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School Art: Where Is It?

(Re)exploring visual arts in secondary schools

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Artwork

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Contents

Forward

Forward

Much has changed since the first *School Art* report was commissioned. The education landscape is more fractured. Changes to the inspection framework, austerity, pandemic, and progress measures have all had an impact on what, why, and how we teach art, craft and design. The potential of contemporary art practice to make a distinctive contribution to the curriculum is as relevant in 2024 as it was in 2004, but our definition and understanding of what that might mean, and what (and who) is being ignored have shifted.

In the Foreword to the original report, Marjorie Althorpe-Guyston, then Director of Visual Arts at the Arts Council wrote: 'this report raises fundamental questions about the meaning, value and purpose of art and opens opportunities to drive the curriculum forward' (2004, v) and Nicholas Serota highlighted the importance of support for teachers in the development of the curriculum.

Twenty years later those questions are still relevant. The need to support teachers to be confident designers of curricula that is future facing, and relevant to the lived experience and aspirations of learners is greater than ever. The changing socio-economic context for learning in art, craft and design brings new questions – and even more opportunities to harness the power of visual culture.

Michele Gregson, General Secretary, NSEAD

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

Background

This report presents the findings of research conducted in 2024, designed to mirror the work undertaken by Dick Downing and Ruth Watson in *School Art: What's In It?* (2004). This research was conceived to ascertain the content of the art curriculum at key stage 3 and 4 and how this may have changed over the interceding 20 years.

In 2004, Downing and Watson's research was sponsored by Tate, Arts Council England, and the National Foundation for Educational Research. Therefore, their guiding objectives included: portraying the content and foci of school art, including examples involving contemporary art practice; identifying factors that encouraged contemporary art practice in the school curriculum; and exploring how contemporary art practice might make a distinctive contribution to pupils' learning. In a departure from their objectives, this report comments on the place of contemporary art practice in school curriculum but does not centre this as the object of study, taking instead a more inductive view on the data collected. This research sought to illustrate:

- the content of the art curriculum at key stage 3 and 4
- the factors influencing the choice of art curriculum content
- the perceived impact of the secondary school art curriculum

Methodology

In 2004, Downing and Watson's research review revealed more literature 'concerning the aims and effects of art teaching than about the content of

the curriculum' (2004, vii). On reviewing the field of literature published between 2013 (the date of the most recent National Curriculum in England) and 2024, it was found that this remains the case.

This study mirrored the methodology described in 2004; qualitative data was gathered from 33 sample schools spread randomly across the South of England, London, the Midlands, and East Anglia. In each of the sample schools, interviews were carried out with teachers of art – 36 in total, including 16 heads of department. They were questioned about the curriculum they delivered, its design, content, and potential impact on pupils. Interviewees were asked to speak in some detail about one project or module from their key stage 3 or key stage 4 curriculum. 19 teachers (dependent on availability) were asked to respond to a sample of eight images depicting artworks from a range of modern or contemporary artists, to gain further insight into their curriculum content selection processes.

All interviews were recorded and digitally transcribed. As in 2004, data reporting includes 'rudimentary response frequencies combined with descriptive and perceptual data from interviews' (Downing and Watson 2004, vii). The aim was collection of rich data, and while we do not presume this to be representative, it is presented in a format that allows both indicative and illustrative utility.

The content of the curriculum

Descriptions of projects delivered in our sample schools suggest that the art curriculum taught in schools can be illustratively characterised by:

- Structured curriculum 'maps' or learning journeys.

• Projects defined by theme, technical skill, influential artist, or a combination of the above.

• The prioritisation of technical or practical skills, particularly the accurate manipulation of analogue, 2D media.

• The prevalence of artworks by white, heterosexual, male artists produced in the 20th or 21st centuries.

• The teaching of the 'formal elements' as a perceived 'foundation' in art.

At key stage 4, pupils were generally afforded more agency in both media and artistic influence, and the assessment objectives of examination boards were employed more visibly in the structuring of curriculum.

There was variation across the sample regarding the scale to which contemporary art practices might be described as significant. In many settings, reference was made to artists alive and working today, although the extent to which chosen artists were representative of a contemporary art practice remains debatable.

Factors influencing the choice of art curriculum content

As in 2004, this research presents evidence that, despite the potential for super diverse artists and art images to feature on school curricula, and an authentic interest among many art teachers to diversify their content, the actual choices made in 2024 remain somewhat limited. This research identified several factors of potential influence, some seemingly unchanged over twenty years, while others have emerged in the interceding period:

• Teachers feel that the National Curriculum has minimal impact on art curriculum content choice, while limitations on teaching time and art materials does have impact.

• For many art teachers, especially early career teachers, there is considerably less agency to affect curriculum change in their departments today (while in 2004, 'personal preference was the most frequent influence in teachers' curriculum choices). This may be connected to significant changes in the structure of English schooling over the last twenty years.

• There was a strong recognition that the artists referenced in art curricula are inadequately narrow and do not effectively represent pupils in English classrooms, and a palpable interest in taking action to diversify references. Teachers may lack the confidence, time, or strategies to amend curriculum content to these ends.

• In principle, most art teachers were open to a wide breadth of modern and contemporary images featuring on their curriculum and were more likely to find reason for inclusion than exclusion. There was a distinct bias towards artworks easily associated to practical skill acquisition. There was also more interest in artworks that opened general, paradigmatic questions about the nature of art practice, than there was artworks included for the value of their own internal content, or the individual issues artworks raised.

The perceived impact of the secondary school art curriculum

We updated the theoretical categories of art educational effects used by Downing and Watson to include more recent academic sources.

• The most cited category of effect was dialogic knowledge with materials, resulting in competencies (or technical skills), understanding, and/or enhanced appreciation of art. Second most frequently cited was the category of pupils' enjoyment, wellbeing, and agency.

• Other effects were cited much less frequently, suggesting prevalent standardisation of shared priorities across school art departments, and de-emphasis of other areas common in theoretical literature. For example, very few interviewees perceived their curriculum as having impact on pupils' flexible purposing and growth in tolerance or meaning-making capacities.

• Popular among interviewees' responses was comment on the effect art education might have on a general sense of pupils' confidence. Uncommon was direct reference to the concept of creativity.

• We did not ask specifically about the effect contemporary art practice might have when featured in school curricula. Anecdotally, we would suggest that where schools did include more contemporary artists, or deliver more inclusive pedagogy, this infrequently challenged the paradigm expectations that new content would still support a 'typical' overall curriculum design (where technical skill and pupil enjoyment were prioritised).

Implications for policy and practice in visual art teaching

The findings indicate that several orthodoxies are prevalent across much art curriculum content in English secondary schools and have been for over twenty years. However, there were teachers whose approach to curriculum design deviated from common models, and many others who expressed an

intent to innovate. For practitioners reflecting on future directions for their departmental curriculum design, senior leaders, and policymakers, the following questions are for further consideration:

• To what extent are art teachers empowered to respond to the needs of their pupils, and design curriculum content to engage them?

• Does control of the curriculum by multi academy trusts lead to simplistic understandings of what a quality art and design curriculum looks like?

• Given art teachers' interest in diversifying the artistic genres and cultural references of their curriculum content, what support would allow them to realise this intent?

• Is the oversupply of artist references at key stage 4 leading to superficial engagement and understanding?

• To what extent can art teachers in 2024 use their classroom and/or contemporary art to explore difficult or transgressive social issues?

• Is contemporary art practice intellectually, emotionally and socially accessible to students in school? (Tate definition)

• Are there alternative foundations, other than the formal elements, that the secondary school art and design curriculum may be built on?

• Are critical analysis, issue-based learning and the communication of meaning in and through art sufficiently integrated and balanced with the acquisition of the craft skills of art making?

• What is lost from pupils' learning in art and design by the huge reduction in exposure to three-dimensional materials, techniques, processes and ways of thinking?

• Where has creativity gone?

• How can the notion of artist-teacher practice (as a way to encourage contemporary understandings of art and design) be supported in schools?

• What is the place of craft and design in art teachers' concept of curriculum?

Introduction

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the Research

In 2004, the world was a different place. In the year that Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook, Dick Downing and Ruth Watson published *School Art: What's In It? Exploring Visual Arts in Secondary Schools*. While these two events may have had quite different impact on the world in general, for those of us with an interest in English secondary school art education the latter's influence has lasted just as much as the former.

What was *School Art*? It was an attempt to lift the curtain on the rather opaque art[1] classrooms of England. With loose statutory expectations of curriculum (DfES 2004), art teachers in 2004 had significant agency over the content of their classroom, often developed and delivered locally. There had been little research into how teachers were choosing to use this agency;

[1]We are advocates for using the more inclusive and expansive 'art, craft and design' as the name used to describe our subject discipline. For brevity, and following Downing and Watson's (2004) precedent, throughout this report we use the shorthand of 'art' as substitute for our preferred moniker.

what artists, art forms, or cultural references were being studied by pupils across the country. The authors of *School Art* hoped that qualitative interviews with 50 or so teachers from across 18 schools would offer at least a fleeting glimpse into this process. As a secondary concern, there was a focus on the extent to which contemporary art practice was a feature in school curricula. Both Arts Council England and Tate – keen that their efforts to promote classroom engagement with the contemporary arts were well-informed – sponsored *School Art* to learn more about this dynamic specifically.

Why, two decades later, do the three of us – art teacher educators – find ourselves still referencing this text in our research and teaching practice? There are two reasons for this. First, Downing and Watson's report, while humble in its intent, is well written, and rich with illustrative detail – an enlightening and motivating text for student and experienced art teacher alike. Their research methods were transparent, and the findings revealing and relatable. Second, as noted in 2004, the size and focus of the academic field of art education in England makes *School Art* a veritable hen's tooth. It is remarkable, and perhaps dispiriting, that *School Art* so resolutely retains its place on reading lists for initial teacher education programmes today; what should be an historical record of a prior generation's curricula convention in our discipline substitutes still as a 'contemporary' snapshot of classroom practice.

Despite, and largely because of, what we believe to be the sustained resonance of Downing and Watson's report we felt 2024, the twentieth anniversary of their findings, an appropriate point to look again – to (re)explore 'the actual content of the art curriculum as it is taught in schools' (Downing & Watson 2004, 1). We felt this activity would be most useful to others if we echoed the process followed by the authors of the first *School Art*. Our methodology is laid out below. While we would be cautious about suggest-

ing immediate comparisons can be made with any claim of academic rigour, throughout this report we could not resist the opportunity to reflect on how the teachers' responses we recorded compare with those on record in 2004[2]. Rather than repeat in full the major findings from Downing and Watson's work as a forward to our own report, we include vignettes from 2004 where most pertinent. In addition, we would strongly recommend a reading of the original which can be found open access online.

For the reader interested in making their own comparisons, it is worth remembering that the context of art classroom practice has changed significantly in the interceding years. For example, a new National Curriculum was published in 2007, and another in 2013, which schools that have since 'academised' have not been required to follow. We describe these specific changes and their potential impact in more detail in section 3.2.

1.2 Methodology

To celebrate and recognise the lasting impact that *School Art* has had on us and others over the last 20 years, we have chosen to mirror many of the research design decisions taken by Downing and Watson in 2004. We wanted to do so not least because we found their outcome edifying, but because their use of qualitative data and novel visual research connected to our own

[2] This report's name, School Art: Where Is It?, is intended as a double entendre; recognising that this work provides a timely update on the original What, while simultaneously hinting at the diminishment of our subject discipline in the intervening 20 years. The reality is that examination entries, taught hours, number of specialist teachers, and institutional recognition have all dipped since 2004 (Cairns 2021). We are hopeful that as our small research study is published, the impact of this phenomenon is being publicly recognised (Campaign for the Arts 2024) and may be politically addressed (DfE 2024a).

preexisting methodological interests. Imitation, we felt, would in itself be an interesting research practice – allowing us new insight into the making of the original report and the thinking of its authors. In writing up this report, we decided to directly mirror some fragments of text from the original 2004 report: respectfully repurposing Downing and Watson's language to maintain a consistent tonality. Where we do so, we make this clear without interrupting the flow of the text by printing it in a different colour.

We did make one change, which has had impact on the structure of this report: we chose not to focus on the inclusion of contemporary art in curricula as a discrete concern. We did identify themes on this issue in our analysis, but we did not award these any greater weighting than other themes that emerged. Nor did we divide our sample of schools according to preidentified curriculum characteristics (as was the case in 2004). We were interested in the extent to which contemporary arts practice found its place in the art curriculum more generally.

It should be stated clearly; this work, as with *School Art*, does not attempt to draw universal conclusions about the art classrooms of England. Our interviewees were not carefully selected as a representative sample, and our data has not been analysed with any intent of producing generalisable truth claims. Instead, this qualitative snapshot is an illustrative vignette of the types of practice that are likely to be noted elsewhere in England. We have endeavoured to present our findings largely with impartiality; we are not interested in passing personal judgement on the generous contributions of our interviewees. This would have unethical, but it would also overstep the spirit of this exercise – our intent is not to tell others how to teach art.

For those reading this while sat in their own art classroom, we would be

surprised if the commentary reads as completely foreign. As in 2004, our aim was to accurately 'set out some of the questions that seem to be [now, in 2024,] exercising teachers, in the hope of stimulating further debate' (Downing and Watson 2024, 103).

