DOCTORAL THESIS

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

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CHAPTER EIGHT: SUMMARY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

8.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the findings and conclusions for the research. In the first section, I begin by attempting to answer research questions two to four. Next, I reflect on and draw conclusions about action research as a methodology for effecting change in practice. In the final section, I report on my conclusions about the overarching question of what happened when these generalist classroom teachers introduced art history through a strategy for interpreting art that included art history information in an infant primary curriculum. In this part I also draw conclusions about the selection of artworks and resources. Finally, I discuss the contributions this research makes to knowledge and offer recommendations for future research. In a postscript, I talk about the implications for my own practice as an art history educator.

8.1 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Six main research questions influenced the decisions I made for the overall design of research. Chapters Four, Five and Six reported the empirical research through which they were investigated. In Chapter Seven, the questions were the focus for the analysis of three themes arising from the descriptions of the data. The answers and research conclusions follow.

8.1.1 Strengths and weaknesses of the ISEE

These generalist classroom teachers were convinced it was worthwhile to test out the conceptual framework in the related ISEE strategy. They concluded the ISEE was a helpful guide for interpreting paintings, although they sometimes chose not to use all three steps. However, they liked the structure of the three step strategy and judged it facilitated class discussion and gave them more confidence to talk about artworks. At first they were concerned the design was too rigid but by the end they appreciated its flexibility.

Pupils between the ages of four and seven were able to answer the four key questions specified in the ISEE. Step One (***What do you see?***) facilitated discussion about paintings in all three classes. The younger pupils in Reception in particular, enjoyed looking at and describing the subject matter. Year One and Two pupils were more interested in the

reasoning required to respond to Step Two questions; for example ***Why is the subject matter included in the painting?*** and ***Why do you think this?*** Teachers found the strategy of questioning what pupils said a useful starting point. It is consistent with a constructivist theory of learning (Barnes, 2002; Bruner, 1966; Selley, 1999) that places pupils squarely at the centre of their learning and uses their existing skills and knowledge as the foundation from which to begin to interpret a painting. A significant and unexpected finding was that age was not a differentiating factor in this research. Aside from shorter attention spans and lesser ability to verbalise ideas, pupils in Reception were just as able to answer the ISEE questions and construct interpretations of a painting as the older ones in Year Two.

The teachers appreciated the way Step Two (questioning, analysing and relating to) subject matter) offered them several ways to encourage pupils to construct meaning; for example by questioning them about subject matter; exploring relationships between these objects, places and events; making associations between them and pupils' experiences and memories; and prompting them to consider their emotions and feelings about them. However, the teachers had problems conceptualising the intended purpose of the question ***Why is the subject matter included in the painting?*** which was based on my translation of Panofsky's theory into practice and intended to teach pupils to think in terms of analysis. But after further explanation and practice, all of the teachers judged it worked well in the final lesson. From the initial difficulties they encountered, I realised this question was in need of further consideration for generalist teachers.

Step Three, which involved disseminating art information, was sometimes a problem for the teachers and some of them failed to use it on several occasions. With the exception of the headteacher, who taught one lesson, all the teachers were inconsistent in teaching this step. Because the dissemination of art information is crucial for teaching 'knowledge and understanding of art and artists' (National Curriculum, 2005), I address it in greater detail in the next section when I answer question one.

Another finding about Step Three was that pupils required time to consider, absorb and reflect on the art information. Teachers found it difficult to gauge how much time was necessary and this made timetabling lessons that included all three steps, tricky. Pupils benefitted from reflecting in an unhurried learning environment and this required teachers

to be flexible. This supports Boyd and Fales' (1983) claim that measured learning is important because it allows for and encourages reflexivity.

Overall, the teachers judged the ISEE a useful tool. They accepted that they would have to formulate sub questions and research art information for each new painting they selected. All of them anticipated using it in their future teaching. Thus I concluded that, despite problems encountered with Steps Two and Three, and only rudimentary art history subject training, these teachers are able to use the ISEE and may find it useful for teaching art interpretation using information about the art and artist.

8.1.2 Significance of the teacher variable

Several variables affected the implementation of the ISEE overall and interpreting art including the pupils, the selection of paintings, the setting, lesson plans and timing, I concluded that the teachers' levels of confidence working with paintings and art information and their motivation were the most significant factors to impact on the pupils' ability to use the ISEE. Teaching styles, teachers' beliefs and attitudes working with artworks and information were other teacher specific factors.

Whether the teachers were able to pose questions and extend discussions in the classroom was important because it positively affected pupils' interpretations. How they manipulated timing and pace to suit the tempo of a lesson and to allow time for pupils to reflect and absorb information also had a positive effect on pupils' reception of the artworks and the implementation of the ISEE. But the teachers faced several challenges when they used it. Some teachers found the slower pace of these lessons especially challenging and needed time to adapt to it. Working in more open-ended, less assessment-driven lessons than usual negatively impacted on two teachers who struggled sometimes to find a purpose and direction in this kind of learning. Finding enough time to set aside for pupils to step back and reflect on what they observed and heard about paintings was problematic and extending lessons for this purpose sometimes had a negative effect on class control.

Another finding was that it was important to the pupils to interact with the teacher and exchange ideas together on an equal basis when they interpreted the paintings in whole class discussions. In these exchanges, pupils talked about the art information received

previously from the teacher and discussed it in conjunction with their own and others' ideas. The breadth of co-constructed ideas shared with the teacher broadened the pupils' interpretations. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory of adult participation and collaboration and it endorses the notion of 'flat-hierarchy' learning that Chappell and Craft (2011:9) talk about in creative learning conversations. By participating with pupils in whole class discussion the teachers mirrored Vygotsky's (1978) recommendation they should place themselves 'firmly alongside' pupils in a process of co-constructing meaning (Galloway and Edwards, 2001:64). In this way, they refined their thinking through engaging with an adult or 'more competent' peers (Vygotsky, 1978:86). The finding that pupils valued the teacher's interaction and input in discussions adds weight to his idea that scaffolding is an important and necessary action for teachers. As despite the flat hierarchy, it was important for teachers to carry on extending pupils' ideas. In this research, social interaction between pupils/teachers and pupils/pupils was understood as important because it allowed pupils to test out ideas while they built their interpretations in a positive learning environment.

