stage, my interpretation is pre-iconographic and relates to factual meaning. It involves literal or denotative recognition of objects in their most elementary sense. At this point, Panofsky subdivides subject matter into two categories: *factual* or *expressional* and apprehension of these categories relies on personal interpretation and experience. The viewer is expected to use personal recognition without reference to outside sources (Panofsky, 1955:47).

### 1.3.2.2 Step Two: Secondary or conventional subject matter

In this step, Panofsky suggests viewers find conventional meanings. Viewers describe what they observe in more detail and make associative connections or links between artist motifs (compositions, objects, images and events) and themes, concepts or predictable meaning of objects. They identify images as known stories, events or recognisable figures. According to Panofsky, these motifs are recognised as carriers of secondary meaning. For this method to work, Panofsky assumes correct descriptors and identification of subject matter are made. He considers any expressive quality found in an artwork is relevant and acknowledges it may not be consciously intended by the artist.

In describing Figure 1.1, I recognise the figures as Inuit people living in Northern Canada and the building in the background as a living accommodation, known as an igloo and used by Inuits. I make other associative connections between the igloo in the stonecut print and the trademark motif shown in Figure 1.2. It is a requirement for the sale of any Inuit artwork and widely recognised by members of the Inuit community. (This registered trademark is the stamp of authenticity provided by the Canadian Government as evidence that an artwork is genuine and made by a member of the Inuit people. Each individual artwork carries its own inscribed catalogue code for the artist to trace, track and safeguard their work). The representation of an igloo in this print suggests to me it is a scene from Inuit life. I understand the igloo as representative of the environment, setting and cultural circumstances surrounding the Inuit people. In Inuit society, the igloo is an important symbol which represents or refers to home, family and culture. According to Panofsky (1955:54) realising these connections makes the image of an igloo a carrier of meaning, and an artistic motif, in iconography.

**Fig.1.2: Registered Trademark of Authenticity, Government of Canada,1958.**



### **1.3.2.3 Step Three: Iconological, intrinsic meaning or content**

In this step, Panofsky (1955:55) explains that intrinsic meaning, the ‘unifying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, period, class, religious or philosophical persuasion’ is condensed into an understanding. The image of an igloo is a special symbol for the Inuit people because it is understood as an extension of those who build it and their relationship with their natural surroundings (O’Connell and Airey, 2005:34). It demonstrates the physical and spiritual unity of the family. In Step Three, therefore a viewer may come to understand this deeper level of symbol reference which embodies an intrinsic understanding of what is depicted in the artwork. For example, I understand this print as alluding to a struggle for survival and the togetherness of the pair holding hands and shielding their faces as they walk in the windswept environment and to the close unity of family and community encapsulated in this endeavour. Inuit people would most likely make further symbolic connections to mythological stories of the *spirit* of the igloo. Making these kinds of connections extends interpretation beyond conventional or predictable meaning and alludes to a deeper level of understanding which Panofsky calls intrinsic or a worldview.

### **1.3.2.4 Criticism**

Panofsky’s (1955) theories have met with criticism for several reasons. Fulkova (2004) points out that the vocabulary of symbols and signification that emerged in an age of ideologies and grand narratives no longer exists or is understood in the twenty-first century. In other words, meaning making infers a community of shared beliefs, values or cultural ideals that has disappeared. Westermann (2002) questions whether all art has underlying intrinsic meaning and Bialostocki (1954) queries how apprehended meaning is achieved and how viewers know it is correct or intrinsic? Alpers (1989) and Jolly (2000) do not think viewers are equipped with the ‘personal intuition or visual training’ Panofsky claimed is necessary for interpretation (Panofsky, 1955:47). Alpers (1989) also questions whether his theories can be used to interpret meaning across a range of artworks from different times and places. Bryson and Moxey (1991) and Cheetham *et al.* (1998) question whether iconography/iconology is relevant alongside new theoretical approaches in art history.

### **1.3.3 Theories of art as communication**

The review showed that links have been made between Panofsky's theory of literal and conventional meaning (iconography) and the notion of symbolic meaning in the field of communication. I recognised that iconography, like semiotic theory, is about representation in artworks and so I examined symbol and expression theories of communication. According to Feinstein (1982:47) literal meaning is communicated by way of denotation and a basic requirement is that the meaning of something is understood by the recipient in the same way as it was intended by the creator. According to Panofsky (1955), a shared understanding constitutes the first level of meaning (literal). In the second level, non-literal meaning is evoked by way of connotation. Feinstein (1982) points out that to proceed to this second level, there must be an agreed upon, literal level and this highlights the importance of sequential steps of examination.