1.2.1 Literature review

Downing and Watson began their project with a review of literature in the academic field of secondary phase art and design education in England. They chose to search for literature between 1989, when the National Curriculum was introduced, and the year of their study. Following this logic, we also undertook a systematic review of studies focused on 'the content of the school art curriculum as implemented' (Downing and Watson 2004, 2) from the date of the most recent iteration of the National Curriculum in England, 2013. We used the same databases (where still extant) to undergird our search, drawing on our own involvement in the field to identify additional policy and practice reports relevant to our research questions.

As in 2004, very limited literature could be found concerned specifically with the extant curriculum content of secondary school art. The same three questions guided our review of the literature that could be considered relevant:

- What is school art at key stage 3 and 4?
- What are its main foci and contents?
- In what way are pupils encouraged to broaden their approaches to the process of engaging with art forms and genres?

Compared to the literature reviewed by Downing and Watson, there was a notable change of tone in literature specifically concerned with what art and design is in an English context over the last decade. This tone was one of concern for the health of the subject in the face of perceived threats from the reform of the national curriculum and examination specifications and changes in accountability measures for schools. Whilst there was a lot of literature that sought to address the impact of such change, advocating strongly for the subject (see for example Etherington 2015; NSEAD 2016; Kinsella and Thorpe 2022; Tambling and Bacon 2023) there was not a lot that addressed the content of the curriculum directly. The literature makes clear that over the last twenty years the subject has lost curriculum time in schools, and that numbers of pupils being entered for art and/or design examinations has fallen (Campaign for the Arts 2024). A study by Nottingham University of 'arts rich' schools that appeared to resist these trends points to the signature pedagogies of the creative project and the affective space of the art room as constituting the content of the subject (Thomson and Hall 2021 and 2022). Rather than teaching about art, these pedagogies induct pupils into an artistic community that teaches them how to be an artist. Whilst acknowledging the power of such pedagogy, several different studies question the inclusivity of the subject, describing the art classroom as a place where only some are represented and able to imagine themselves into artistic ways of being (Wild 2022; Penketh 2020; Millet 2019). The Visualise study into race and inclusion in art education points to a lack of artists of colour within the visual resources that are made available to pupils and significantly to the exam boards for the paucity of such sources within the externally set exam questions for GCSE and A Level (Begum, et al. 2024). Rather than seeking an inclusive, decolonised, curriculum, research by others suggests that curriculum content is still driven by a pseudo-formalistic understanding of the subject, with the formal elements retaining

a privileged position as 'foundational' (Walton 2020; Wild 2022). In a few contexts, in what some might see as a regressive move (Atkinson 2018), it is the teaching of accuracy in drawing that is made the central focus (Ashbee 2021; Ofsted 2023a). In contrast, accounts by individual teachers, including those claiming an artist teacher practice (Stanhope 2013; Stanhope 2023; Thackara 2024) and numerous case studies profiled in NSEAD's AD magazine (see issues 35, 36 and 41, for example), suggest that the freedom of the openness of the National Curriculum (2013) for art and design is used by some to develop innovative curriculum approaches which expose pupils to a broader understanding of what art might be. These teachers engage pupils with contemporary art practice, build on collaboration with cultural institutions, are enriched by their own further academic study, and have inclusive aims at their centre. They also suggest that two important areas of concern for teachers is the sustainability of their practice in the light of the climate crisis (Hall 2023).

Aside from answering the three questions above therefore, there are other relevant themes that emerge in the discourse of the last decade. These include how inclusive curriculum content and pedagogy within art is, how the curriculum negotiates the politics of representation, and what an art curriculum for sustainability might be. This is not the space to unpack these in detail, but we might consider them pertinent, and where appropriate refer to them throughout the report.

1.2.2 Interviews

In place of Downing and Watson's 'research visits' to interview art teachers, we primarily undertook qualitative conversations online (although some did

take place in classrooms too). We wanted to capture similar detail on the content of the curriculum and spoke with art teachers in 33 different, randomly selected sample schools. Our locations, in Birmingham, Bristol, and London respectively, gave us access to schools predominantly drawn from across a wide area of South and Mid-England. Twelve of our sample schools were from within the greater London area, and another 12 from large urban centres; it may be argued that our findings are therefore less likely to be indicative of schools in rural locations.

In 2004, Downing and Watson described their sample schools as either grammar or comprehensive. Perhaps indicative of a sector that has diversified significantly since, our interviewees were based in many different types of secondary school; academy; local authority; independent; co-ed; single sex; religious; selective; and specialist. 22 could be described as comprehensive – with no entry criteria attached, and 19 were attached to a multi-academy trust (MAT) – from small (c.3 or 4 school) through to very large (40+). With approximately 64% of English state secondary schools in MATs (Plaister 2024), our sample could be described as roughly in line with this national context (58%). While we don't claim our findings anything more than illustrative, some may find this comparison useful.

In all sample schools at least one art teacher was interviewed, in others two colleagues were interviewed separately. All interviewees were asked about their background, the rationale and content of the art curriculum they delivered, and their perception of impact this had on their pupils. Where we spoke with heads of department, we asked for further curriculum overview. All interviewees were additionally asked to describe in some detail a single project delivered to a key stage 3 or key stage 4 year group, and some (19) – primarily dependant on available time – were asked to comment on the

suitability of a selection of artworks to feature on their curriculum.

In addition to conventional questioning, Downing and Watson elicited art teachers' response to six images of artworks, including Damien Hirst's The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991) and David Shrigley's Terrible News! No More Treats (1998). We chose to do the same where practicable, retaining most of their image selection but updated to include a total of eight artworks by a more diverse group of artists (the original list included no female artists), and additional works made since 2004. We felt this method may provide further means of understanding teachers' selection of curriculum content.

1.2.3 Interviewees in the sample

A total of 36 teachers (including 16 heads of departments) were interviewed from the 33 schools. Of these, all were qualified teachers. 22% might be classified as newly qualified – within their first three years of employment, while another 22% were very experienced teachers with over 20 years' experience in the classroom.

We also asked interviewees about their own professional and/or educational artistic background, and whether they viewed themselves as practising artists at the time of interview. Whether this sense of identity might have influence on curriculum content is explored in section 3.2.3. There was some overlap with the response twenty years prior; many felt the time commitments of their employment as teachers made maintenance of any artistic practice unsustainable. Despite this, there clearly was a large minority who felt confident in self-identifying as artists (44%), many more than in 2004.

There was a continuum of thought in this space – in some instances, interviewees who did feel active directly referenced concepts of the artist/teacher, while others spoke on using their teaching practice, space, or materials as resource for their own ongoing artistic enquiry. Most explicitly, one teacher described themselves as 'an artist who has to teach to earn money' (Teacher of art, Birmingham). Where teachers denied an artistic identity, this was

How long have you been teaching?		
Category	no.	%
1-3 years	8	22%
4-6 years	6	17%
7-10 years	2	6%
11-20 years	12	33%
21+ years	8	22%
Total	36	100%

Fig. 1: Total response to 'How long have you been teaching?'

frequently expressed as a temporary abandonment or pause in activity – 'not currently', 'less so this year', or:

Right now, I feel almost like a practising artist in sabbatical...
Teacher of art, South London

Others made explicit distinctions between their own art-making activity (variously classified as professional development, therapy, or hobbyist) and the conditions that would give them confidence to self-identifying as 'actual' artists:

I don't pretend to make anything that might have a commercial value...I'm not applying to be exhibited. Teacher of art, Birmingham

Not in a professional manner because I don't sell any of my work. Teacher of art, Wiltshire

It's something that I struggle with...I would feel uncomfortable to say that I am an artist because I'm not a pro - I'm not a practicing artist. Teacher of art, London

What is your artistic background?		
Category	no.	%
Fine Art 2D	18	50%
Fine Art 3D	3	8%
Graphic Arts	5	14%
Textiles	4	11%
Design 3D	2	6%
Lens-based	2	6%
Art History	2	6%
Total	36	100%

Fig. 2: Total response to 'What is your artistic background?'

Do you consider yourself a practising artist?		
Category	no.	%
Strong Yes	16	44%
Yes	5	14%
Maybe	2	6%
No	3	8%
Strong No	10	28%
Total	36	100%

Fig. 3: Total response to 'Do you consider yourself a practising artist?'

It is of interest that many teachers associated an artistic identity with artistic production; lacking confidence to describe themselves as artist based on traditionalist notions of financial reward or public exhibition as qualifiers of such designation.

1.2.4 Analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and verbatim transcriptions produced. After anonymisation, an analytical matrix was devised such that interviewee responses could be navigated, compared, and inductively coded. Answers to each of the questions could be separately retrieved for analysis. Following Downing and Watson (2004, 8) we applied what might be considered a 'rudimentary quantitative' analysis to some portions of the data, where in

other areas qualitative analysis was more appropriate. Our aim in employing mixed methods of analysis was a thematic gestalt that might describe our interviewees' responses with an interpretive authenticity. We followed in the spirit of our predecessors' claim:

It is readily acknowledged that the sample size...was not large, however the data is rich and in many respects detailed, and while not presuming to be representative, it is presented in a way that is intended to be both indicative and illustrative. Downing and Watson (2004, 8)

1.3 The structure of the report

The report begins with an overview of the content and foci of school art curriculum as taught at key stage 3 and 4. Since 2004, policy focused on curriculum design has sharpened school leaders' expectations of content rationalisation (Ofsted 2023a), and we briefly explore the impact this may have had on art departments' curriculum structures. We cover interviewees' responses when asked about skills taught, media and materials used, thinking processes demanded of pupils and cultural references deployed by teachers. We touch here on the nature and status of contemporary art within the classroom.

Chapter 3 considers factors that influence the choices made by curriculum designers; themes here include teachers' interest in diversification, and the impact of multi-academy trusts and changes in initial teacher education on teacher agency. The inclusion of contemporary art practice is again mentioned, and we discuss interviewee elicited responses on images of modern and contemporary artworks.

Chapter 4 focuses on the perceived outcome of art department curricula; the impact art learning has on pupils in interviewees' schools. Finally, Chapter 5 summarises the themes that dominated our analytical discussions, the questions raised, and potential strategies for further research, curriculum design, and art classroom practices.

The content of the art curriculum in secondary schools

2 The content of the art curriculum in secondary schools

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the structure of the school art curriculum at key stage 3 and 4; the underlying curriculum design principles described by interviewees. Section 2.3 explores in detail the concrete components[3] that teachers chose to discuss as illustrative constituents in their curricula; the media and materials; the artistic and cultural references; the skills taught; and the thinking processes developed in or through art lessons.

In section 2.4 we follow Downing and Watson's (2004) framework by using this space to discuss additional themes relevant to curriculum content rooted in deductive engagement with our data. This includes discussion on the sur-

[3] We acknowledge that 'curriculum' can be conceived as a more expansive notion than the projects planned and delivered by classroom teachers – including informal and hidden experiences that have profound impact on a pupils' learning (Amadio et al. 2013). It is important to note that the scale and design of this study allowed us only to focus on the curriculum (planned, perceived, and taught) by those who deliver it. We would welcome and encourage further research into the wider implementation and impact of the art curriculum as experienced by secondary school pupils.

prising absence of online sources named by interviewees, and concerns we have on the erosion of professional agency in art departments.

While the position of contemporary art practice in the school art curriculum was not a concern that informed our methodological design as it did in the original *School Art*, we chose to include section 2.5 as opportunity to reflect on instances where this was explicitly raised in interview. The chapter concludes with a summary in section 2.6.

2.2 The structure of the school art curriculum at key stage 3 and 4

Interviewees were asked to comment on how the art curriculum they taught was structured through key stage 3 and key stage 4. While this question was interpreted differently among interviewees – some communicating philosophical design principles (or lack thereof) adhered to in their department, and others explaining in fine chronological detail the content of their curriculum – all added to our understanding of how the notion of 'curriculum structure' might be perceived by art teachers. It is also important to note that while many interviewees were enthusiastic about the way their curriculum was structured, others – particularly early career teachers – were critical about the design of curriculum they had been asked to deliver. For example, one teacher with three years' experience spoke of a 'reduced and boiled down' (Teacher of art, Birmingham) curriculum, and another of 'quite a lot of ticking boxes and not a huge amount of taking them through the subject' (Teacher of art, Cambridgeshire). These themes are picked up in more detail in sections 2.4 and 3.3.

2.2.1 Underlying curriculum design principles

Answers to the question: 'How is the art curriculum you teach structured?' could be categorised initially into two common responses. First – the content was perceived to have no identifiable rationale, and the curriculum had developed organically over a (sometimes considerable) period of time, with portions added, inherited, or discarded dependent on changing staffing, resource, or senior leadership directive. Such a situation might fully characterise four of the 36 departments we engaged with. This does not include others who purposefully institute a loose, learner-focused, or agile curriculum – but rather those who did not feel a philosophy informed their approach at all:

Not a lot of structure...I sort of teach my lot how I think they should be taught, so mine had quite a lot of structure, but the class downstairs didn't.
Teacher of Art, Cambridgeshire

Much more frequently, teachers were able to articulate a philosophy, or in the least a methodology, that undergirded the content taught in their department. These might be crudely characterised as one of the below (some interviewees touched on more than one concept):

• Skills-based or led by materials: projects chosen explicitly to provide skill[4] or exposure to specific art media or process; e.g., in year 7 pupils study drawing in term one, painting in term two, and clay modelling in term three

[4] While most interviewees spoke explicitly about practical skills, some were more nuanced in their articulation of 'skill' in the context of the discipline: 'what we would call kind of artistic skills... for example, resilience, criticality···we focus on that alongside learning technical skills' (Head of department, London)

(24 interviewees referenced improving pupils' skills, or artistic materials, as an organising principle in their curriculum design).