A finding was that giving pupils' control to lead class discussions produced different and often unpredictable results. The teachers were surprised by how knowledgeable and confident they were when they took control of discussions, particularly in Years One and Two. Unfortunately then, pupil-led discussions sometimes resulted in a diminished class control which the teachers disliked. I agree with Eisner (1997) that theory in classroom practice is challenging and can be disappointing when results don't meet expectations or aspirations. However, I also agree with his view that translating theory into practice takes practice as demonstrated by the final research lesson when teachers found they were more comfortable in the semi-structured learning environment they had cultivated.

Pupils were sensitive to the teachers' comfort levels, and in particular how they reacted to and talked about art information in connection with paintings. I concluded that positive modeling of desired behaviour and actions influences and increases pupils' confidence to engage reflectively with artworks.

Although the teachers found the ISEE helpful for initiating discussion of paintings, they continued to have reservations about whether or not it would work with all paintings. This mirrors Alpers (1989) criticism of Panofsky's (1955) iconographical theory and his

assumption that all subject matter is open to interpretation in the same way. The teachers in this research remained apprehensive about whether they could *find something* in every painting to talk about. I concluded that the ISEE may have contributed to their anxiety because it relied mainly on discussion of subject matter such as objects, people and events more than formal qualities of colour, shape and form which they were more familiar with teaching and this might have given them more confidence in the lessons.

The teachers shortened lesson activities and tightened control over class discussion when they felt uncomfortable about working with a painting or the direction of a discussion and so their teaching was inconsistent. Therefore, the choice of painting had a direct effect on their confidence. Downing *et al.* (2003), Fitzpatrick (1992) and Taylor (1999) also argue that the selection of artworks can be de-motivating for teachers. It appears teachers' personal preferences for art are a deciding factor in what they select and how they teach about it. This was demonstrated by the lessons in which they selected their own paintings. Individual likes and dislikes differentiated one teacher's art interpretation lessons from another.

8.1.3 How pupils engage with paintings using the ISEE

The way pupils reacted to artworks influenced the way they interpreted them and so it was important for the team to examine and reflect on this. Sometimes pupils chatted to each other about a painting or talked aloud to *themselves*, at other times they reflected in silence. From this I concluded that Vygotsky (1978) is correct when he explains that dialogue is important in the construction of ideas. On other occasions pupils were restless or distracted by circumstances or the painting itself. Several pupils sought to engage with paintings physically, by touching, holding and walking around them which supports Hooper-Greenhill's (2004) findings that young children have multiple ways of engaging with art. Some pupils in the research were frustrated by computer images of artworks that were not interactive. This is significant given the growing trend towards using digital, computer technology in school art lessons.

A very important finding was that the pupils often responded affectively to the paintings. The ISEE questions ***What do you feel about this painting?*** or alternatively ***What are your feelings looking at this painting?*** deliberately targeted this kind of response. When pupils

explained their affective responses it gave the action team clearer insights into their interpretations, which was helpful for extending discussions (Vygotsky, 1978). It also helped the team to evaluate pupils' interpretive skills. Iser's (1978; 2006) notion that text 'does something' to readers and their responses contribute to the reading (or interpretation) was reinforced in this research. Understanding reader response patterns (e.g. Ingarden, 1973; Iser, 2006) helped me to appreciate that the associative connections and individual understandings pupils brought to their interpretations functioned as a way of processing emerging knowledge. This is reminiscent of Bruner's (1960) theory that learners use their current or prior knowledge as a foundation for constructing ideas. I concluded this explained why all the pupils, regardless of age, were able to construct interpretations of paintings.

The affective responses were the catalyst for cognitive thinking. Pupils began their interpretations with statements like 'I feel' before justifying them by offering a rational construct (Freeland, 2001:117). They did so through links they made with mental schema they created from memories, experience and prior knowledge. In the same way, Arnheim (1969:13) points out that cognitive thinking relies on 'receiving, storing and retrieving' schema through associative connections in memories and experiences. A cognitive constructivist learning theory also understands that knowledge is constructed through an *evolving* framework of personal links and experiences (Pritchard, 2005).

This research was premised on a notion that meaning in art is constructed through an understanding of representation and symbol references in subject matter. However, when the teachers asked pupils to explain their feelings towards paintings they found they could tap into their cognitive thinking and this has implications for teaching art interpretation. When they explained their affective responses, pupils demonstrated cognitive reasoning. Therefore, I concluded that teachers should not accept immediate affective responses as an end result but use **why?** questions to probe further, for example, **Why do you think this?** Contrary to Fish's (1980) argument that reader responses *are* the interpretations of artworks, this research found they were a *trigger* for engaging in deeper and informed interpretations.

There were missed opportunities for teachers to explore emotion in pupils' affective responses to paintings as sometimes they chose not to pursue this line of discussion. If

Efland (2002) is right when he suggests teachers need to help pupils to understand their emotional responses to art and what these emotions tell them, this finding is troublesome. This is an area for further consideration and development by art and generalist teachers.

An unexpected finding was that pupils used imagination to interpret paintings. This opened up a new line of enquiry. However, it was not built into any ISEE question *per se,* although pupils may have understood the question **What do you think?** as an invitation to think up possible scenarios to explain what they observed or heard about paintings. Most often they used imaginative thinking to bridge the gap between what they observed and understood about a circumstance or event depicted in a painting. This is consistent with Ingarden's (1973) idea of *concretion* or 'filling in the gaps' of understanding, although he used this term in reader reception theory about affective responses. I concluded that using imagination created a new form of knowledge that helped some pupils to explain the grey areas between their visual and cognitive understanding of a painting. This expands on Eisner's (1983) theory that individuals create visual and intellectual realisms when they engage with art and suggests they also include imagined realism.

The pupils' use of imagination took two forms, fantasy and imagined possibilities. The teachers typically disregarded their interpretations when they included fantasy, although they recognised this kind of imaginative thinking could usefully inform art making and storytelling in literacy lessons. They did promote it when pupils used it to speculate or imagine possible scenarios as they understood it could benefit pupils' thinking skills. Therefore a recommendation arising from the research is that the teachers reconsider the potential of using imagination in art and general education and how they might afford it more priority in school curriculum.

Thus my original conceptual framework (fig.3.1) for constructing informed interpretations of paintings changed during the research. Figure 8.1 shows a comparison of the original and final conceptual frameworks. In the final revised version (fig.8.1), imagined knowledge, understood as the imagined ideas pupils' bring to inform interpretation, is included. Although the concept of imagined knowledge sounds contradictory, in practice it provided pupils with an opportunity to envisage or supply *possible* constructs through an assimilation of the other three forms of knowledge. The resulting framework (fig.8.1)

consists of four forms of knowledge: i) personal, prior and current; ii) shared, through social interaction; iii) factual, given information about art and artists and iv) imagined.