The notion that art communicates and embodies ideas and emotions is embedded in expression and cognitive theories in art education (Marshall, 2006; Sullivan, 2005). Psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) maintain that art communicates or expresses, consciously or unconsciously, feelings, emotions, ideas or thoughts to viewers.

#### **1.3.3.1 Theory of symbolism**

Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), Panofsky (1955) and Susanne Langer (1895-1985) wrote about symbols and communication in art from the viewpoints of their respective disciplines of philosophy and art history. They theorised that art communicates meaning in symbolic form. According to Dorfler (1957:289), symbols in art are the oldest form of visual communication and their function is to 'convey meaning beyond what is obvious'. In keeping with Panofsky (1955) and Gombrich (1973), Dorfler (1957) maintains that symbols become actual once they are communicated to beholders.

For Cassirer and Panofsky, art is a symbol of the artist and his times. Panofsky (1955: 54) understood art as a 'vehicle of communication' intended to transmit a concept or convey a meaning. He suggested meaning is understood through symbol processing. Arnold (2004:99) points out that Mâle, Warburg and Panofsky all believed symbols are derived from a 'readily recognisable common currency of cultural or religious

experience'. Langer (1953) understood art as an expressive symbol of emotion. She conceptualised a theory of presentational symbols in which they are understood to encapsulate or present total meaning not to form part of the meaning.

Any form of communication assumes a double action of transmitting and deciphering or giving and receiving. For Véron ((1970:93), a cognitive symbol is one that expresses what one knows or believes, in contrast to what one feels. Osborne (1970) describes the latter as an emotive symbol. According to Freeland (2001:101), cognitive theories of art incorporate symbol theory which holds that art communicates thoughts and ideas. In contrast, expression theory views art as the communication of feelings and emotions by the artist and/or to the viewer.

### **1.3.3.2 Theories of expression and emotion**

Advocates of 'art as emotive expression', for example, Croce (1806-1652), Collingwood (1889-1943), Dewey and Langer (1953) regarded art as primarily instrumental in the communication of emotion (Freeland, 2001; Osborne, 1991:155)<sup>2</sup>. Much of the artworks produced from the beginning of the twentieth century in Germany and France, during the modernist movement known as expressionism, set out to provoke or stimulate the emotions. According to Cumming (2001:393) they conveyed 'heightened sensibility' intentionally through choice of colour, distortion, space, scale, form and intense subject matter to achieve this result. This notion was supported by Croce, Collingwood and Langer with the claim that artists express their emotions intentionally to provoke response from viewers. In Freeland's view (2001:116), the primary concern in expression theory is with how artists express feelings and emotions in their artwork. Tolstoy and Freud argued that communication centres on the artist's expression of conscious or unconscious feelings and desires (Harris, 2006). For Goodman (1968:48) 'excitation of emotion' is the prime function of art. But he contends that meaning is communicated, not through feelings and emotions expressed by the artist but rather from an excitation of emotion within the viewer.

Reception theorists such as Fish (1980), Ingarden (1973) and Iser (1978) advance theories of reader reception and affective response. They focus on the role of the reader

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<sup>2</sup>Croce, Collingwood and Langer criticise expression theory for its limitations and narrowness in considering only the communication of artists' emotions and feelings and developed a theory that includes emotions, feelings and ideas (Freeland, 2001:108)

in literary theory. For Ingarden and Iser, the reader is 'instrumental in the construction of meaning' (Castle, 2007:178). They theorise that it is the reader's experience of a literary work [artwork], how they receive and respond to it that is important for the construction of meaning. In this view, emotion and feelings contribute to what is realised, expressed and understood in a text.

Osborne (1991:155) considered expressed emotion to be the central function of art and contended that an artwork could be judged by the extent to which it successfully achieved it. According to Osborne (1991:182), in object-centred interpretation, it is the 'work of art as a whole' that expresses or stimulates emotions and feelings. This assertion raises two points, first, the possibility that communication resides within the artwork itself and second, that there are two sides to expression theory: expression and response. I identified three ways to interpret paintings using expression theory, for example through:

- i) the artist's expression of emotion
- ii) the artwork, as the embodiment of emotion and feelings and
- iii) the viewer, in response to emotion or emotional stimulus of the artwork

After due consideration, I adopted Goodman's (1968) view that interpretations of art are primarily cognitive constructions of ideas. I found the explanation more convincing than views that interpreting art is about the expression of emotion and feelings.