• Artist focussed /knowledge focussed: projects centred on the working practices of an individual artist or art movement; this might be chronologically sequential (from cave to contemporary art), designed to encourage critical comparison between artists' practices, or as a structural means to ensure diversity of influence; e.g., 'one ancient, one modern, and one contemporary artist project in each year' (Teacher of art, Somerset) (Nine interviewees referenced artists, art movements, or historical and contextual knowledge as an organising principle in their curriculum design).

A significant percentile of interviewed teachers made mention of the 'formal elements' as a structural typology in their curriculum design, especially with younger pupil groups. Discussed in more detail below, we would consider the use of the formal elements as curriculum rationalisation an example of a knowledge focused methodology.

• Designed to engage the learner demographic: projects chosen to have direct relevance to the lived experience of a specific group of pupils, or with youth culture in mind. This might include the study of a local artist or art form, an artist representative of a particular ethnicity or faith, or a popularist artist; e.g., the study of graffiti with the intent to engage year 9 boys. Some interviewees spoke about the limited cultural capital of pupils, some of whom 'have never engaged with art outside of school' as primary rationale for curricula designed to engage learners through very accessible content (7 interviewees referenced the engagement of their pupils as an organising principle in their curriculum design).

Mainly I suppose we have designed a curriculum that we think is gonna be suitable for our particular demographic of…a selective boys' school. Head of department, London

• Thematic: sometimes the primary means of describing a project was through the subject matter the art teacher addressed – sometimes a specific genre, at other times an abstract concept or starting point; e.g., 'different topics…so bugs is one, then we do a bit of street art and then portraiture' (Teacher of art, Bristol) (Nine interviewees referenced thematic projects as the organising principle in their curriculum design).

• Led by Assessment: in only one instance, a teacher noted the influence of examination board assessment criteria on their curriculum design – not only during key stage 4 as pupils prepare a portfolio to be assessed against Department for Education derived principles (DfE 2015), but also in preparatory curricula of key stage 3; e.g., 'building them up to be used to the assessment objectives' (Teacher of art, Somerset). (One interviewee referenced assessment processes as the organising principle in their curriculum design).

• Synthetic rationalisation: in most art departments, there was evidence of what can be termed a synthesis of multiple methodologies. Here, curriculum designers attempt to create a balanced curriculum – or one of cumulative sufficiency (Ofsted 2023b) – by ensuring their planned projects facilitate thematic, skill, and knowledge diversity (for example) across the pupils' experience; e.g., year 7 paint a portrait inspired by Vincent Van Gogh in term one, build a recycled architectural model inspired by Zara Hadid in term two, and make prints of cars taking inspiration from Pop Art in term three.

While all teachers provided some comment on curriculum structure, heads

of departments were asked whether they could describe an overall approach to the curriculum. Here an inertia was sometimes described, predicated on the challenges of integrating new ideas with content inherited by previous post-holders. For example:

About half of what we have in our curriculum is there because it was there when I arrived...built upon the last head of department and his legacy...to a certain extent, if it's not broken then you don't need to fix it.
Head of department, Wiltshire

It was perhaps more common to hear about the real importance placed on coherent and comprehensive rationalisation; the provision of strong 'structured, supportive, progressive ways of working' (Head of department, West Midlands). Many spoke of 'balance' or 'sequence', that pupils' learning should 'spiral', that content and expectations 'escalate' or were 'cascaded' from the oldest to the youngest pupils.

What I've done is plan something that goes from 13 back, trying to shuffle down the curriculum the skills we need. Head of department, Somerset

In 2004, a number of schools provided medium-term planning documents, and a few (4) shared documents that outlined 'a philosophical standpoint' on the priorities for their work. We did not ask our interviewees for written documentation, but it was clear from frequent references that the production of a 'curriculum map', or visual 'learning journey' has become a prevalent means of planning and communicating curricula within art departments. Often organised visually as a metaphorical pathway snaking upwards across the page, this device is not unique to the subject discipline (although its decorative form may be of particular attraction to art teachers). Rather than

state a philosophy, or principles that might shape the curricula contents of a singular department, the simplicity of a linear curriculum map can provide opportunity to demonstrate sequential or cumulative logic; where material use is repeated and developed, or where historical and contextual sources are purposefully diverse. It is likely that the common existence of curriculum maps, road maps, learning journeys, or similar across art departments in our survey has been driven by Ofsted's (2019) interest in evaluating schools' curriculum intent.

The initial establishment of a visually organised 'journey' might facilitate valuable reflection on the purpose and content of a departmental curriculum, certainly beyond that possible among a sheaf of lesson planning documents alone. Also, if shared with pupils such simplicity and certainty can helpfully explain the future value of individual learning activities, and create excitement about the future content of forthcoming lessons.

We have a lovely curriculum pathway; visualising and I think...showing the layering and building of skill and artists and themes as you go up and progress. Teacher of art, London

However, interviewees were also aware that 'mapping' five years of curriculum delivery might create challenges, especially where departments were committed to reflexive, contemporary, or student-focussed content:

We do have some structure, but we're trying not to be too pinned down...the reason I arrived here is because I left a school where we had this curriculum map...and it had to specify end points and outcomes and all of those things linked to when we were assessing what... Head of department, London

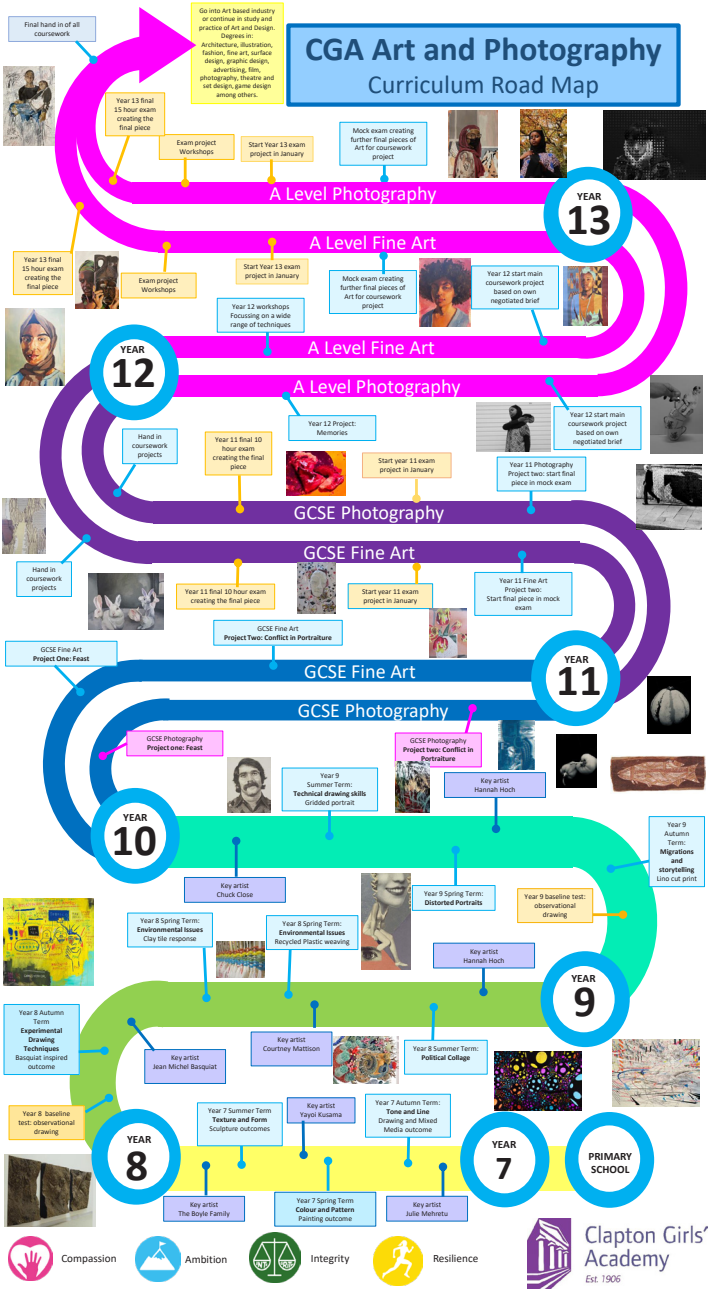

Fig.4: An exemplar 'curriculum map'

Indeed, while a well-designed map might serve the bureaucratic function of satisfying non-specialists that there is method to an art departments' curriculum design, once printed and permanently static it risks undermining the subject's capacity to follow divergent paths as required by a changing local or cultural context (Wilson 2003). There is also the increased possibility that ineffective content is retained because it can't easily be amended.

While most of the 32 interviewees who could articulate a structure or approach to their curriculum design spoke of maps, patterns, and progression some spoke of a looser or more reflexive philosophy. For example, providing a 'bare-bones' curriculum with the intent that pupils 'go on an exploration to figure out what art they really like and what they enjoy doing' (Head of department, London). Others spoke about developing a curriculum 'week by week to see what I wanted it to be like' (Head of department, Swindon) or that while 'some projects are becoming a bit more established...we're mindful that we have a loose structure' (Head of department, London). Indeed, for one teacher interviewed the concept of a prescriptive learning journey was problematic enough that they would not be compelled by management to produce one:

I'm not going to be pushed down a route...the centre of doing art is in yourself – we've got a responsibility to pull them out of themselves and notice things about themselves. Head of department, Bristol

In conclusion, the large majority of interviewees from our sample schools were confident in expressing a methodological approach to their curriculum design. Two-thirds used artistic or (more specifically) technical skills to inform their curriculum design choices, and often spoke about this from a deficit perspective – the need to build up a foundation of skills to facilitate

creative activity. The prevalence of this approach is explored further in section 2.2.2. Other common structural devices included sequencing thematic projects: monster illustrations; food; landscapes and so on, or looking in turn at artistic periods, movements, or individual practitioners. What, and who, might feature in this content is examined in section 2.3.

To make imperfect comparison to Downing and Watson's (2004, 14) findings, the prevalence of 'a directed, skills-oriented' approach which moves towards a more exploratory mode of learning in key stage 4 looks to have remained broadly consistent. It might be expected that the last decade of educational policy in England, prioritising concepts such as powerful knowledge, cultural capital, and a knowledge-rich curriculum (Gibb 2021) would have led to an increase in curricula design with historical and cultural context in the fore. While this was noted, we also suggest that this movement may have had impact on the way 'skill' in the art classroom is articulated. In our data, there was often a traditionalist language present in the description of 'skill' based curriculum design that might pass for 'technical knowledge' (Ofsted 2023a) rather than embodied knowing – for example, a curriculum that encouraged 'basically academic drawing and theory until the middle of year 8' (Teacher of art, Bristol).

2.2.2 Differentiation of the key stages

Key stage 3

In 2004, Downing and Watson cited the overall aim for art and design as written in the recently published 2003 iteration of England's national curriculum. Today, the National Curriculum has not been updated since September

2013[5], and extends to no more than 340 words in total: less than a single side of A4 paper. The aims are articulated as follows:

To ensure that all pupils:

• produce creative work, exploring their ideas and recording their experiences

• become proficient in drawing, painting, sculpture and other art, craft and design techniques

• evaluate and analyse creative works using the language of art, craft and design

• know about great artists, craft makers and designers, and understand the historical and cultural development of their art forms

DfE 2013

There are no longer suggestions of specific artists, makers and designers of importance, although drawing, painting and sculpture are still specified as media required within any curriculum. While before 2013, QCA exemplar curriculum projects (QCA 2003) were often employed directly by art departments (or amended to meet local needs), today art departments have little centralised guidance on how they might structure or populate their curriculum. For many, this change was and is celebrated as recognition of the agentic ability of specialist teachers to design and deliver rich learning materials appropriate to learner and context. On balance, it might be speculated that lack of guidance encourages reproductive practices too; for every proactive curriculum designer there may be an overworked or anxious

[5] It might be noted that at time of writing, the recently installed UK government had appointed Becky Francis to lead a curriculum review, with suggestions for change due in 2025; her mandate including exploration of 'a broader curriculum' that might provide 'greater access to cultural learning' (DfE 2024a).

teacher of art unwilling or unable to design revised content without support (Grant 2020).

It is also worth recognising that only schools maintained by local authorities are mandated to follow the National Curriculum at all. With 81.9% of secondary schools now academies or free schools (DfE, 2024b), even the brief statutory direction that the National Curriculum represents can be ignored in four fifths of art departments. Unsurprisingly therefore, there were only two references to the National Curriculum across our data. One head of department was concerned about teaching requisite breadth (in their interpretation) about 'major movements from ancient times up to the present day' (DfE 2013, 2). Another was dismissive of the National Curriculum's value when planning for a particular group of learners:

I do have a look at what the government specifies should be in the curriculum...but mainly we have designed a curriculum for our demographic...
Head of department, London

In lieu of national policy exerting any observable influence on the structure of key stage 3 schemes of work, we next focus on two themes that echoed strongly throughout our interviewees' answers.