Fig. 8.1 Original and final conceptual frameworks

Original conceptual framework   Final conceptual framework
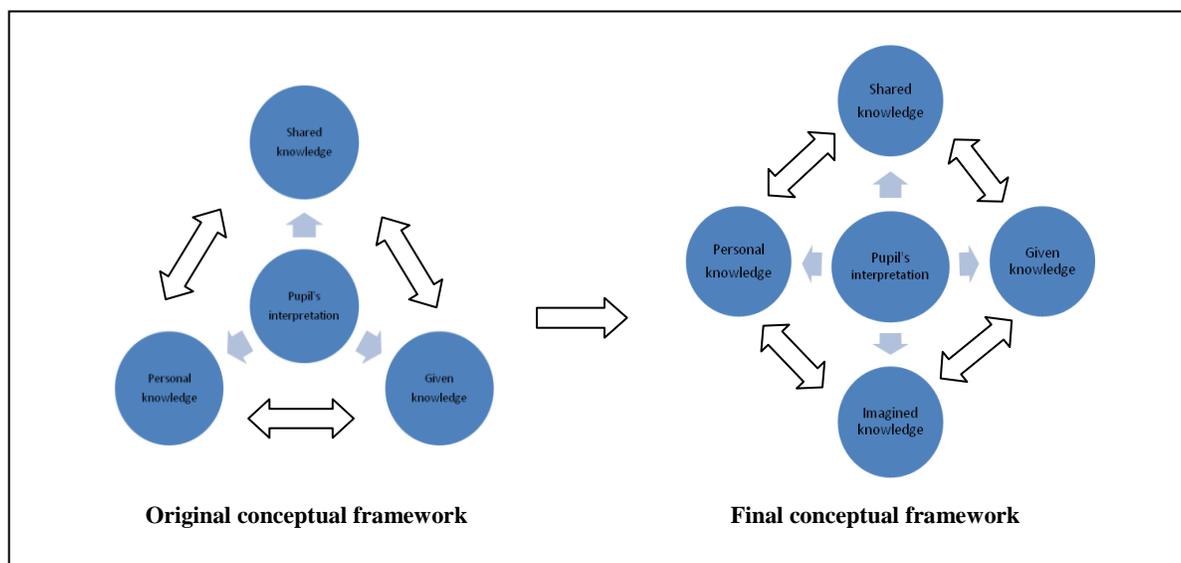
8.1.4 The role of art interpretation in teaching and learning

An important conclusion is that interpreting art is an inclusive form of learning for all primary school pupils across this age range. The pupils on the Special Educational Needs register in this research, including an elective mute who did not typically participate in class discussion and less able pupils, actively participated in these lessons. As expected, age related differences affected younger pupils' levels of attention, ability to articulate interpretations and skills for writing and drawing; however learning to interpret art gave them a 'level playing field'. Other studies have drawn similar conclusions and reported that pupils of various abilities can contribute equally in discussion about artworks. This is a positive contribution to the current discourse about inclusivity and offers teachers a new learning focus (art interpretation).

The teachers were surprised and impressed that the majority of pupils were able to take in and some to use art information. This disputes views of some art educators who claim that children this age struggle to assimilate it. The group interviews showed pupils in all three classes had retained some of the art information they learned in the lessons. While they talked about the art information they did not always use it in their interpretations. Their

interest was mainly in personal, biographical or anecdotal information about the artist as opposed to the artwork. From this, I concluded pupils of this age are indeed able to accommodate art information and furthermore they want to receive factual information about artists or artworks.

The social interaction between pupils enabled ideas to be pinched, swapped and voiced aloud. The research confirmed Thompson and Bales' (1991:45) assertion that substantial learning takes place as a result of 'talk' in classroom settings. It corroborated Vygotsky's (1978:57) notion that language organises thoughts. It was this that persuaded the participant teachers to change their normal practice and allow pupils to chatter amongst themselves while they looked at paintings.

The pupils' interpretations tended to be voiced in rather incomplete, clumsy statements. They did not say, 'This is my interpretation' because teachers did not ask them the question *What is your interpretation?* directly, but instead asked them *What's the painting about?* or *What do you feel about it?* In hindsight, I wished we had introduced pupils to the notion of 'interpreting' and 'to interpret' because this might have furthered their understanding of ownership and the role they played in constructing meaning. Sometimes their interpretations consisted of a series of one line answers, for example, 'It's about a strange ship visiting people on an island' or 'It's a pirate ship' (*The Fall of Icarus,* fig.5.9). Some interpretations were arrived at quickly and did not change as a result of shared discussion or given art information.

The majority of pupils understood that their interpretations included both their own ideas and those of peers, not just what the teachers told them. They listened to the art information the teachers gave them but did not necessarily assume it was the right answer or correct interpretation. Sometimes they discounted it. Contrary to initial expectations, the teachers' transmission of art information often resulted in shared rather than passive reflection. The team found that pupils became increasingly confident in selecting information they needed to help them to construct their own interpretations.

The pupils appreciated personal input and exchanges of ideas with their teachers in discussion about artworks. Piaget (1991) and Tudge (1990) warn that social interactions between teachers and pupils often result in pupil conformity or acquiescence but this did

not happen. I agree with Atherton (2005) and Goodman and Goodman (1999) that pupils do not understand teachers *as teachers* when they work together in collaboration but more as 'partners' as shown by findings in the EPPE 2003 project (Sylva *et al.,* 2004). From this, I concluded that teacher/pupil collaboration gave the teachers a powerful way to guide or facilitate whole class discussions when they interpreted a painting.

In the same way as teachers, the pupils' level of confidence to talk about artworks was an important factor in their willingness to participate in discussions. The teachers encouraged them to participate by assuring them there were no right or wrong answers as long as they could justify their thinking. This emboldened pupils. A conclusion was that when pupils feel their interpretations are accepted by others they join in class discussions. This claim is supported by Goodman and Goodman (1990) and Vygotsky's (1978) theory that validation empowers learners.