Although, I accepted that art communicates emotion I considered asking pupils to determine emotion or expressed emotion to be problematic and I could not see an educational benefit for this. Furthermore, Piaget's (1969) theory about young children's egocentricity between the ages of five and seven made me doubt whether teachers of this age group would gain anything purposeful for informed interpretation by asking pupils to talk about expressed emotion.

Perhaps because of my background training in art history, I did not accept that expressed emotion is *the* meaning of an artwork or consider it to be the aim or goal of interpreting art (Fish, 1980; Osborne, 1970). Furthermore, I was concerned that eliciting pupils' own emotional responses to paintings would shift the research away from a

cognitive and informed approach that included factual art information in interpretation that I associated with art history.

### **1.3.4 Expression and reception**

During the empirical research, I conducted a further review of literature on expression theory as a result of the data analysis reported in Chapter Six. Indications were that pupils' affective responses impacted their interpretations of artworks and this caused me to re-focus my ideas and to examine theories of reception, affect and affective response in more detail. I understood that by ignoring reader reception and response theories I had overlooked a key aspect of art interpretation.

Malpas and Wake (2005:245) theorise about reception theory as a form of reader response concerned with both aesthetic and historical aspects of reading a literary work. The primary focus is on the ways in which readers use texts and how readings alter and shift through time. Iser (1978; 2006), whose ideas are associated with reception and reader response theories differentiates between the two, claiming the first arises from a history of readers' judgements (1978: x) while the second finds its roots within the text.

Gadamer (2008) claimed reception theory fuses two horizons, the horizon of the spectator (which is conditioned by his background, experience, personality, cultural and historical situation) and the horizon of the work (what it puts forward to the spectator). Iser (1978) identified two similar points of intersection, namely the interface between the text and its social, historical and cultural contexts and that of the text and the reader. The literary phenomenologist, Ingarden (1893-1970) and later his follower, Iser (2006) claimed there are gaps or blanks that exist in reading and understanding texts which readers necessarily fill in, using their own personal knowledge and experience. Ingarden (1973:69) referred to 'filling in the gaps' as 'concretion' and emphasised the reader's active role or participation in interpreting a text or artwork. Although reception theory focuses on how texts (or artworks) are, and were, historically received, they are theorised in different ways, for example through the reader's reception of the text or through the text first, followed by its reception (Tompkins, 1980).

#### **1.3.4.1 Reader response theory**

Iser's (1978) writing built on Ingarden's (1973) theory about the interaction between text and the reader's actions in responding to it (Tompkins, 1980:50). He (1978:21)

argued that interaction between text and reader is central to reading a literary work and that readers activate or complete the text according to their individual backgrounds and experiences. According to Iser (1978: 21) the message or communication between text and reader is transmitted in two ways, first through the reader 'receiving it' and second, by their 'composing it'. He considered the reader to be instrumental and claimed reader response should focus on objective reasoning as well as emotion and warns against constructing meaning based solely on subjective thinking. This concern was also raised by Wimsatt and Monroe-Beardsley (1954), who argued that to evaluate a literary work in terms of emotional affect is to confuse it with its result. This contrasts sharply with Fish's (1980) view that reader response *is* the meaning not a *contributor* to meaning (Castle, 2007:178).

According to Hubbard (2003; 2008:169) and other art educators (Barrett, 2002; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994), Iser's theory of reader reception has strongly influenced the way museum and gallery educators understand the practice of 'meaning making' in their settings. A key principle of reader reception theory is the notion that a literary text (or artwork) 'does something' to readers (Iser, 2006:60). For example, that it elicits some form of response from them, be it cognitive, emotive or affective. According to Iser (1978:163) and others (Eco, 1984; Fish, 1980; Ingarden, 1973), the activity of reading a literary work is guided by the text and then processed by the reader. In their view, the reader is affected by what he/she processes in the reading of the text and in this way, Iser (1978; 1987; 2006) concludes *affect* plays a key role in reader reception theory.

#### **1.3.4.2 Theory of Affect**

Writing from a perspective of psychology, Tompkins (1980) defines *affect* as an innate biological motivating mechanism individuals use to interpret the world around them. It is understood to be a physiological theory of emotion or feelings. Tompkins suggests individuals are born with a finite set of nine innate 'affects' or organlike centres located in discrete areas of the brain, which include: joy, interest (positive affects), surprise (neutral affects) and fear, disgust, anger, distress and shame (negative affects). All human experience filters through these areas of the brain and whenever an individual becomes aware of something, it is because they have become aware of it in relation to one of these nine biological affects of emotion or feelings.