First, there was an almost ubiquitous focus on the importance of key stage 3 (year 7 in particular) as a foundational space to teach remedial art-making skills and knowledge. This deficit model, dependent on the assumption that learners' primary phase art education was inadequate, informed much of the structure employed in sample departments' curriculum design. Comments included the idea that 'students start almost from scratch', and that it was important to get them 'practicing in the room more, because that's not hap-

pening at primary school'. All 'foundation' or 'key skills' were questioned, but in particular pupils' pre-existing drawing competency was critiqued. 'Students that are coming through can't draw', they 'lack motor control, and have to 'do a lot of drawing in year 7 and year 8'. Some interviewees suggested not only that art education had been missing from the primary phase, but that which had been experienced had set a poor precedent and required redress in key stage 3: 'we're unpicking bad teaching', 'there's an awful lot of undoing to be done in year 7 – yeah, there's a lot of trying to switch the mindset'.

Trying to understand why this phenomenon – certainly not a new complaint among secondary phase art teachers (Ofsted 2008) – appears to be intensifying, one interviewee noted:

They're coming from primary with less skills...Less practitioners in primary schools means that they don't have the bare minimum skills that we would expect to see, and the need to kind of fast track their...how do I put it...literacy and numeracy means that things like art get very much sidelined now.... what they are being taught is wrong, we are finding that quite a lot at the moment, certainly since Covid that seems to be a massive thing...smudging instead of blending, they don't understand how to mix and blend colours. Many of them have never seen a colour wheel before. They don't understand what primary and secondary colours are.

Head of department, Warwickshire

Whether there has been a measurable decline in primary phase art and design education or not, our interviewees perceived there to have been. It was of interest to us that in response to this perception, only two teachers specifically highlighted the importance of curricula that built a 'culture of

belonging', that might make uncertain pupils 'kind of safe and secure in the classroom', while many more spoke on technical skills that needed immediate development.

The second, interrelated, theme that we found threaded across many sample departments was reference to the so-called 'formal elements' of art as either thematic focus or 'foundational' knowledge prioritised in year 7 – line, shape, colour, texture and so on. Nearly half of all teachers interviewed spoke directly of the 'formal elements' or 'visual elements', while others' language was suggestive of the same. This Modernist typology of visual components appeared to be a normative presence in interviewees' lexicon; a convenient, if largely simplistic and reproductive substitute for 'theoretical knowledge' in the subject discipline (Walton 2020).

So, in year 7 we'll still go through like, you know...really focus on the formal elements. Teacher of art, Bristol

We're starting the year 7 with the formal elements...kind of what they are and why they're there. Teacher of art, Wiltshire

Like...a lot of formal elements, it's drawing shapes. Tone. Uh line.
Teacher of art, London

Start with just looking at what the formal elements are.
Teacher of art, Somerset

While these strikingly repetitive quotes impress a general acceptance of the 'formal elements' as requisite foundational knowledge, one teacher was candid on the limits abstract visual components represent regarding pupil

engagement:

Year 7 - Formal elements in a single project...colour mixing with Kusama, drawing – it goes on for aaaages and then the kids seem to think 'oh, we're still doing pumpkins'. Head of department, Bristol

In contrast to the majority, one teacher was happy to report a new head of department with a different approach:

...developing a new curriculum in reaction against the old one...the old one was very 'formal elements' heavy. Teacher of art, London

We would not wish to critique individuals' curriculum choices. Equally, we acknowledge that there is a celebrated tradition of the 'basic design course' in 20th century art education (Crippa & Williamson 2013), and that there exists an academic discourse on this phenomenon (Atkinson 2011; Grant 2020; Walton 2020; Wild 2022). However, we feel there would be value in further research into why, and how, the formal elements remain such a dominant presence in key stage 3 curriculum design (particularly given no mention of them in the National Curriculum).

The structural characteristics of year 9 provision varied considerably between interviewees' departments, but in almost every instance where it was discussed it was described as limited. For several interviewees, art and design was either optional in year 9, or taught on rotation in this year group, so perhaps for just one term, facilitating 'only one project' in total[6].

[6] This was particularly frustrating for interviewees where GCSE options were chosen during year 9; if a pupil was scheduled to take their art and design rotation in the summer term, they may not have studied the subject at all for the two terms prior to making their choices for GCSE study.

Year 9 are on a rotation, so only actually get eight weeks in the whole academic year...two hours a week. - I don't think it's great, but that's what our leaders want. Head of art, Bristol

For others, the year before key stage 4 was structured as opportunity to prepare foundational skills for later application (as was common in year 7); 'again it's quite drawing heavy···make sure they have a really good understanding of key art vocab' (Teacher of art, Bristol). Others spoke of delivering strategically engaging curricula to 'attract' pupils to choose art for GCSE.

Key stage four

As in 2004, all of our sample schools offered a GCSE course in art at key stage 4. We did not ask which exam board was followed, nor whether entries were predominantly unendorsed or endorsed. The DfE guidance (2015) that informs exam boards' specifications ensures all overlap significantly, assessing pupils' capacity to evidence essentialist artistic processes of research, ideation, iterative testing, and presentation against varying degrees of sophistication. Regarding curriculum structure, mostly teachers spoke of graduated removal of teacher-directed expectations; pupils expected to take increasing responsibility for their decision-making. Key words that featured in interviewees' comments included 'independence', 'confidence' and 'ownership' – this last relevant to both pupils and teachers. As one interviewee said:

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[6] This was particularly frustrating for interviewees where GCSE options were chosen during year 9; if a pupil was scheduled to take their art and design rotation in the summer term, they may not have studied the subject at all for the two terms prior to making their choices for GCSE study.

Key stage 4, it's quite good actually, because it's up to the teacher to take total ownership of their classes...I've got permission to change the theme every year so I don't have to keep doing the same thing...in key stage 3 at the minute...we're all getting a bit bored by it. Teacher of art, Birmingham

If there were external influences on the shape of key stage 4 curricula delivery, beyond increasing autonomy, they might be summarised as assessment and instrument. Neither were mentioned frequently. The first, 'building up' pupils' understanding of assessment objectives (AOs) and how to practise within these requirements, was identified in a few teachers' replies as a priority during key stage 4 teaching and learning:

We're focusing more on the AOs and them having...creative independence within those... Teacher of art, London

Echoing recurrent academic concerns about the feasibility of assessing creative activity (Rayment 2007), some interviewees were sceptical of key stage 4 curricula that they felt 'teach to the matrix rather than teach the art' (Teacher of art, London). While there is not space here to explore perceptions of such tension in detail, it is interesting to note that some art teachers feel facilitating successful examination results is a professional responsibility in direct conflict with provision of authentic artistic opportunities.

You can see some departments churning out some...you know getting some good results, but...they all end up with the same things.
Head of department, Bristol

The second (less frequent again) influence on key stage 4 curriculum structure, could be described as 'instrumental rationale' or put simply a desire to

foreground the value of the subject for future career aspiration. For example, one interviewee spoke about creating a more 'design' focused curriculum to demonstrate that there is the potential to apply their skills in creative careers beyond 'just possibly teaching of being an artist' (Teacher of art, West Midlands). Elsewhere, soft skills developed through arts learning, such as tenacity, empathy, or critical thinking were actively prioritised:

> *...So the students that want to be more kind of academic doctors, dentists, they can see the skills transfer across from art to other areas.*
> Teacher of art, Birmingham

In conclusion, there is little curriculum structure or content currently mandated at a national level in art and design. Resultantly, individual art departments have considerable control over the content of the art curriculum taught in secondary schools; largely similar to the findings of Downing and Watson (2004, 17) twenty years earlier. However, while opportunity for this agency may persist, the extent to which it is exercised; contemporary barriers to curriculum redesign; and the diversity of curriculum content across sample schools, will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

2.3 The content of art modules and schemes of work, as delivered by secondary school art teachers

Analysis of curriculum content is based on the data collected in the section of each interview that focused on a particular module or project. Because modules were discussed from a range of year groups (in key stage 3 and 4) and across the whole academic year, collectively they may be seen as reasonably indicative of the curriculum taught. Indeed, given interviewees were

encouraged to speak on a module they felt worked well, this selection might be indicative of what teachers perceive to be the best curricula taught. However, it should be remembered that this is a very limited sample.

A total of 33 modules or projects were discussed by the 36 teachers interviewed. In reporting the findings, frequencies are often relayed as percentages in order to illustrate differences; because the sample size is very small findings should be seen as indicative rather than representative. As in Downing and Watson's report (2004) this section is purposefully descriptive in nature, providing an overall picture of the content of school art lessons. For discussion on the reasons underpinning decisions made by teachers, which led to the selection of content as outlined below, see Chapter 3.

The content of modules is divided into the following subsections:

- the media and materials used
- the artistic and cultural references included
- the skills taught
- the thinking processes developed by, or demanded of pupils

The teachers were also asked to provide the 'title' of the module or project, all of which are listed in \fig. 5, under the year group in which they are delivered.

2.3.1 The use of media and materials

Interviewees were asked to list the media and materials that pupils were encouraged to work with in the module or project being discussed. In 2004,

Downing and Watson recorded that nearly a quarter of interviewees mentioned the optionality of media in their projects – pupils could choose their medium or materials. This was not mentioned in any interview we conducted, given it was also not explicitly asked. As illustrated in Fig. 6, most modules or projects involved the application of multiple media (72 across 33

Module or Project name or focus				
Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Liquorice Allsorts	Clay Architecture	Figurative Project	Human Form	Decay
Aboriginal Patterns	Perspective	Extraordinary Everyday	Freedom	Layers
Shoe Project	Bugs	Distorted Portraits	Natural Forms	Messages
We Came to Birmingham	Food	Architecture	Human Condition	
Drawing Emotions	Kandinsky	Ceramic Sculptures		
Printmaking	Impressionism	Migration & Storytelling		
Birds	Mythical Creatures	Word Art		
Monsters	Figures	Power		
Dystopia		British Art		

Fig.5: The names given by interviewees to the modules or projects described

projects). Only three projects named were limited to a single medium: a year 9 migration project completed in print, a year 9 clay project, and a year 7 perspective project where only pencil was mentioned. Some projects employed seven or eight materials, e.g., a year 10 natural forms project where pupils used pencil, charcoal, plastercast, carving, photography, Brusho and acrylic paint. Such variety was more commonplace the older the pupil.

Can you list the media and materials that pupils were encouraged to work with in the module?		
Category	no.	%
2D	58	81%
Drawing	21	29%
Mixed-media/collage	11	15%
Painting	15	21%
Photography	7	10%
Printing	4	6%
3D	11	15%
Clay	5	7%
Other 3D	6	8%
Digital	3	4%
Total	72	100%

Fig.6: Total response to 'Can you list the media and materials that pupils were encouraged to work with in the module?'

The categories we have illustrated in Fig.6 include mentioned media and materials as follows:

• Drawing: pencil, coloured pencils, watercolour pencils, biro, fine liners, metallic pens, oil pastels, charcoal, chalk and so on, used for creating two-dimensional images and for the development of the skills associated with the manipulation of these 'basic' art materials. Materials associated with drawing accounted for nearly a third of all media employed by pupils in key stage 3 and key stage 4; and it might be noted that where multiple drawing materials were mentioned within a single project (chalk and charcoal, for example) this was only recorded as a single entry, so the total number of drawing media employed across those 21 projects is likely higher again.

• Painting: ready mix, powder, acrylic, watercolour, inks, oil paint, Brusho, spray-paint, stencils, and graffito were all mentioned by interviewees, although sparingly in comparison to drawing materials.

• Clay: construction, glazing, kiln firing; no distinction was made between ceramic processes (e.g., slab, coil or thrown vessels).

• Other 3D: card constructions, tinfoil, papier mâché, found objects, wire, Modroc, plaster casting, carving, tissue paper and gum tape. It might be remembered that drawing, painting, and sculpture were the only three media explicitly referenced in the National Curriculum for key stage 3 (DfE 2013). As can be seen in Fig. 6, these three media constituted 65% of the materials listed by interviewees in the projects they chose to describe. Those below can be considered the 'other art, craft, and design techniques' art teachers are compelled to introduce.

• Mixed media/collage: collage with found images, text, recompositing of experimental drawings, layering, photomontage; referenced in 11 modules.

• Photography: primarily digital, although cyanotype and other analogue darkroom processes were mentioned, experimenting with lenses; referenced in seven modules, including one year 10 module specific to a GCSE endorsed photography specification.

• Printing: mono-printing, poly-printing, relief, intaglio, etching; referenced in four modules.

• Digital: manipulation of primary and secondary images using Adobe Creative Suite software or similar; referenced in just three modules. This does not include the use of digital resources for research purposes, only where used directly as an artistic medium.

While Downing and Watson (2004, 19) included an additional 'other' category (in which they included sand, chamois and expandable foam!), we found no need to do so. In 2004, 85% of the modules described utilised drawing or painting media; in our sample this was 50%. In 2004, the second most popular media category was 3D, including clay and other materials, featuring in 56% of projects; in our sample this was dramatically reduced to 15%. In 2004, no mention at all was made of photography; in our sample this was an artistic medium employed in 10% of projects described (given the significant increase in accessibility of digital photography technology over this period, we might have expected more). No mention was made of the moving image. Making tentative, and unsubstantiated, comparison of the data it suggests a diversification of media across curricula over the last 20 years, while less variety of media might feature in each discrete project.