The role of facilitator was integral to the success of the ISEE as pupils needed someone to pose questions and guide them through the steps. The teachers said they could push pupils to think deeper than usual and extend their ideas when they used the ISEE questions and sub questions and could extend the interpretive skills of pupils across the ability sets by re-shaping them so as to suit them. The team concluded that Socratic questioning is useful for encouraging pupils to mediate information (Addiss and Erickson, 1993) and construct ideas and understandings about artworks and this corroborated similar claims made by Armstrong (1986); Taunton (1983) and Yenawine and Housen (1998).

The team also concluded that interpreting art with art information involves deep learning which requires extra time in class. Because of this, I agree with Eisner (2002:92) that there is a 'lag time in learning' in the arts. In deep learning, standard modes of assessment and evaluation may be inadequate or inconclusive according to Biggs and Tang (2007) and Eisner (2002). In a similar way to Du, Havard and Li (2005), the team understood deep learning as leading to the kind of long term understanding and retention of information that is important for informed interpretation. This is like the metaphor of sowing seeds of learning that flower later. I agree with Eisner (2002) that long term learning objectives are needed for learning which is abstract, like art interpretation. Furthermore, deep learning involves repeatedly revisiting new and sometimes difficult concepts over time and I concluded that a spiral curriculum such as Bruner (1996) endorses would enable it.

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It was difficult to assess whether pupils used all three ISEE steps to interpret paintings and the team found this frustrating in the beginning. According to Mason and Steers (2006:119) formal assessment in learning and teaching in art and design is an ongoing concern for teachers. The team concluded that in this case it should take the form of ongoing observation and discussion between teachers and pupils.

The teachers were concerned that including art interpretation in art lessons might encroach on the time allocated for practical art making. This influenced their recommendation that art interpretation should be part of cross-curricular learning or linked to class topic work.

8.2 REFLECTIONS ON METHODOLOGY

8.2.1 Action research as a methodology for effecting change in practice

One research question sought to determine whether action research was an effective methodology for changing practice. In this section, I reflect on the findings identified at the end of each cycle in Chapters Four, Five and Six and my overall reflective analysis that led me to answer this question.

The teachers in this research felt they built a strong community of practice. After having taught the lessons and carried out reflection and evaluation together, they shared a vested interest in the results and an understanding of what they had experienced together. A positive outcome of an action research is the continued support and advice that remains close at hand amongst team members after it ends (Stringer, 2007). This team acknowledged that this was an important factor affecting their decision of whether or not to continue these lessons in future. A strength of the methodology was that the teachers felt free within this community to experiment with and try out new ideas in their practice. Several of them admitted they would not have carried out such an intervention without guidance and support from their colleagues. They concluded they benefited from carrying out first hand research in schools and having dedicated time to try out something new and re-examine practice (Costello, 2003).

At the end of the research, I appreciated how lucky I had been to have an opportunity to work with the headteacher and teachers at this school. As an outsider, it gave me a view of teachers' practice from within. I gained valuable insight from their teaching into

interpreting artworks in classrooms and issues surrounding dissemination of art information that enabled me to reconsider my previous assumptions. This methodology also enabled me to cross check and question ideas with the practitioners and to identify and begin to unpick some practical problems related to teaching 'knowledge and understanding about art and artists from different times and places' (National Curriculum, 2005:120). I concluded that this methodology was particularly important for me, as researcher, because of this insider access. Therefore, a conclusion is that it was a catalyst for beneficial change for the teachers and my own practices.

Doing action research over a full academic year was hard work, time-consuming and physically and emotionally draining at times for all the participants. Keeping the momentum required persistence (Stringer, 2003) especially in the middle period, although the team felt they reaped the benefits at the end. Team members were able to spur each other on and when a team works together like this it is a strength of action research.

Joint reflection on practice is an important principle of this methodology; however team members found it more taxing than anticipated. A conclusion was that it requires practice to carry it out effectively. Elliott (1991) and Stenhouse (1975) claim that teachers *should* reflect on practice and professionals *willingly* undertake to do so collectively. However, I refute this because the participant teachers struggled with the concept of discussing their teaching practice with others in the early stages and took time to adjust to it. I concluded that this claim is idealised because it ignores the reality of conflicts that arise during the research between team members' professional and personal feelings and behaviour.

Action research is about practitioners identifying a practical problem and taking action to solve it. However, in this research, it was me who identified a problem in the art curriculum to be the teachers' narrow perspectives of teaching art. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009:64) claims that sharing a common concern or professional problem lays the foundation for collaboration and recommend 'passion' as an essential component for teacher-research. On reflection, I concluded that because this research problem was not identified by the teachers, it was not viewed as integral to the school and this may have resulted in a lack of urgency to resolve it. The teachers' slow uptake to share ownership of the research led me to conclude that the research would have benefited from developing the problem from within the practitioner context, as is typical of most action research.

Carrying out two strands of action research (the action team and my own) simultaneously had its drawbacks as illustrated by the teachers' lack of agency in much of the research. I concluded that the overall reflection and evaluation I carried out as lead researcher separated me in some way from my fellow research partners. Perhaps this was because they viewed the research as mainly belonging to me. While I agree with Pollard (2008) and Weiskoph and Laske (1996) about the practicalities of designating a lead researcher with the role of co-ordinator as it left me free to organise many aspects of the research, I drew the conclusion that on balance it had a negative impact on the dynamics of this particular team.

Chappell and Craft (2011) list key characteristics necessary for positive and effective collaboration found in the 'creative learning conversations' research programmes carried out by the University of Exeter Graduate School of Education from 2009. These partnerships, involving researchers, teachers, artists and students working together in joint research collaborations, favoured characteristics of 'partiality, emancipation, working from the 'bottom up', participation, debate and difference, openness to action and embodied and verbalised exchange of ideas' (Chappell and Craft, 2011:9). While this research encouraged many of these factors, working from the 'bottom up' was not one of them. In hindsight, I concluded that this should have been a foundation of the research and more time should have been invested in ensuring that team members shared or understood each others' value systems about teaching art. For these reasons, I drew the conclusion that researchers in participatory action research, particularly external ones from outside the community, may struggle to sustain the best characteristics of the methodology, for example the collaborative spirit, shared input and trust, if their participant partners do not view themselves as co-owners of the research.

On a positive note and despite these factors, by the end of the action research the teachers, headteacher and I shared the same view that we had carried out a rewarding study that had presented us with new ideas that helped to shape and change our individual practice. In retrospect, I concluded that our understanding of what transpired in the research, what was learned and how our views of art practice changed served to pull both strands of the action research together.