From an alternate perspective, Lynch (2007) argues that feelings are what individuals become conscious of after an *affect* is triggered. Typically, facial expression is the stimulus-response pattern, or the biological response to environmental stimuli. According to Lynch (2007), individuals experience emotion and respond to it in different ways according to personal background histories, memories and experiences. He (2007:25) maintains that people build ‘libraries’ of memories attached to each feeling and emotion.

## **1.4 CONSTRUCTIVIST AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING THEORIES**

It was necessary for me to review literature about learning theories in art and general education as I had limited experience working with them. Two inter-related theories dominated much of the art education literature I reviewed, namely constructivist and social constructivist learning theories. Although the rhetoric of art and design in the National Curriculum continues to promote a view of *freedom* as an ideal learning condition, Burgess and Addison (2007) claim that constructivist learning theory informs current approaches and practices in art and general education (Bresler and Thompson, 2003; GTC, England, 2006)

### **1.4.1 Constructivist learning**

Constructivists understand learning as an active process whereby learners construct new ideas and concepts based on their prior or current knowledge (Bruner, 1966; 1996; Pritchard, 2005). According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2004:167) learners ‘internalise’ these new concepts. Larochelle, Bednarz and Garrison (1998:5) propose that constructivism ‘reintroduces what objectivism sought to leave out, namely properties of the observer within the description of his or her observations’ and claim that in constructivist learning, learners take responsibility for their own actions. According to Cohen *et al.* (2004:167) constructivist and social constructivist theories share several common concerns about how knowledge is constructed, for example that it involves:

- i) reflective abstraction
- ii) a learner’s cognitive structures and processing
- iii) active and participative learning

- iv) recognition that learning is not fixed and inert.

Cohen *et al.* (2004:168) provide a useful list of general characteristics of constructivism.

According to Larochelle *et al.* (1998), constructivism is based on a broad conceptual framework that ranges from Dewey and Mead's pragmatic social constructivism which emphasises the place of experience in education, to Kolb's experiential constructivism. Two leading perspectives are highlighted as Piaget's development (stage) theory, which links with his research in child development and Bruner's (1960) theory of structural learning derived from his study of cognition in psychology. According to Bresler and Thompson (2003:90) and Walsh (1993, 2003:102), both these dominant strands of cognitive constructivism are structural because they view learners as proceeding through successive stages of development and learning.

Piaget's (1969) cognitive developmental theory of childhood is divided into four stages of intellectual, age-related development. These are sensori-motor (birth to two years); pre-operational (two to seven years); concrete operational (seven to 11 years) and formal operational (11 years onwards). Cunliffe (1999:117) refers to this view of child development as 'biological constructivism' and Wood (1998:52) explains it as a series of 'intellectual revolutions' in a child's life cycle. Piaget's theory suggests that young children reach appropriate states of readiness as they move from one stage to the next. Two terms, *assimilation* and *accommodation* refer to the way young children move through the stages (Barnes, 2002). Wood (1998:53) explains these terms by saying that children need to *accommodate* changes in order to *assimilate* new experiences. In Wood's (1998) understanding, *assimilation* refers to the process of absorbing information from an environment into the mind which then results in changes, sometimes minor, to the evidence of an individual's senses. Piaget calls the change the *accommodation* of experience. Wood (1998) suggests that assimilation and accommodation occur simultaneously in Piaget's view.

While there has been strong support for Piaget's theories, others such as Edwards and Mercer (1987); Papalia, Olds and Feldman (1998); Wood, Smith and Grossniklaus (2001) report criticism of his choice of research methods and the way he measured children's development; his premise that children automatically move from one stage to the next as they mature and underestimation of children's abilities. Wood *et al.* (2001)

expresses concern about Piaget's disregard for environmental and social factors as discussed below.

Bruner (1996:53) theorises constructive learning through a 'structure of knowledge' and suggested 'acquired knowledge is most useful when it is discovered through a learner's own cognitive efforts' because he/she is able to relate it to prior or existing knowledge that reinforces it. Bruner (1996) conceived of learning as developmental in a synoptic way that was not necessarily age-related. According to Cohen *et al.* (2004), his strand of constructivist learning recognised a social dimension in learning. The General Teaching Council of England (GTC, 2006) claims that Bruner's (1966) theory of learning consists of three progressive stages in a learner's intellectual development, identified as i) **enactive** (learning by doing); ii) **iconic** (learning by means of images and pictures) and iii) **symbolic** (learning by means of words or numbers).