2.3.2 The artistic and cultural references included in the curriculum

Interviewees were questioned about the artistic and cultural references they used to support the modules they were describing. The question was posed 'Did the students study any particular artists in this module?' and this resulted in an extensive list of artists, genres and art forms. For analysis purposes we grouped together artists under broad art historical headings: pre-20th century, 20th century, and contemporary. Where an artist was alive and practising (even if their major contributions might be described as pertinent to the 20th century) we considered them contemporary. We also created a category 'cultural practice' where the foci were not associated to a historical time period, but a general, ongoing cultural or artistic tradition, e.g., Indigenous Australian art practices.

Fig. 7 shows the range of time periods, and identifying characteristics, that define the artists mentioned by interviewees. It can be noted that a total of 104 individual artists and 4 cultural practices were mentioned across the 33 projects discussed. There were two projects where no artist was studied; 'We Came to Birmingham', a year 7 project, and 'perspective', a year 8 project. On the latter; 'we tend to just stick to skill-based at key stage 3 and then we start adding artists when they start becoming more independent' (Teacher of art, Bristol). This would suggest an average of three artists are studied in the course of a typical key stage 3 or 4 project; but to make this assumption based on such limited data alone would be unwise. Indeed, on a number of occasions when discussion key stage 4 projects (in particular), interviewees mentioned 'banks' of artists' work that they made available for pupils to choose from, or that pupils had free choice in sourcing their own artistic influences. Equally, there were a number of occasions where teachers simply

Did the students study any particular artists in the module?		
Category	no.	%
Pre-20th century	8	7%
20th century	35	32%
Contemporary	61	56%
Cultural Practice	4	4%
Male	66	65%
Female	36	35%
Other	2	2%
White	85	82%
Minoritised ethnic	19	18%
Person with disability	6	6%
Person without disability	98	94%
Heterosexual	98	94%
Other	6	6%

Fig.7: Total response to 'Did the students study any particular artists in the module?'

could not remember the artists that might feature in a particular project:

There's a mono-printing artist we look at, but I've totally forgotten her name... Head of department, Swindon

It's like, quite a traditional painting and it's of some fishing, some women, on the coast in Cornwall... Teacher of art, West Midlands

Artist-wise, it's a bit vague really... Teacher of art, Bristol

In 2004, less than 10% of references were made to art pre-1800, but near 15% of references were to art from the 19th century; a total not far from 25% could then be classified as pre-20th century. This looks to have significantly reduced since, with only 7% of artists (8) references by interviewees in our sample. Those who featured in this category included only canonical Western painters such as Caravaggio, Vincent Van Gogh, and Claude Monet (who, admittedly, lived until 1926).

Downing and Watson made no distinction between late 20th century art and 'contemporary' art practice in their own data. It is therefore difficult for us to make direct comparison. As can be seen in Fig. 7, over half of the artists listed could be considered contemporary artists, in that they are alive and making work today. This category is discussed further in Chapter 4. We felt there might be interesting analysis possible within a group of 'contemporary' artists which stretched from internationally celebrated artists well-established in the mid-20th century such as Yayoi Kusama, through to (relatively) obscure, local, or amateur artists.

Regarding the 32% of artists featuring in curricula from the 20th century, reoccurring names included but were not limited to Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore, Wassily Kandinsky, and Andy Warhol. Indeed, of all 43 pre-20th and 20th century artists studied, only one was female (Barbara Hepworth). This clearly represents a significant under-representation of historical non-male artists, and given our own anecdotal experiences we were surprised not to hear about perennial curriculum favourites such as Georgia O'Keefe or Freida Kahlo. The gender balance across the total data set, including contemporary practitioners was arguably less problematic; 37% of artists references

were female or non-binary. This might be considered some improvement on the 11% documented by Downing and Watson in 2004, if not a fair representation of female and non-binary artists across these sample projects.

Downing and Watson recorded the nationality of the artists mentioned in their sample; we chose to record ethnicity as we believe this a more useful metric when reflecting on the representation of artist diversity within school curricula. Outside of European (and American Pop) artists, Downing and Watson found only one reference to an artist of another nationality, the Brazilian Anna Bella Geiger. We found that 18% of artists (19) referenced identified as minoritised ethnic[7], mostly British. This likely represents a more diverse curriculum offer than 2004 but is still far from representative of the 37% minoritised ethnic pupils studying in English secondary schools (DfE 2024b).

To further understand the character of artistic references made in curriculum content, we also looked for an illustrative sense of how many artists taught to pupils in key stage 3 or 4 self-identify as having a disability, or as LGBTQI+. We would not presume the sexual orientation or ability of an individual artist if not declared, so this data should be handled with caution. Where this was historically well-documented (Keith Haring's sexuality), or even a celebrated feature of the artists' practice (Yayoi Kusama's mental illness), we noted it.

The factors affecting the artistic references chosen by teachers are explored in more depth in Chapter 3.

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[7] We recognise the inadequacies of the term 'minoritised ethnic', but follow the Visualise report's (Begum et al. 2024, 18) precedent in applying it to describe Black, Asian or other minoritised groups in the UK; 'a domestic lens that has helped to unify many communities'.

2.3.3 The skills taught, including the formal elements of art addressed

Interviewees were asked to identify the main skills being taught in the modules under discussion. Of interest here was the diverse interpretations interviewees made of the ambiguous notion of 'skill'. Borrowing the classifications employed by Downing and Watson (2004, 28), it was clear that there remained considerable overlap but also some additional considerations:

• Manipulation of materials: there were 23 instances where interviewees mentioned the manipulation of materials as a main skill associated to the project under discussion. This included multiple mentions of mark-making (arguably also a skill pertinent to the 'formal elements'), and a reoccurring focus on accuracy; the capacity of a pupil to control the pressure placed on a pencil or palette knife, or build slab clay forms with precision. Other art form skills including sculptural construction, colour blending, digital manipulation, printing and watercolour palette management also featured.

• Formal elements: as previously discussed, the formal elements remain a commonplace reference point for art teachers, and were explicitly mentioned 26 times, including colour, line, tone, texture, pattern and form. Also included here are more specific comments that could be considered developments of pupils' skill with the formal elements: applying accurate proportion (2); perspective (5); atmospheric shadow (1); or making effective compositional decisions (2); utilising negative space with effect (1).

• Research skills: there were 13 references to what might be termed research skills, primarily the skill of researching and/or analysing artists' work, process, or context (7). There were some other mentions of thematic or discipli-

nary research priorities: colour symbolism, social justice, and visual literacy. One interviewee prioritised 'critical engagement and analysis over practical skills', although this attitude was not representative of most. It is also possible that, particularly within the seven key stage 4 projects or modules discussed, research was completed outside of teacher supervision and therefore while fundamentally taking place, research skills were not being explicitly taught.

• Observational drawing: there were also 13 direct references to observational drawing, largely unspecified in nature, although one interviewee clarified this as 'academic drawing', another as 'abstract drawing' and a third as 'basic drawing'.

• Using art to create personal meaning: there were three instances of interviewees touching on skills that might be described as skilful meaning-making; one on using colour to express emotion; another which prioritised material play; a third that explicitly promoted subjectivity in the discipline.

There were additional answers against this question that didn't easily fit Downing and Watson's original categorisation. For example, what might be considered 'dispositions' or 'attributes' were mentioned as 'skills' developed in modules by eight interviewees, namely confidence (4), problem solving (2), resilience (1), and public presentation (1). Confidence in particular, is a theme we return to in section 4.2. Others misattributed knowledge as skill, naming enhanced knowledge of typography; aerial perspective; composition; or body language as central to their module, rather than identifying the skilful application of this knowledge as priority.

We were surprised that the skill of artistic self-expression, or meaning-mak-

ing, did not feature more frequently in conversation. This may be due to the way in which interviewees categorise taught 'skill', or suggestive of a continuing tendency to concentrate on the craft skills of artmaking rather than on critical and expressive skills (Downing and Watson 2004, 29).

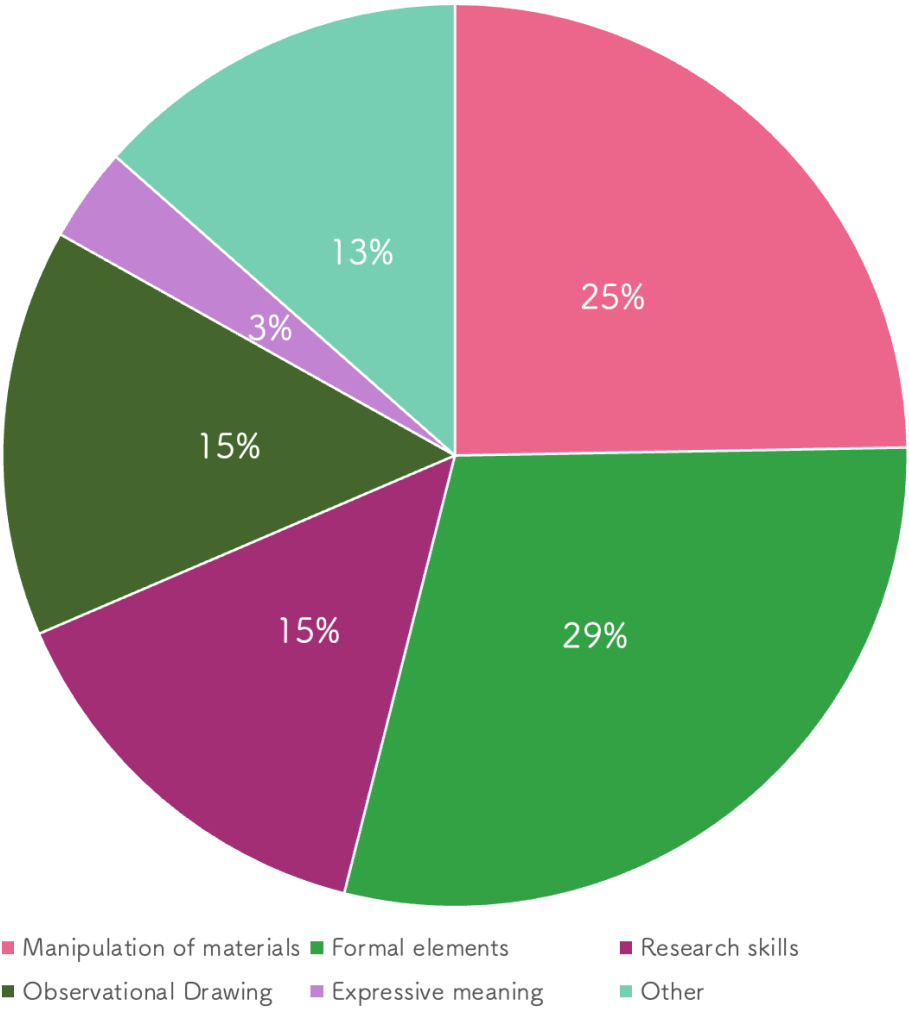


Fig.8: Total response to 'What are the main skills being taught in the module?'

2.3.4 The thinking processes developed by, or demanded of pupils

Lastly, interviewees were asked to comment on the 'thinking processes' pupils use to support their work; how they 'generate ideas and to what extent analysis and evaluation' featured. The answers given to these questions were once again classified following the precedent set in *School Art* (2004). This was a question that many interviewees struggled to answer initially – perhaps due to the ambiguity of the term 'thinking process', or a lack of prior consideration in this space.

• Analysing and evaluating: given the questions asked included the terms 'analysis' and 'evaluation', it is unsurprising that 32 responses directly referenced these terms when discussing the thinking processes employed by pupils. There were definitive subcategories of response here; some interviewees focused on the analysis or 'investigation' of artists' work through written or visually imitative responses or 'spreads' (9); others mentioned activities that promoted peer evaluation, marking, or feedback, 'gallery views', 'discussion' or 'turn and talk'; a few interviewees spoke on self-assessment practices (4). Other interviewees highlighted specific analytical questions asked of pupils 'why they think Kandinsky made that work...' or 'what are they trying to get across in their artwork?'.

Frameworks for evaluative activity were frequently mentioned, from vague 'what went well to even better if' processes through to 'rigorous guides' and 'homework books' structured to support analysis. Views on the value or quality of these activity were mixed:

I feel quite strongly about art appreciation [featuring in the curriculum]...it's

like a guiding force for me to be in the profession.
Teacher of art, Birmingham

There's a lot of written work expected from our school...we've got a little bit too much analysis... Head of department, Swindon

• Creating and making: 18 references were made to thinking about material choices, compositional decision making, or an artistic or design process of iterative development of artworks. Specific terms included 'planning', 'experimentation', 'material literacy', 'colour perception'. This category does not include ideation activities such as mind mapping, which feature in creative thinking processes below.

• Investigation and research: there were eight references to what might be considered investigative or research processes, namely searching for information on a relevant theme, exploring the context of art-making activity, or increased understanding of the creative industries. For example, the expectation that pupils gain 'raised awareness of...pollution in oceans', reflect on where cultural patterns may have originated, or researching personal histories. There was a single explicit mention of this taking place digitally. It might be remembered that 'research skills' were referenced as being taught only 13 times, so we might not expect associated thinking processes to feature frequently.