Having carried out the research using this methodology, I concluded that it is important for researchers to gain a sense of immediacy for what actually happens in research; the 'lived experience' that Whitehead and McNiff (2006:1) write about. I hope this research report will provide other researchers, particularly teacher researchers with both an objective and subjective view of what resulted from the team's collective reflections and evaluations. I concluded that the 'collaboratively constructed' (Stringer, 2007:189) descriptions, interpretations and conclusions drawn by the team might be useful for others as an example of 'what worked', in this context and with this sample. Furthermore, my overall interpretations of others' interpretations may provide researchers with an alternate viewpoint of someone outside the immediate community of generalist classroom teachers. And, through the filter of my interpretations, they may gain a deeper insight into the research problem. Given the scarcity of research and exemplars for teaching 'about art and artists' in the primary art curriculum, I hope that teachers from other schools and researchers in art education and art history gain from the experiences, problems and findings reported in this thesis.

8.2.2 Role of researcher

I carried out multiple roles in the research. In hindsight, I questioned whether I undertook too many and if this marginalised others from taking responsibility for their actions early on. Elliott (1991:18) warns about researchers stepping in and out of different roles or encroaching on teachers' professional territory and I recognise the truth in this although by the end of the action research the team had an effective working relationship. Reviewing transcripts from meetings, I recognised a delicate balance between co-ordinating meetings, leading them and taking over. Stringer (2007: 25) recommends researchers act as catalysts to stimulate others to reflect on, evaluate and change in action research and I concluded that I had not always done this, mainly for fear that no one would step into the breach.

Because I transcribed the tapes from meetings, lessons and pupil interviews and collected, reviewed, coded and stored data, I had more awareness and insight into what they contained. I used an outside researcher to help me code patterns and trends in transcripts and this meant the first stages of data analysis was carried out 'offsite'. My aim was to ensure reliability. On reflection however, I question whether this was most appropriate way

to carry out coding patterns as it may have contributed to an imbalance in ownership of the research while attempting to increase its reliability.

Action research requires a co-ordinator to set agendas, guide discussion and maintain the *big picture* view of the research; however this can be problematic if the rest of the team views them as owner of the research. This team worked well together but professional and personal roles separated us at times. My inexperience in co-ordinating and using this methodology negatively impacted on actions at the beginning as I struggled to combine the roles of team co-ordinator, researcher, non-teacher and member. In the end, I concluded that asking teachers to share ownership and responsibility while I held the main roles for much of the early actions may have resulted in a confused power base.

I enjoyed my role as specialist trainer in art history and mentor for the ISEE strategy as I felt a real sense of purpose in it. When I dealt with educational matters such as co-ordinating evaluation meetings, I considered my role became that of an art educator. However, I concluded that these teachers were reluctant to accept me in this role and this led me to feel isolated and ineffective at times.

8.2.3 Limitations of methodology

The majority of action researches involve practitioners who have already bought into the solution and work together to make it work. This research was designed as a hybrid. I recognised from the beginning that it as atypical for the methodology in that the research problem was not identified or perhaps shared by all the participant teachers and this may have produced more challenges than usual.

When I reviewed literature about action researches in collaborative partnerships, I could not find solutions in the critical debate of problems researchers face working in this kind of teamwork. Therefore I agree with Wilson McKay (2006) that action research reporting often idealises practice. This may be because the authors want to avoid the appearance of criticism of other group members and or actions. Much of the literature focuses on its broad characteristics, strengths and limitations and how to conduct it. Few researchers adequately detail ongoing problems they encounter, or solutions they arrive at, to resolve practical issues and this would have been helpful.

Like Liu (2005), I had difficulties obtaining self-initiated reflection from team members. It was difficult to schedule reflection time and guarantee everyone was experiencing or carrying it out at the same time. Problems of ensuring the team set time aside for *deep* reflection have been reported. I recorded the team questioned **How deep is deep?** and **What does deep look like?** (Journal, 14/6/07) in our meetings and this caused me to search unsuccessfully for explanations. Although, they spent a considerable amount of extra-curricular time in team meetings, some team members found it difficult to disassemble and begin to reflect purposefully on actions at the end of a long day's work. I concluded that collective reflection on practice, like deep learning, requires slow, unhurried time.

Getting teachers to complete written records is another recurring problem reported in the literature. I designed evaluation record forms to try to avoid this; however participants' reporting styles were varied and some commentary was more fulsome than others. While all the written records were eventually received, delays meant lesson evaluations were not always completed for team meetings and this had a knock-on effect for the timeliness of actions in each cycle.

Critical evaluation is sometimes cited as a weakness of action research and while the team made every effort to be *critical friends* and consider data in a conscientious way, there was an impulse towards compliance and agreement for the sake of consensus. Written comments from the teachers, observers and me recorded statements such as '*I was pleased*' or '*It went well*' for example, which tended to generalise situations, mask what really happened or idealise events. As co-ordinator, I tried to unpick these statements through reflective questioning although sometimes they went undetected until my final reflective analysis at the end of the research.

I considered Whitehead and McNiff's (2006) suggestion that action research might involve only one or two persons and questioned whether this would have worked better. But not all the participant teachers used, appreciated and adopted the ISEE or taught lessons in the same way so it was important to observe and consider the variations. Being able to test out, evaluate and report actions from multiple perspectives is a key strength of this methodology. I concluded that action research is a suitable methodology for change since it opened all the team members' eyes to our individual and collective practices, made us question what we did more closely and consider the effects.

8.3 IMPLICATIONS OF TEACHING ABOUT ART AND ARTISTS IN THE PRIMARY ART CURRICULUM

This research set out to introduce 'teaching about art and artists' to a group of infant primary teachers. The intentions were twofold. On one hand, the team aim was for the teachers to introduce a strategy for interpreting art that included the dissemination of information about the art and artist in the art curriculum. On the other, my own aim was to broaden their perspective of the art curriculum to include interpreting art with art history. As such, the overarching research question was 'What happens when generalist classroom teachers introduce art history through a strategy for interpreting artworks in an infant primary school?' In hindsight, I recognise this was an ambitious aim. But, was it successful? Without doubt it achieved its aim of widening these teachers' perspectives of art education. Although there were problems with the dissemination of art information, there was a general agreement that this was an initial foray into art history or 'teaching about art and artists' and overall it had positive results.