Bruner's (1966; 1996) theory of instruction proposed a school curriculum organised in a spiral approach to enable pupils to build continually on prior and current knowledge. He (1996:39) called this a 'spiral curriculum' and his main precept was that teachers should encourage pupils to discover new ideas for themselves while re-visiting learning to reinforce it on a continual basis.

According to Barnes (1992) and Selley (1999), teachers using constructive methods use pupils' base knowledge as a starting point for teaching and this is why Watkins, Carnell and Lodge (2007) claim it is a child-centred approach. Brown and Fouts (2003) suggest constructivist methods help pupils to demonstrate conceptual understanding in their learning and not merely recall. For Walsh (2003:109), linking pupils' learning to prior knowledge and experience is supportive because they are better able to make sense of something when it is supported by their own immediate world. Cohen *et al.* (2004:168) suggest pupils rely on and use their own 'mental models' in this approach. Watkins *et al.* (2007) describe teachers' ability to use pupils' individual and diverse experiences to help them construct their own ideas as a strength of this learning theory.

Bruner (1996), Pritchard, 2005 and Selley (1999:23) all emphasise the importance of active dialogue and Socratic questioning to expand this kind of pupil learning. Bruner (1996) recommends teachers support learners with questioning and by prompting them to test their ideas against existing knowledge. Unlike closed questions which seek to find one acceptable answer, teachers use open questions to encourage pupils to build or

construct their knowledge in order to find answers (Selley, 1999). According to Bruner (1966; 1996) and Cohen *et al.* (2004), teachers and pupils play active and interactive roles in constructivist learning and teaching. Thus as Bruner (1960; 1996), Cohen *et al.* (2004:168); Pritchard (2005); Selley (1999) and Watkins *et al.* (2007:35) all conclude constructivist learning is both ‘an individual and social activity’.

### 1.4.2 Social Constructivist learning

Bruner (1996) and many educationalists favoured the social dimension Vygotsky (1962; 1978) brought to constructivist learning. According to Hedegaard (1990:349), an assumption underpinning his strand of constructivism is that psychological development and instruction are socially embedded. For Bresler and Thompson (2003:90), Vygotsky’s central tenet is that children learn through ‘interactions with materials and through dialogue and activity shared with parents, teachers and other children’. According to Cohen *et al.* (2004:168), Vygotsky theorised a learning context where ‘social, collaborative and interactional’ activity takes place. Liu and Matthews (2005:391) call this ‘social collectivity’ in learning.

Watkins *et al.* (2007:89) highlight the importance Vygotsky attached to thought and language discourse, in particular the context of dialogue in his theory of social interaction. Unlike Piaget’s notion that egocentric speech<sup>3</sup> fades away as a child matures, Vygotsky (1978) emphasised its importance and argued that it is tested out on peers before going underground and becoming internalised as inner speech.

Vygotsky (1962) proposes a social constructivist theory of, what he called, a ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD)<sup>4</sup>. Cohen *et al.* (2004:169) define this zone as ‘the distance between the *actual* development of a child and the level of *potential* development as determined by adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’. To support his theory of ZPD, Vygotsky (1978) reported findings from a study of children completing tasks on their own that showed they rarely did as well as when they worked in collaboration with an adult (Daniels, 1996). In particular, he concluded that *scaffolding* is a necessary action for teachers. Cohen *et al.* (2004:169) suggests a

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<sup>3</sup> Egocentric speech occurs when a child talks aloud to themselves while alone.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The child is able to copy a series of actions which surpass his or her own capacities, but only within limits. By means of copying, the child is able to perform much better when together with and guided by adults than when left alone, and can do so with understanding and independently. The difference between the level of independently solved tasks is the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1982:117).

variety of ways teachers can scaffold, such as posing questions, prompting and probing for answers, reminding, providing clear step by step instructions and demonstrating or modelling.

According to Goodman and Goodman (1990), Vygotsky advocated a combination of whole class transactions and one-to one learning and that teachers should value each learner and help them to value themselves. Goodman and Goodman (1990:235) have identified three possible roles for teachers including: i) initiators, who create authentic contexts for learning; ii) 'kid watchers', where they observe 'naturally occurring zones of proximal development' and iii) mediators, who scaffold learning. According to Goodman and Goodman (1990), mediators offer useful hints, direct attention to overlooked information and support learners as they synthesise new concepts.