• Creative thinking processes: the 14 references to thinking processes that might be described as creative (although this term was rarely employed directly by interviewees) included opportunity to make artwork more personal to individual pupils (5):

[pupils are] *challenged to approach landscape differently, inspired by the Impressionists – you know it can be quite personal then.* Teacher of art, Bristol

It also included mention of ideation or 'mind mapping' (3), and consideration of narrative storytelling, creative rationale, and artistic voice. Some interviewees spoke on 'critical thinking' or 'problem solving', which we would suggest comparable concepts to creative thinking.

There were quite a considerable number of responses (31) that did not easily fit the categories employed by Downing and Watson (2004, 30). We have sorted these into two additional categories below:

• Other prominent considerations: in this category we would include the multiple mentions that were made of collaborative, discursive, or presentational thinking processes (9) – where pupils either worked together or the focus was on the presentation of their work for critique. There were also references to cross-curricular activity; thinking beyond the discipline to connect art with science, English, history or ethics (4). There was one mention of 'empathy' as a thinking process encouraged through the project, and a handful of other comments too (3).

• A demonstrable lack of thinking processes: there were 15 responses that were suggestive of modules or projects where interviewees did not feel 'thinking processes' an active priority at all, intentionally or otherwise. Some were critical of this apparent deficit:

I'm looking at the curriculum and saying it's a bit of a hole in all honesty. Head of department, Swindon

While others rationalised the paucity of thinking processes employed by pupils as the result of time pressure, pupil's inability, or poorly designed curricula.

With time constraints in the classroom, there is always a tension between – am I going to teach then to do something really well or to think about it really meaningfully? Teacher of art, Birmingham

There were a few interviewees who took a binary stance, defending a purposefully skills-focussed curriculum:

I was thinking – what knowledge have they gained from this? Like maybe they will gain some skills, but I don't think a lot of knowledge. But then does that matter? Teacher of art, Somerset

It's a conscious choice that we have made through our curriculum...skills based...we basically have ignored the kind of free creative aspect of art. Head of department, Swindon

Others chose this portion of the interview to describe pedagogies that potentially restrict opportunity for pupils' thinking processes:

I sit at the front and I will do a lot of drawing on the board so they should be able to follow along with me. Teacher of art, Bristol

Essentially, we tell them what we want from them – we give them criteria.

Teacher of art, Wiltshire

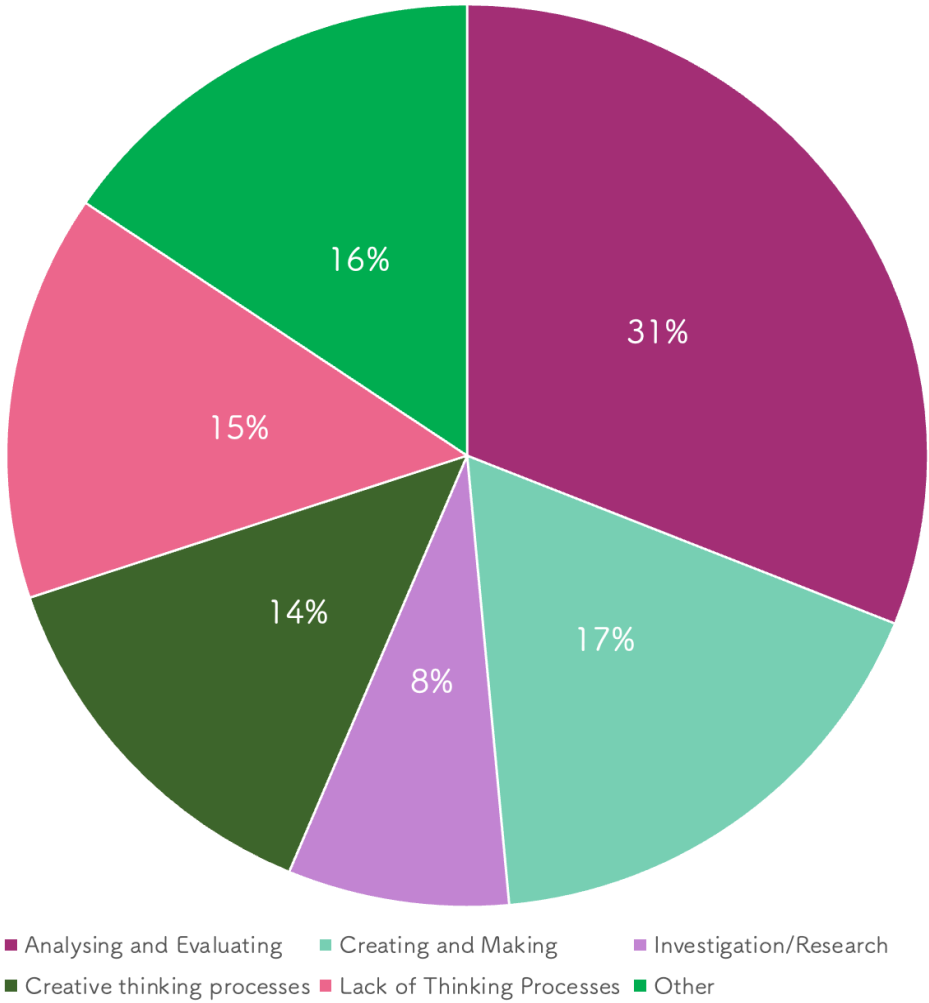


Fig.9: Synthesised responses to 'What thinking processes do students use to support the work done in this module?' and 'How do students generate ideas and to what extent does analysis and evaluation feature?'

2.4 Other curriculum features

In addition to the three elements of curriculum content discussed in section 2.3, we wanted to highlight two further themes relevant to discussion on the content of art modules: (i) the apparent lack of online resources to support the curriculum, and (ii) teacher agency.

Downing and Watson (2004, 36) used this section of their report to comment on 'issues-based work' in the art curriculum, and 'links to other parts of the school curriculum'. On the former, it can be noted from the project titles in Fig. 5 that at most, five projects might fit the description of issues-based (Johnson 2015); Dystopia; We came to Birmingham; Migration & Storytelling; Human Condition; and Freedom. This is not to suggest that political, social or environmental issues do not come to the fore in other projects also, but it does suggest that most modules discussed did not centre these discussions. On the latter, we would note that there were only four passing mentions of modules with cross-curricula overlap.

2.4.1 The use of secondary online resources to support the curriculum

In 2004, teachers explicitly mentioned the internet as an external resource (used by either them or their pupils) in 55% of the modules discussed. In 2024, only five interviewees (14%) made reference to the internet – which given the increasing prevalence and power of this resource may seem strange. Perhaps, in 2004, the internet might still have been described as relatively novel in key stage 3 and 4 teaching and learning, and therefore more worthy of note. In 2024, it might be assumed that near all pupils being

taught would natively employ online tools or social media for the purpose of exploring or investigating artists and themes. Two teachers interviewed in 2024 did speak positively of the American image-sharing website Pinterest, as a source of inspiration when searching for contemporary artists or those thematically relevant to their curriculum. Another interviewee was dismissive of the largely unmoderated content their department sourced online as classroom materials:

A lot of the lessons were [on artists] that they'd sort of taken off the internet or they had thought were something popular at the time.
Teacher of art, Cambridgeshire

While we recognise that interviewees in 2024 may assume use of digital resources in curriculum design such normative practice that it need not be mentioned, we were surprised not to hear more reference to authoritative online repositories of subject knowledge and curricula materials as source for content or curriculum structures. For example, one interviewee mentioned the NSEAD's website as a helpful space to 'keep up to date', but there were no mentions of the society's 'Big Landscape' resource (2024) or the Tate, Art UK, Access Art, the Times Educational Supplement, Oak Academy, or Twinkl; all websites of varying authority containing significant curriculum suggestions and relevant resources. There was also no mention of the popular Artpedagogy website and social-media profile, or any other practitioner-initiated online forum. It would be interesting to see if a study that more pointedly asked art teachers about their use of online resources in curriculum design and content sourcing, could provide a more accurate map of access and influence; or if these resources are indeed utilised as infrequently as our data suggests.

Sources that were explicitly mentioned by interviewees as influencing curriculum content are discussed in Chapter 3.

2.4.2 Art teacher agency

Another observation that came to the fore when reviewing the content of the art curriculum conveyed by the teachers, was how some felt disconnected from the process of deciding on or designing the curriculum content and structure at all. Again, the influences relevant to this phenomenon are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. We felt it important to note in this chapter on content that where teachers communicated a distance or disconnect from the materials being delivered, this changes the nature of the content as encountered by pupils.

For example, where teachers' comments included reflection on their curriculum being 'prescriptive', 'boiled down', or 'very limited' it was most often because 'it's all prewritten', 'the projects are already there···have been established for a really long time'.

I think a lot of our schemes of work are, you know, kind of 1000 years old.
Teacher of art, London

Such a dynamic was most evidence among new teachers of art, with 50% of those in their first three years of teaching (4) making mention of predetermined content over which they had limited creative agency. This was not always the case, with one new teacher celebrating how quickly the digital design skills they brought from industry were integrated into every project taught, and how resultantly they felt less 'out of [their] depth'.

In conclusion, analysis of the data collected across 33 different schools gives us an indication of the prevalent art curriculum in secondary schools. We would suggest that distinct characteristics have emerged relating to the media used in the curriculum, and how this has changed over the preceding twenty years. Similarly, comparison can be made between Downing and Watson's (2004) description of the references used to support the curriculum, and underlying design principles that informed curriculum, and that communicated to us in 2024.

2.5 The nature and status of contemporary art practice within school art

In 2004, Downing and Watson collected two distinct data samples. One group of schools was designated 'randomly selected' (10), and the other group had been previously identified as 'incorporating contemporary art practice in their curriculum' (2004, 5) (8). Their intent was to compare and contrast the curriculum evident in each context. We did not make this distinction in our sample data. Partly, because our interest was in reporting an illustrative view of art curriculum in secondary schools at large rather than approaching this project with a specific brief, and partly because making a methodological distinction about which school art department may or may not take contemporary art practice as its focus, and to what extent, felt an arbitrary one.

Despite this difference, we still felt it valuable to reflect on the instances where contemporary art practice was, and was not, evident across the data we collected. Therefore, below we pick up Downing and Watson's (2004, 39) own 'list of characteristics' which they inductively applied to describe

contemporary art practice in art classrooms, and make comparison to our own sample. Next, we briefly offer some qualitative analysis relevant to this concern.

Downing and Watson (2004, 39) chose, sensibly, not to work with a predetermined definition of contemporary art. Instead, they looked at common practices across the eight schools their sponsors (Tate, Arts Council England, and the National Centre for Educational Research) nominated as knowingly engaged with contemporary practices, and produced a grounded 'list of characteristics' prevalent in this context. These contemporary art practice (CAP) school characteristics were as follows:

• Pupils produced work using digital media and other, less traditional media.

• Teachers used artistic references from the latter 20th and early 21st centuries to support the curriculum.

• International artists and female artists were included in the artistic references used to support the curriculum.

• Teachers included a wide range of art forms in the references used to support the curriculum.

• Expression of meaning through art was taught as a distinct skill.

• Teachers encouraged pupils to use and develop creative thinking processes

• The curriculum taught included visits to galleries and museums and included the use of external artists[8].

Downing and Watson's (2004) CAP Characteristics	Freq	%	Examples from our 2024 data
Work produced using digital media and other less traditional materials	3	4%	Photomontage
Artistic references from the latter 20th early 21st century (at least one contemporary artist named)	23	70%	Lubna Chowdhary
International* and female artists were included (*outside of Europe/USA)	19	58%	Njideka Akunyili Crosby
Wide range of art forms referenced in support of curriculum (artists named suggests more than two)	12	36%	Ai Weiwei, Barbara Kruger, Andy Goldsworthy, Shephard Fairley, and Cornelia Parker
Self-expression taught as a distinct skill	3	9%	'Challenged to approach landscape differently...you know it can be quite personal '
Pupils encouraged to use and develop creative thinking processes	14	42%	'We've got a girl who stitched onto her old school bag about carrying her emotional baggage around.'
Curriculum included visits to galleries, museums, or visiting artists	5	15%	Workshops at the New Art Gallery, Walsall

Fig.10: The frequency of references to Downing and Watson's (2004) CAP characteristics among our 2024 interviewees

This approach can be described as methodologically questionable. By inductively grounding characteristics of supposed 'contemporary art practice' in data gathered from a small group of pre-nominated schools the authenticity of these attributions becomes, we feel, equivocal. However, in the spirit of the original *School Art* report we wanted still to reflect on how this typology of characteristics connected to our own data set. In Fig. 10, we chart the frequency with which, across the 33 projects discussed, Downing and Watson's (2004) CAP characteristics were mentioned by our interviewees. It is worth noting that near three quarters of the projects discussed did include reference to 'contemporary' artists, and that a breadth of art forms was represented within single projects. Turning to the low frequency results, it may come as no surprise to teachers working in art departments in resource-poor and risk-adverse school settings, that visits to galleries and museums – or connecting with visiting artists – is relatively uncommon. Interestingly, where this was seen to occur, trips and artist involvement was very positively and passionately described by interviewees (see section 3.2.2). Less expected is that only three teachers directly referenced meaning-making, or the 'expression of meaning' as a skill that was taught in the project discussed; in comparison to over 60 mentions of technical skills prioritised in the art classroom (see Fig. 8).