An initial finding from Cycle One was that the five teachers were concerned about how to disseminate art information. However, by the end of the action research three of them had decided storytelling and game playing were useful ways to 'drip feed' it into class discussion. This is consistent with Addiss and Erickson's (1993:134) claim that narrative storytelling is effective for young children's learning about artworks and artists. The team concluded these modes of transmission are particularly effective because they are active and do not rely on passive listening. This is supported by Bruner's notion of 'active achievement', amongst others.

Despite their specialist training and practice in applying the ISEE strategy, not all the teachers used art information. I was confused about this finding because there was no consistency in who did, or did not. I agree with Chapman (1997:112) that in constructing 'knowledge and understanding of art and artist' the impulse is for teachers to base it on their own training. These teachers made calculated selections of art information from the categories I provided for them (see Table 8, page 91). They used their knowledge of pupils and what they thought would interest them to choose but in some cases only transmitted it when, and if a pupil asked a direct question.

These teachers did recognise that making art information relevant to pupils was important for their interpretations. They judged it was successful if they were able to grab pupils' attention. Although I was concerned that art information was used sometimes in a superficial way to amuse pupils rather than expand interpretations or knowledge, the teachers judged that anecdotal and amusing stories about the artists and paintings made pupils think more deeply about them. Thus, I concluded they had found a starting point for teaching about art and artists which could be extended and refined overtime.

Information about artists and artworks is available through credible websites, books and educational resources but these teachers rarely spent time searching them prior to lessons. They did not seek assistance or ask me questions about them. Personal interest in art and artists is a significant and motivating factor for the teachers and a strong indicator of whether or not they choose to teach this strand of art education. Given the overcrowded school curriculum, I question whether other classroom teachers would take time to do the extended research necessary to carry out this type of teaching. I concluded that without motivation, interest or confidence to teach it, it may well struggle to be included in the art curriculum.

Were these teachers confused about the purpose of learning 'about art and artists' or unhappy about disseminating *factual* information about them? Did a strategy that includes art information pose a dilemma because it contrasts with the methods and aims of discovery learning in favour at the time the research was being carried out? Time factors and personal constraints such as illness or heavy workloads may have negatively impacted some teachers' preparations and delivery of art information. They may have been unconvinced about the value of this learning. These factors may contribute at least partially to the conundrum surrounding the teachers' inconsistent or half-hearted use of art information. However, despite them, the interest the pupils showed in artists and artworks caused the teachers to re-evaluate their neglect of it. They concluded it adds a positive dimension to pupils' engagement with art and want to continue using it. I concluded that teaching information about art and artists presented a challenge for these generalist teachers but they were not discouraged by this. Because I cannot fully explain why these teachers faced problems, I recommend more research is carried out to examine this further.

8.3.1 Implications for classroom teachers

These participant teachers concluded that they gained professional expertise from testing out the conceptual framework through the ISEE strategy and building interpretive discussions with pupils about paintings. They judged it was rewarding for pupils and innovative in terms of their own professional development. Their confidence levels improved as regards instigating whole class discussions about paintings and motivating 30 pupils in a classroom at the same time. They were able to design and teach their own lessons using the ISEE. Therefore, the conclusion is that teaching pupils to interpret paintings this way was a positive experience that broadened their perspectives of art education.

However, the teachers concluded that art interpretation works best in a cross-curricular context. They reasoned it could be used to develop writing and literacy skills and to open up discussion about multicultural issues. The Reception, Years One and Two teachers ended up valuing art interpretation for enhancing core skills of communication, observation, information processing and collaboration, all of which were emphasised in the Primary National Strategy (2005). For their part, the Reception teachers were pleased that the early development of these skills had established a foundation for their pupils to build on at Key Stage One. I understood that all the teachers wanted to consolidate the art learning by making it relevant for the general curriculum and I concluded from this that they were colluding with a current trend towards cross-curricular learning in general education (Hickman and Kiss, 2010:27). This has important implications for the conceptual framework and ISEE strategy since it may change the focus of learning away from art and towards other learning objectives.

I concluded that the teachers' preference was for an instrumentalist approach to learning *through* art as opposed to *in* or *about* it (Hickman, 2005). As an art historian and educator, I was disappointed by these findings at first because of my belief that art is a unique form of communication and important for pupils to learn about. I was concerned that in an instrumentalist view, the value and importance of art, in its own right, lessens. But I concluded that it had opened doors for these teachers to engage with artworks in the classroom and so accepted it as a positive outcome.

8.3.2 Selected paintings

My selection of paintings for this action research has implications for classroom teachers so I will discuss this now. Three main concerns underpinned my final selection, namely that teachers might i) consider the fine art paintings I chose old fashioned, boring or irrelevant; ii) find contemporary artworks difficult to interpret with pupils and iii) object that it was dominated by white, Western, male artists. In hindsight, my first worry was unfounded as the teachers and pupils readily engaged with them all. My hesitation to use a non-figurative painting was supported by the finding that teachers struggled to work with *Untitled: Grey and Brown* (fig.5.13) which has little or no identifiable subject matter. The third concern was unfounded since in selecting their own artwork for the final lesson, the teachers' choices reflected similar Western *old master* examples from 16th century Flemish, 19th century French Impressionist and 20th century French Fauvist artworks. This supports the NFER research findings of Downing and Watson (2003) that generalist classroom teachers gravitate towards '*masterpieces*' they know or have studied during teacher training because they view them as appropriate choices.

These teachers wanted control over the selection of paintings they used in lessons. However, given free rein, they struggled to find examples and consequently made selections based largely on personal preferences. I concluded they needed specialist guidance to make informed decisions and source suitable reproductions. Thus I concluded that working with an art specialist is important because it can expand generalist teachers' horizons.

Figurative paintings that depict figures involved in activities or highlighting expressions and gestures captured most pupils' attention. Again this supports the literature about young children's artistic preferences. The pupils were interested in and able to identify with the figures in the paintings despite recognising differences in their clothing and describing the settings as 'old fashioned' so I concluded that iconic examples of Western art retain their currency. This has positive implications for selecting this artwork and teaching young children to interpret them.

When the artworks had a strong narrative element, the teachers and pupils viewed them mainly as illustrations, for example the pupils' interpretations of *Silarjuaq, The Whole*

World (fig.6.2) were dominated by the Inuit story of Sedna and the sea creatures. They interpreted the story rather than the artwork. I concluded that narrative art is effective for capturing pupils' attention and it offers the instrumentalist approach to art education the teachers liked. I also concluded that teachers need to be aware that by adopting this approach the learning focus may shift from art.