Vygotsky's (1978:86) view of 'more competent peers' and his notion of peer collaboration in classroom practice has been analysed by Tudge (1990:155). According to Tudge (1990), Vygotsky understood pupil to pupil interaction and collaboration as important, particularly where pupils are able to act as tutors and help less able peers to learn skills or solve problems. Tudge (1990:157-158) extended this notion with the proposal that collaboration with other persons *in* the zone of proximal development leads to development in 'culturally appropriate ways', although he questions whether the opinions of more competent peers always prevail when they collaborate with less competent ones. Whereas he assumes the information adults provide is valid and correct, Tudge (1990:158) raises concerns about misinformation when pupils interact together.

In art education, Burgess and Addison (2007:187) endorse constructivism as a most appropriate educational theory for learning and teaching in and about art. They suggest it has become increasingly influential in the organisation of the art classroom and curricula in UK schools. Bresler and Thompson (2003:90) and Cunliffe (2005) concur that it permeates the arts curriculum in the UK and conclude that social interaction is important in art classrooms. Parents, teachers and peers all have a 'powerful influence' over pupils' learning and the way they develop and construct new ideas. Cunliffe (2005) argues art teachers need to scaffold or mediate socio-cultural experiences for pupils as they negotiate ideas in their art making and suggests assisted learning gradually leads to self-regulated learning as scaffolding is withdrawn.

## 1.5 KEY FINDINGS

I spent a considerable amount of time reviewing concepts and theories in art history, criticism, appreciation and education to help me locate the research within the most appropriate discipline. In the end, I accepted that art history was indeed my central focus and chose theoretical underpinnings accordingly. Each strand of the review helped me to clarify my thoughts about the design of the research and conceptual framework for interpreting art. I needed to identify a pragmatic theory so I could explain how meaning and interpretation is constructed in a way teachers would find helpful.

I decided to use the first two levels of Panofsky's theory of iconography largely because I appreciated that the teachers would find his emphasis on the study of subject matter useful for initiating discussion about artworks. I borrowed Van Leeuwen's (2001: 92) definition of subject matter as the 'people, places, things and events' depicted in artworks and included Panofsky's (1955: 54) suggestions of 'gestures, expressions and colours'. I was drawn to Honigman's (1998) suggestion that subject matter provides viewers with clues for interpreting art and Dewey (1934), Goodman (1968) and Panofsky's (1955) notion that art communicates thoughts and ideas about past and present times. I was not persuaded about the purpose of examining art as the communication of emotions or viewer's emotional response to art at this point and felt this conflicted with the notion of informed interpretation.

I recognised that while the idea of iconography retained currency in the twenty-first century, Panofsky's explanation of iconology and determination of intrinsic meaning in artworks was outdated. Cultural theory has moved on and the new postmodernist understanding of plurality has replaced notions of absolutes. I concluded that meaning making and interpreting are not always the same thing, although both involve the principal action of determining explanation and understanding. I became more conscious of the role of *purpose* in interpretation. In school art education, Duncum (2000) raises valid questions about the likelihood of knowing or appreciating art from, or in, other contexts. In the end, I rejected the term *meaning making* as it implied the discovery of one single meaning, in favour of *interpreting* or making meaning through individual construction (Freeland, 2001).

Although a wealth of literature exists in art education related to interpreting and making meaning in art, I discovered a gap between the abstract notion of interpreting meaning

and practical discourse about how to carry it out. Schön (1983) alludes to an intuitive leap individuals make when they interpret phenomena. I recognised this would be difficult to prove and was mindful of Efland's (2002) suggestion that the act of interpretation is sometimes unobservable. Furthermore, I was influenced by Smith's (1962) key questions, *How can art be explained?* and *What is being explained?* During the review, I also considered questions such as *Do we need to interpret art?* ; *Can anyone interpret it?* and *Are all interpretations relevant, valid and acceptable?*

In summary, I adopted a view that interpreting art involves cognitive construction of meaning (Goodman, 1968; Efland, 2002) built upon a base of personal knowledge and experience (Bruner, 1960). After I reviewed the learning theories, I was satisfied that Bruner's (1960; 1996) constructivist and Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist approaches to learning could support pupils' cognitive thinking when they interpreted artworks. In particular, I was persuaded by their notion of pupils needing to be responsible for, and actively involved in constructing interpretations about art and the importance of social interaction between adults and pupils in a learning environment.

Following the reviews of literature on conceptions of art history and art education, theories of interpreting art in art history and art education and constructivist and social constructivist theories of learning, I reviewed the research questions set out below:

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?