While we remain sceptical of Downing and Watson's (2004) CAP charac-

[8] The CAP school characteristics suggested by Downing and Watson can and should be problematised in the context of 'contemporary art practice' in 2024. It might be suggested that digital media is no longer a 'non-traditional' material for artistic production. It might also be asked – why recognise the geographic and gender diversity of a curriculum as a contemporary characteristic, but not seek to understand the representation of artists from minoritised ethnic groups, or those with disability? In addition, implicit in Downing and Watson's CAP characteristics is an assumption that 'self-expression', and 'creative thinking processes' are the exclusive domain of contemporary art practice, while we might suggest the former more accurately associated to Modernist traditions (Grant 2020), and the latter as discernible across all periods of artistic production.

teristics as measure of a curriculum's authentic connection to 'contemporary art practice', we might tentatively suggest that the frequency of the above activities in our random sample of key stage 3 and 4 projects is indicative of an increasingly 'contemporary' practice. In 2004, Downing and Watson analysed their own randomly selected sample schools (10) and found – no use of digital media; just four references to contemporary artists; no 'international' artists and only two female artists (Georgia O'Keefe and Bridget Riley); one art form per project (predominantly painting); two references to expression of meaning; five to creative thinking; and three to gallery visits. Clearly, in 2004, contemporary art practice – as defined by Downing and Watson – was a 'marginal' (2004, 49) concern in secondary school curriculum – perhaps less so today.

2.5.1 Contemporary art practice in school art curriculum

While we would avoid pinning a specific definition to the mercurial concept of contemporary art practice in the context of the secondary school, we are confident enough to suggest that some things – artworks, activities, or techniques, are not connected to contemporary art practice. Indeed, it is almost certain that some artists practising today – and therefore contemporary in the most simplistic sense – would shy away from, or actively dismiss being labelled as a 'contemporary' artist. This suspicion led us to reassess the authenticity (for want of a better word) of having labelled 61 (56%) artists mentioned (52 different artists, some referenced by multiple teachers) by our interviewees as contemporary; purely on the premise that they are alive and active today. In the context of section 2.3.3, this chronological premise was, we feel, appropriate, but when discussing, discretely, 'contemporary art

practice' we felt it opportunity to look again at this data.

In Fig. 11, we looked to subcategorise the artists our interviewees referenced into three imperfect groups (imperfect for reasons discussed below). If the definition of 'contemporary art practice' were to be limited only to those individuals who recently started producing 'seminal' works (recognised as conceptually or commercially valuable through representation with a named gallery), then just 19 would qualify. If one chose to qualify only artists with elite gallery representation in the art market this might reduce the number to just four; Njideka Akunyilli Crosby (David Zwirner); Lucy Jones (Flowers Gallery); Rachel Jones (Thaddaeus Ropac); and Mickalene Thomas (Lehmann Maupin). The extent to which art teachers are aware to this, concerned by this, or would direct pupils to consider the cultural capital of an artist's contemporary practice is uncertain.

'Contemporary' subcategories	Freq.	%	Example
Alive, but renowned for seminal work produced in the 20th century	17	33%	Frank Auerbach
Renowned for having produced seminal work very recently	19	37%	Njideka Akunyili Crosby
Obscure (no gallery representation) but producing work very recently	16	31%	Andrea Joseph
Total	52		

Fig.11: An imperfect means of subcategorising 'contemporary' art practice

Another third of the contemporary artists named by interviewees certainly command high esteem in the arts and cultural sector (and may still be working), but perhaps produced their most impactful works over forty or fifty years ago; Frank Auerbach; Jim Dine; or Yayoi Kusama, for example. The final third of artists named were making work today but receiving little or no public recognition for their practice. This included some emerging artists, artist/teachers, vernacular artists, and others.

We wanted to produce 'subcategories' of contemporary art influences in the classroom (as reported in Fig. 11) because we felt the generic category might otherwise hide an illuminating internal diversity. We recognise this as an imperfect resource, not least because we remain sceptical of any attempt, including our own, to delineate contemporary art practice with any certainty (it is a slippery, subjective and contextual term). Alternative strategies would be possible; Neil Walton's (2022) typology of art concepts includes three potentially definitive characteristics of contemporary art practice which we might well have applied here, and the art market often applies the term 'ultracontemporary' to delineate 'up-and-coming' artists under 40 years old (Ehrmann 2023). It would still be of interest, we feel, to see deductive analysis of contemporary art references in the context of a more secure theoretical framework. Not least, because outliers in our data bring into question the subcategories we chose. For example, there was a group of applied artists referenced; illustrators, or graphic designers – for whom cultural or social impact would not be measure in recognition from commercial galleries at all. We therefore would not want to suggest that cultural or social impact is the only legitimising factor in selecting curriculum content; individual teachers should be encouraged to take their own view.

This may also be a relevant space to touch on the relationship between some contemporary art practitioners mentioned by interviewees and the exist-

ence of a 'school art' style, a practice first described by Efland (1976) and explored by others since (Gude 2013; Wild 2011). Efland theorised that 'art that is made in school isn't about art as it exists beyond the school; it may be more a function of the school life-style itself' (1976, 39). If 'school life-style' is accepted as a significant influence on the priorities of art teachers (as well as pupils), it may explain the predominance of accuracy, observation, and evaluation over self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking as evidenced in section 2.3. If such concerns are then also allowed to lead the choice of artists attached to curriculum content, it explains why realist painters of still-life such as Janet Fish, or Jöel Penkman, are significantly over-represented among 'contemporary artists' – their work retrospectively attached to curriculum to justify more traditional artistic aims.

2.6 Summary and conclusions

Based on the analysis of the data collected in 2024, the art curriculum taught in schools can be illustratively characterised by:

• Pre-planned, structured curriculum 'maps' or learning journeys.

• Projects defined by theme, technical skill, influential artist, or a combination of the above.

• The prevalent use of analogue, 2D media such as drawing, painting, and collage in which pupils work.

• The prevalent use of artwork by white, heterosexual, male artists without disability.

• The importance placed on technical, or practical, skill, including the manipulation of materials and accurate drawing.

• The teaching of the 'formal elements' as a perceived 'foundation' in art.

• The creation of opportunities for pupils to think in analytical and evaluative ways, and to experience the thinking processes associated with artistic creation and making.

• Little evidence of research skills, or self-expression, being prioritised.

• The almost total lack of pre-20th century artwork.

• Limited use of contemporary artists renowned for recently producing seminal works.

• Limited cross-curricular working.

• Limited mention of digital or 3D media.

At key stage 4, pupils were generally afforded more agency in both media and artistic influence, and the assessment objectives of examination boards were employed more visibly in the structuring of curriculum.

There was considerable variation across the sample regarding the extent to which 'contemporary art practices' might be described as significant. In many settings, aside from reference to artists alive and working today, there was little evidence of 'contemporary art practice' being a big influence at all.

Questions for policymakers and practitioners

The following questions have been framed in response to the findings discussed in this chapter.

• Why, in 2024, does their remain such little engagement with digital, photographic, and moving-image materials and media? What does this mean for the continued disconnect between school art, art school, and skills seen in the contemporary creative industries?

• Would a curriculum that included a more ethnically diverse range of artistic references be more representative of learners, and wider society in England?

• Is sufficient attention being paid to the inherent quality and cultural impact of artistic references being used to support the curriculum, or are references more frequently being chosen based on supporting predefined, technical priorities?

The following questions were asked by Downing and Watson in 2004 and remain pertinent twenty years later:

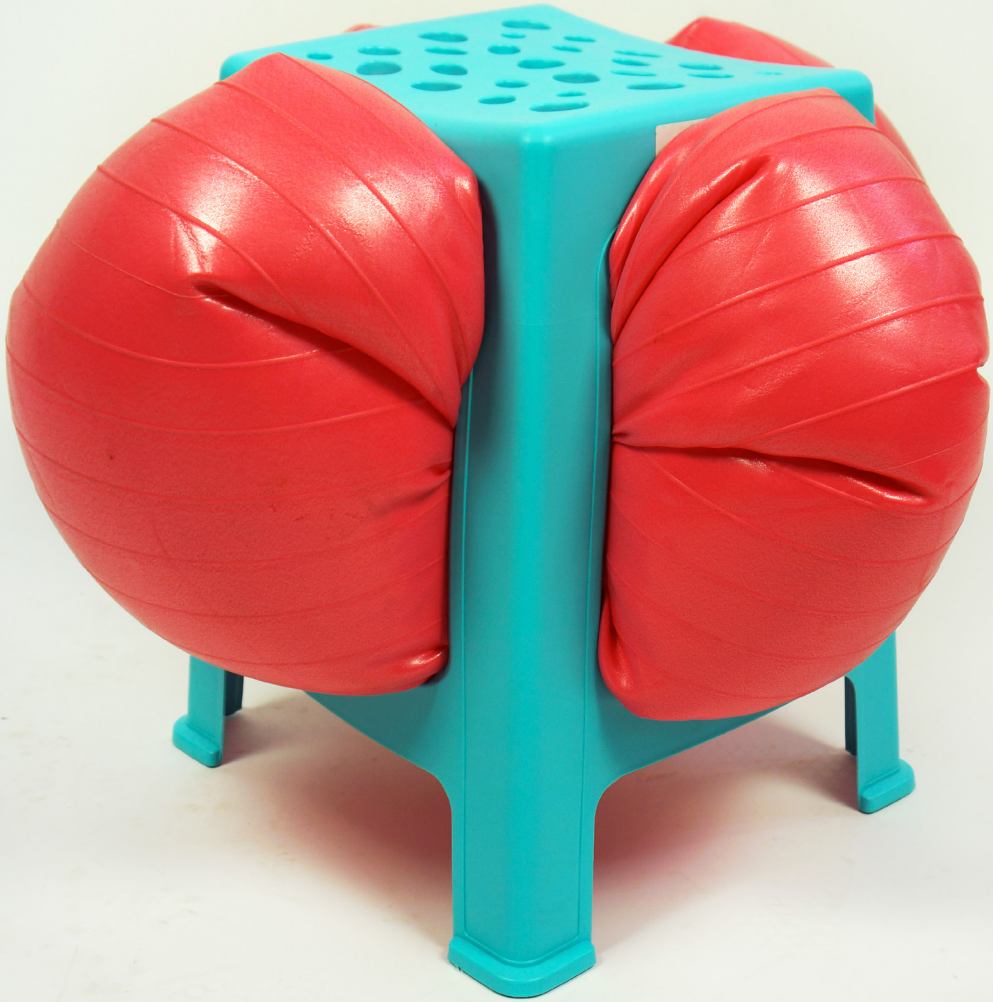
• Should efforts be made to achieve a greater integration of skills development and the exploration of meaning, issues and context? Does the teaching of skills exclude the exploration of meaning, issues, and context?

• Should it be assumed that the exploration of meaning, issues, and expressions should chronologically follow the acquisition of art-making skills?

• Is sufficient attention being paid in art to the teaching of research skills,

and in particular the critical use of the internet?

Factors influencing the choice of art curriculum content



3 Factors influencing the choice of art curriculum content

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 revealed some significant findings concerning the content of the art curriculum taught in secondary schools, and how this has and has not changed over the preceding 20 years. As in the original School Art, this research also sought to ascertain the factors that might influence decisions concerning curricula content. Interviews with heads of departments and art teachers included a number of approaches to address this issue.

We asked interviewees about their own professional background and training, since it was deemed that these might have some impact on curriculum choices. We also collected some data on the type and context of schools and art departments our interviewees worked in, and asked directly what they themselves thought were the key influences in making curriculum content choices. When time permitted (with 21 interviewees), we shared images of eight artworks and asked interviewees to comment on the suitability of each for inclusion in the curriculum.

In 2004, Downing and Watson (2004, 53) organised this section of their report by looking at the 'widest' influences first – national policies and cultural norms, before moving closer to the influence individual teachers' characteristics might play in curriculum design. We have elected to follow a different structure – one that demonstrates the influences that remain similar to those of 20 years ago, and those that we suggest have emerged since. Therefore, what follows is organised into three sections:

• Orthodoxies: here we look again at influences that were discussed in some detail in 2004 and recurred in 2024, including the place of the National Curriculum, the effective management of limited resources, and the qualifications typical of teachers interviewed (section 3.2).

• Progressions: here we look at prominent influences in our data but were not a noted priority in 2004, including both the limitations placed on teachers' curricular agency through membership of multi-academy trusts, and new attempts towards socially diversified curriculum content (section 3.3).

• A third section looks at the processes of curriculum content choice (section 3.4), and then we report on the individual responses of teachers to art images (section 3.5).

3.2 Orthodoxies: influences with similar enabling or inhibiting effect on art curriculum in 2024 as in 2004

3.2.1 The National Curriculum

The first School Art was published just one year after the last iteration of

a National Curriculum (2003). Downing and Watson (2004, 54) relayed the changes that had been made since the initial National Curriculum of 1988 – the revision had dropped a prescribed 'canon of artistic examples' and defined only attainment targets rather than delivery methods. In 2024, it has been over a decade since the last revision of the National Curriculum (DfE 2013). After a brief expansion in detail during a 2007 iteration (QCA 2007), the ethos of 2003 was echoed once again in 2013, with the statutory requirements reduced to just two pages of 'aims' and 'attainment targets' for art and design education at key stage 3. Therefore, despite the social and political changes in-between, it might be claimed with some accuracy that the national documentation for art curriculum in England has remained relatively unchanged in over twenty years.