8.3.3 Resources

Poster sized reproductions were the most favoured resource for teaching art interpretation in all three classrooms. One poster sized reproduction could capture the attention of 30 pupils. The teachers liked them because they were 'dependable'. Interactive whiteboard equipment provides access to a wide variety of art images through the internet and PowerPoint, but was problematic for two main reasons; the poor quality of image reproduction on the screen and equipment failure. Small, laminated, postcard sized copies of paintings were also useful because they provided pupils with opportunities to look at paintings close up in detail. The teachers used them for individual and paired observation work.

The debate in art education about using reproductions rather than experiencing originals at first hand was tested in this research. On the single occasion when teachers used an original Inuit print it made no apparent impact on the pupils' reception. However, the 'wow' factor of seeing the original paintings in London galleries clearly did have a positive effect on those pupils who experienced them. I concluded this was because they were large scale, framed oil paintings that the pupils had studied and were familiar with and because they saw them in a particular setting. I concluded that all the pupils should have had the opportunity to view an original artwork in such circumstances and regretted the cancellation of the planned school visits.

The internet was useful for researching and sourcing artworks and information. The teachers realised museums and galleries offer a wealth of learning materials, educational digital video discs (DVDs) and activities. But pupils in all three classes (including Reception) were frustrated by the lack of interactive activities the lessons offered. Year Two pupils used classroom computers to research art information through educational websites and enjoyed it. The teachers anticipate that technologies will become increasingly

important for pupils engaging with art images; however, the ratio of pupils to classroom computers restricted their use at the time the research took place.

8.4 CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

In conclusion, this research contributes to knowledge about teaching and learning in art history and art education. The first four contributions relate to the conceptual framework and ISEE strategy and theories that underpinned them. The next two contributions offer insights about a mode of teaching and collaborative partnerships. As such, this research adds knowledge to the following areas:

1. How pupils, aged four to seven years, come to understand and accommodate information about art and artists by personalising and associating with them.

2. Introducing a developmental dimension to Panofsky's theory found that young children can understand literal meaning and some are able to recognise symbolic references or representations that connect them to deeper meanings. This suggests they are able to contemplate two of Panofsky's three levels of meaning making in art, literal and secondary or conventional meaning. However, their affective responses to paintings are often the motivating factor that helps them to make referential links with subject matter. Therefore, both these theoretical perspectives are understood to underpin young children's meaning making when interpreting art.

   This research also contributes to an understanding about the inter-relationship between young children's cognitive and affective thinking when they interpreted art and this has implications for how educators encourage them to think and talk about artworks.

3. The significance of reader response theory, in particular about affective response (Iser, 2006) as an explanation of how young children interpret paintings. Equally important, is the claim that affective response is not an end goal but contributes towards the cognitive construction of reasoned, informed interpretations when teachers probe pupils to explain their feelings. With prompting through intelligent questioning, teachers can scaffold pupils' ideas and extend and deepen their interpretations of art.

4. This research developed and defined a way of interpreting art that established that pupils are able to construct informed interpretations using four forms of knowledge: personal, shared, given and imagined. They rely on knowledge gained from personal observation and experience to do this as, well as shared discussion with others and factual information disseminated by teachers. As such they use visual, affective and cognitively constructed knowledge. Some pupils also add or create their own form of knowledge by using imagination to help them frame and interpret subject matter, events and actions taking place in artworks. This contributes to an understanding about how some young children construct meanings about art and how they may come to accommodate factual art information by creating a context of possible scenarios or settings through which to understand them.

5. This research highlights the social dimensions of interactions between pupils/teacher and pupils/pupils when interpreting artworks. It endorses the literature and research about the potential for 'learning together' (EPPE, 2003; HMIE, 2009) and the 'positive climate' (Pascal, 2011:2) it can create for pupils and teachers to exchange ideas when they interpret art on an equal footing. It also links with the notion of 'flat-hierarchy' learning (Chappell and Craft, 2011:9) practiced by some creative learning partnerships. The pupils in this research, aged four to seven years, valued the teacher's input in class discussion when they discussed their interpretations of paintings without losing confidence or a sense of agency for their own interpretations. It confirmed that in this learning environment, pupils felt validated which led them to take ownership of their ideas when they interpreted the paintings. When teachers embraced this mode of teaching and learning, pupils' interpretations deepened appreciably.

6. Finally, this research contributes to the literature on action research methodology and in particular, discourse about participatory action research in which a lead researcher directs or co-ordinates actions on behalf of a group of participant researchers. It underscores the importance of effective shared dialogue (Weiskopf and Laske, 1996) and acknowledges the delicate balance of collaborative working relationships. In its comprehensive account of the description, reflection and interpretations of actions, it offers an example of an external researcher-led study, in

which two strands of action were undertaken at the same time and achieved a positive outcome of changing practitioners' practice.

8.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The thesis ends with implications about the research for policymakers, educators and researchers in art and general education and art history and the Association of Art Historians in the UK.

When this research began it was unusual because it tested out a strategy that included, in part, knowledge acquisition in the infant primary art classroom. Thus, it presented a new perspective for the art curriculum which at the time was focused on a child-centred approach that favoured discovery and self expression in art making. The recent Coalition government announcement of a review (DoE, January 2011a) of the National Curriculum for England (primary and secondary curriculums) to include a more content-driven curriculum focused on teaching 'facts' over the transmission of skills for learning, means this research is well placed to offer insights and evidence. Concerns that subject disciplines such as history have been 'watered down' (DoE, January 2011b, webpage) to an 'unacceptable degree that [may] have damaged standards in primary schools' suggest that this strategy, which attempts to find a balance between teaching pupils to construct interpretations and assimilate art information disseminated by teachers, may be of interest to classroom teachers.

Furthermore, the announcement of a major review (DoE, March 2011) of the Early Years Foundation Stage of learning curriculum is also timely. In this research, the Reception teachers embraced the ISEE strategy as a way of developing pupils' interpretive skills and dispositions beginning at the grassroots level of the Early Years Foundation Stage of learning. They concluded that pupils as young as four+ years were able to engage in interpreting paintings and interested in listening to information transmitted about them. They concluded that their teaching had developed several important skills for general learning and 'sowed a seed' for future art engagement, enjoyment and learning. If the aims of the new EYFS and National Curriculum reviews are to allow children to 'build their knowledge systematically and consistently' from one stage of learning to the next (DoE, January 2011b; DoE, March 2011) and the Secretary of State for Education, Michael

Gove's view that 'stronger links should be made between the Early Years and KS1' is accepted (DoE, March 2011, web page), then this research provides an example where skills of communicating, analysing and interpreting were imbedded in an Early Years curriculum to benefit art and general education at the next stage of education.

The EYFS review is focused on three key areas that include 'the foundations for children's ability to learn and develop healthily; personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development' (DoE, March 2011). Beneath these, they report 'four areas of learning where these skills [are to be] applied: literacy, mathematics, expressive arts and design and understanding the world' (DoE, March 2011). As such, this research directly supports some aims of this Early Years review.

The review of the National Curriculum (DoE, January 2011a) for primary and secondary education proposes a new focus on four core subjects of English, mathematics, science and physical education, at the expense of the arts amongst other subjects, and this places art in a precarious position of having to fend for itself. Although the new proposals stress that a 'slimmed down National Curriculum will free up teachers to use their professional judgement to design curriculum that meets the needs of their pupils' (DoE, January 2011b) this is no guarantee for the provision of the art curriculum. The conclusion that pupils were able to listen to information about the art and artists and some were able to reflect on and assimilate it into their interpretations may persuade some teachers to include it in the art curriculum. The teachers' conclusion that the pupils gained from and appreciated the experience of engaging with artworks in an informed way may also encourage them. Although some teachers struggled at times to disseminate the art information, three years after the art project all of them continue to include it in their teaching of the ISEE strategy in art lessons.

On 5th November, 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) announced that Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education would become a statuary part of the National Curriculum from September, 2011. This provision has been endorsed by the Coalition government and included in the reforms announced in March, 2011. As such, emphasis will be placed on making sure children are provided with the basic knowledge and skills they need to deal with aspects of life-learning, for example emotional health and well being, communication and language (DoE, March, 2011).

Teachers in this research concluded that interpreting art was a useful way to explore these curriculum dimensions and they intended to use it as an activity for Circle Time and PSHE lessons. This would suggest the ISEE strategy might offer teachers a way of instilling these particular skills in general education.

In this research, teachers expressed interest in using fine art paintings and pupils were a receptive audience. This suggests there is currency for working with these exemplars. The finding these generalist classroom teachers need specialist support to select artworks and art information indicates there may be potential for art educators trained in art history to work peripatetically in some capacity with schools. Alternatively, art history educators interested in promoting the engagement of young children with art history might develop an educational bank of selected artworks with accompanying art information and resources accessible for generalist teachers to use in the classroom.

The interest the pupils in the research showed for artists and paintings suggests they would profit from engaging more intensively with art information. Therefore a recommendation is for art educators and teachers to explore new ways to disseminate this type of information. This would require art history trained educators and classroom teachers to enter into collaborative partnerships in the school context. Questions that arose about teaching about 'art and artists from different times and places' and the teachers' mixed views about the purpose of this learning indicates that this strand of the present art curriculum needs further attention if it is to be taught. Therefore, given pupils' positive reception for this kind of learning in the art curriculum, a recommendation would be to carry out further research to address this area of art education.

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

When I began this research I had an understanding that teaching about 'art and artists from different times and places' formed part of a body of knowledge that was understood to be important for learning by the primary National Art and Design Curriculum (DFEE, 1999). Thus, because research indicated many generalist classroom teachers overlooked this strand of the art curriculum, I set out to design a conceptual framework and strategy for teachers to engage pupils with artists and artworks to change their practice of art education. In this, I envisaged the research bringing together the disciplines of art history and art

education with a common purpose. However, I was surprised and unprepared for the lack of integration I found and by my feelings of being alien in an art related field. A lack of common theories, no shared pedagogy and a struggle to breach the divide between working in the Humanities and Social Sciences showed me some difficulties art historians face when moving between these disciplines. That withstanding, having made adjustments, I was able to experience a rich and rewarding research that otherwise would have been inaccessible to me as an art historian.

From this research, I learned several important things for the discipline of art history and my own future practice. First, the discipline must stand up and be recognised in art education. When the research began there was a clear, synoptic pathway for teaching 'about art and artists' that developed through each Key Stage (1-4) of the National Art and Design Curriculum for England (1999), leading up to critical studies in post-sixteen education. Although this may change in light of the above educational policy reviews, there is currently an opening for art historians to become actively involved in some capacity in formal education, for example as a specialist teacher trainer or expert subject support. This may become essential given new policy reforms and a potential lack of guidance for generalist classroom teachers teaching art education.

If the discipline of art history wants to ensure the legitimacy what is taught as 'knowledge and understanding of art and artists from the past to the present' from KS1 to KS4, they must join forces with art educators. My lack of teacher training contributed to most of the challenges and misunderstandings I faced in this research. Therefore, I recommend practitioners of art history, interested in working in schools or museum art education programmes, undertake teacher training to work effectively in practice.

Second, this research found there were fundamental problems surrounding generalist classroom teachers teaching this strand of the primary art curriculum and they need to be addressed before it will be taught effectively. The research demonstrated there are significant benefits for young children to learn about art and artist in primary school. The pupils profited from and enjoyed interpreting artworks with art information in the curriculum and this has implications for art historians, art educators and non-specialist classroom teachers.

In 2009, the Association of Art Historians (AAH) in the UK introduced teacher training workshops to provide guidance for secondary art teachers teaching critical studies. This represents an initial move towards developing a schools programme. I am part of the Schools Group within the Association and have attended and spoken at AAH student conferences over the past two years to develop relationships between public art institutions, schools and the AAH. As a committee member of a nine university Rx History of Art research forum I have presented papers to disseminate my research over the past four years at international (National Art Education Association, New York, 2007); regional art education conferences and Roehampton University workshops, seminars and conferences to draw attention to it. I continue to disseminate the research through online networking, blogging and correspondence with other presenters, art and generalist teachers, art educators and art historians. As a reviewer for the <u>International Journal of Education through Art</u> for the past three years, I have been able to keep abreast of international trends and developments within art education and continue to do so.

Three years after the action research, my work continues with a new generation of teachers at the participant school. They use the ISEE and include art information in their teaching. My roles involve teacher training and art subject support and guidance in selection of artworks and information. In conjunction with one teacher from the school, I have been involved in art and literacy workshop presentations for generalist teachers through the local authority, Surrey County Council (*FourS*). My experiences carrying out this research have given me confidence to continue working in this area of art education. Moreover, I feel able to share the knowledge I have gained through presenting papers at conferences and submitting articles for publication to art education journals and look forward to this new challenge.