Art teachers' apathy towards recognising the National Curriculum's effect on content choice also remains consistent. As discussed in section 2.2.2, one interviewee mentioned it as encouraging them towards diversity in artistic influences, while another dismisses it as less influential than the demographic of their pupils. No one else thought to mention it as influential at all so, while we did not explicitly ask whether the National Curriculum was a limitation on the choice of curriculum content in 2024, it would be surprising if any of our interviewees were to answer yes. Other documents at a national scale that might offer authoritative guidance on curriculum design, such as the Ofsted Research Review Series: Art and Design (Ofsted 2023), or the National Society of Education in Art and Design's The Big Landscape Curriculum Toolkit (NSEAD 2024) also go unmentioned by interviewees.

One probable reason for disinterest in the National Curriculum among art teachers, aside from its inherent ambiguity and brevity, is the changing landscape of English schooling. Academies are state-funded schools in-

dependent of all local authority control, first announced in 2000 but not a significant presence in England until the Academies Act in 2010. Today 81.9% of secondary schools are academies (DfE, 2024b) – and need not follow the National Curriculum. Many are members of multi-academy trusts, the leadership of which can have significant influence on the culture, ethos and curriculum of the members. Therefore, it might be assumed that even the weak influence of the National Curriculum in 2004 (when 25% of interviewees suggested it had some limitation on their art curriculum content) has since been significantly usurped by the requirements or priorities of quasi-independent academy trusts. Interviewees' perceptions of this emergent influence are discussed in section 3.3.

Alternatively, it might be suggested that the influence of the National Curriculum can be seen in the content delivered by teachers, only that they are not aware of, or would rather ignore, this influence. For example, two of the four aims of the National Curriculum (2013, 1) focus on technical proficiency, and knowledge of 'great artists···and the historical and cultural development of their art forms'. We saw in Chapter 2 how prevalent the former was, with manipulation of materials and the formal elements a majority concern in our sample schools. The latter, suggestive of canonical art historical knowledge, was also present in some departments where they put 'spotlights of certain artists', felt it 'important that students learn about the canon', or grudgingly followed a 'representational, uh, type of Western art' in their curriculum:

We look at a lot of artists from a while ago...so it's all the classics really, yeah.
Teacher of art, Bristol

Key stage 3 is still more focused around your kind of traditional historical artists...I think the rationale is kind of that of teaching the basics and using that time to teach skills. Teacher of art, London

Probably, the short, open-ended guidance of the National Curriculum's 2013 iteration allows most art departments' curriculum content to meet minimum expectation; it also makes suggestions of causal links between the policy and practice impossible.

3.2.2 Resources

In 2004, six different resource deficits were referenced by teachers as inhibiting their curriculum content choices: space, art materials, art images, computers, access to galleries/artist studios, and time. Given the advances in personal digital technology and classroom computing, it was not surprising that access to 'computers' and 'art images' was not noted by interviewees as limiting curricula content in 2024. The proliferation of images online, and the capacity of most teachers to instantly display these on large digital whiteboards, creates, if anything, a problem of the oversupply of artistic images.

We've got soooo many resources about artists that we pull from. Teacher of art, London

We have parts of some lessons basically...where we just flick through slides and they're all very different. Teacher of art, Bristol

However, some of the other resource challenges faced in 2004 remain.

Perhaps most prevalent was a sense that reduced contact time put pressure on the curriculum content to provide foundational skills for further study more efficiently, or at the expense of creative opportunity. Teachers spoke of 'needing' to cover a certain quantity of media each year, leading to prescriptive pedagogies, and technical skill training taking priority over time for deep thinking.

The Cultural Learning Alliance (Cains 2021) cited the number of hours of art teaching in secondary schools in November 2010 as 159,800, and the number of hours in November 2020 as 138,136, a percentage change of -14% over the decade. This decline is echoed in the pressures communicated by interviewees, where, for example, two schools had introduced GCSE optionality at Year 9, another delivering the subject in rotation with other creative arts – with a total of eight lessons for art and design education during the key stage 3 years. In association, some teachers were acutely aware of the need (within this shrinking contact time) to explicitly promote key stage 4 study through the content of year 9, given competition to retain learners within the limiting envelope of the English Baccalaureate (Brown 2018).

...trying to introduce the students to how art fits into industry, as a means to encourage them to maybe take the subject for the next level...
Teacher of art, London.

As well as time, there were comments about the lack of art materials limiting the ambitions of curriculum content. One teacher spoke about feeling lucky to retain access to a kiln, despite a lack of digital resource. Another spoke on trying to teach every 'possible material that we have the capacity to teach at this school', while feeling 'conscious that if a school has a bigger budget or more teachers···than they're [pupils] probably getting something better'

(Head of department, Swindon). Another Head of department in Swindon stressed the challenge of finding high quality candidates to fill vacant teaching positions, describing their hopes for the curriculum as limited by their perception of a paucity of 'teachers that are able to deliver that'. While no interviewees spoke discretely about space as a limiting factor on their curriculum content choices, it is worth repeating that just 15% of the media mentioned by art teachers as being used by pupils in their projects was 3D. This is suggestive of a curriculum design tacitly responding either to a lack of space, resource, specialist expertise or most likely, all of the above.

In more positive terms interviewees noted the work they do with galleries, artists, or on trips to cultural institutions. This engagement began with teachers being enthused by exhibitions they had seen and 'feel excited about', through to 'gallery lists' given to pupils, or dynamic curricular content responsive to local opportunities to engage with art:

We've put some of those current exhibitions that have been happening in our schemes to try...so that we can actually say what you can go and see now there, and things like that. Teacher of art, Birmingham

A number of interviewees spoke on gallery trips as an important starting point for key stage 4 learning; 'that's what we're going to be talking about when we get back into the classroom' and at its most integrated, workshops with cultural institutions and collaborative activity in galleries were mentioned.

In summary; time and art materials (and likely space), remain significant inhibitors of curriculum content among our interviewees. No longer does the 'limited capacity' of school libraries restrict access to a full range of

art movements (Downing and Watson 2004, 63). Access to computers and imagery was not mentioned as problematic in 2024, and while there no doubt remains an uncompensated administrative burden in organising visits to galleries and arts organisations, and 'shortage of funding to access them' (Downing and Watson 2004, 63), these opportunities were mentioned positively and relatively frequently by our interviewees.

3.2.3 Teachers' Qualifications, Interests, and Departmental Cultures

In the first School Art, Downing and Watson (2004, 64) looked to the 'factors associated with individual teachers' that might influence the curriculum content, including their training and qualifications, capacity to 'keep up' with developments in the 'art world', and teachers' own preferences.

For the purposes of making some comparison, albeit with caution given sample size and variability, in Fig.12 we have tabulated the difference in qualifications between the 2004 sample and our own, twenty years later. We would suggest a broadly comparable split between those from a fine art tradition (44% in 2004, and 58% in 2024) and those from the applied arts/art history. As in 2004, Heads of department were more likely to have a degree in fine art than were class teachers. Where a generous difference can be noted is in the number of interviewees self-identifying as having worked, or working, as an artist, which was more than double in 2024. Whether this suggests art teachers today are more likely to be drawn from industry, hold a portfolio career as both educator and practitioner, or align closely to the concept of the artist/teacher identity than in 2004, is difficult to say.

Downing and Watson noted the publicly funded Artist Teacher Scheme (which was set up by the NSEAD with funding from the Arts Council in England from 1999 until the early 2010s) as evidence that many at this time saw art teachers reengaging with their own practice as valuable activity. Perhaps, despite having been defunct for over a decade, this scheme (and

What is your artistic background?		
2004		
Category	no.	%
Fine Art degree	24	44%
Craft/textile/design degree	30	56%
Art History degree	0	0%
Total	54	100%
Worked or working as an artist	14	26%

2024		
Category	no.	%
Fine Art degree	21	58%
Craft/textile/design degree	13	36%
Art History degree	2	6%
Total	36	100%
Worked or working as an artist	21	58%

Fig.12: Response to the question 'What is your artistic background?' in our 2024 sample, compared to the 2004 sample.

the principles that established it) have influenced many of our interviewees' identification as practitioners too. Whatever the cause, we might suggest that today, in a policy context at best apathetic to the subjects' instrumental value, there is something politically subversive in teachers' collective self-identification as artists (Matthews 2018). More research in this area might ask interesting questions about the identity and positioning of art teachers in secondary schools today.

Very few of our interviewees commented on their initial teacher preparation or continual professional development as formative in their curriculum content design. We did not explicitly ask them about this so did not expect significant contribution on this potential influence; although were surprised that it did not feature at least among early career teachers' identified influences. It would be interesting to seek student art teachers' views on the extent to which their initial teacher education prepares them to make curriculum content choices, and in what capacity. While the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (DfE 2024c, 15) does mandate student teachers learn 'how to deliver a carefully sequenced and coherent curriculum' that ensures 'pupils have relevant domain-specific knowledge', our anecdotal experience suggests that when placed in schools, few student teachers are granted the critical agency to significantly amend or critique curriculum content (Grant & Kidwell 2024). Few, therefore, may look back on this time as influential in the curriculum content they deliver.

3.3 Progressions: enabling or inhibiting influences on art curriculum notable in 2024

In this section, we describe two influences mentioned by interviewees that

we felt told us something, thematic, of today's art educational context. Both came through strongly in an inductive reading of contributions. The first is the influence of multi-academy trust (MAT) institutional working methods, and arguably symptomatic of a wider, global shift in a teaching profession increasingly shaped by the demands of surveillance accountability in a competitive neoliberal marketplace (Ball 2017). The second is interviewees' overwhelming interest in moving towards a more inclusive curriculum content. Neither of these influences were present in Downing and Watson's (2004) School Art.

3.3.1 The prescriptive influence of MATs on 'departmental ethos'

In 2004 there were fewer than ten 'academies' in England, and the capacity for these schools to be coopted by one another or have external leadership imposed through the mechanism of trust governance was yet to be legislated. In 2024 81.9% (over 2400) secondary schools are now academies, i.e., independent of local authority control, and not obliged to teach the National Curriculum. In theory, this radical structural change might have allowed for teachers' agency over the content of their classroom curricula to flourish in diverse, authentic, or local directions. However, 64% of all secondary schools are now in the control of a multi-academy trust, too. In a trust, individual schools lose all separate legal identity and become the local site through which the MAT delivers the central contract it has established with the Department for Education (West & Wolfe 2018). In this context, the power to make operational decisions moves further from the classroom than ever; in the largest trusts, centralised curricula are designed and distributed across 50 schools or more, often scattered across the country.

This significant shift in the nature of art curriculum design, we assume, explains why so many of our interviewees (at least eight; all working in MATs) were clear that their capacity to influence the curriculum was significantly limited; 'their projects are already there', 'established for a long time', or 'it's all prewritten'. This limitation stands in contrast to Downing and Watson's (2004, 67) findings, where 'personal preference' was 'easily the most frequently cited factor' (46% of interviewees) in the curriculum teachers delivered; 'what they liked, what excited them and what they were familiar with'. Indeed, Downing and Watson were able to make the following general statement in 2004:

> *Art teachers agreed that whatever the departmental approach, individual teachers were accorded a considerable amount of autonomy in defining the actual content of any module taught, in order to play to their own strengths and interests.* Downing and Watson (2004, 59)

While three of our interviewees did cite 'staff interests' as influential, this was either in the context of control; 'within that structure there has to be wiggle room for individuals to say 'I've seen this and I really like it'' (Teacher of art, London), or framing this negatively, as a 'bias' based on 'comfort' (Head of department, Swindon). While a rationalised curriculum should certainly consider more than the artistic tastes of an individual teacher, we might argue that the local expertise and enthusiasm of a classroom teacher with a stake in their content/context holds significant value to the learner.

While early career teachers were the most likely to describe a lack of agency (having never experienced control over their curriculum content, some were surprised to be asked about choice at all), established Heads of department

also made reference to the instructional expectations of MAT leadership, with one teacher particularly frustrated by the traditionalist position of their trust's CEO:

...xx who owns it, was like 'we need to just do a course about master painters'... Head of Department, Swindon

Some interviewees described altering prescribed curriculum, either in areas where their trust had not specialised the content; 'the only freedom I have is with A-level photography' (Teacher of art, Bristol), or where they felt an ethical compulsion to make amendments; 'I've changed a bit because at xx 70% of the students are Muslim and I was like, there's no Muslim artists in this...' (Teacher of art, Bristol).

We would recommend further research on the curriculum design practices of MATs, and how this influences the content delivered in art classrooms. While some of our interviewees had little autonomy, others may well find an effective community of collaborative curriculum design practice facilitated through partnership with other schools.

3.3.2 Attempts towards decolonisation and diversification

Where interviewees did speak on an agency to affect change in curriculum content, there was one theme that predominated (over 20 mentions). Many expressed concerns about the limited breadth of artists studied in their curriculum[9]; 'we don't acknowledge their culture in any of our curriculum...

[9] As detailed in section 2.3.2, 65% of the artists mentioned were male, 82% were white. Only 6% publicly describe themselves as people with disabilities, and another 6% publicly identify as other than heterosexual.

that's really bad' (Head of department, London). For some (4), the solution was to look to local artists, or artists with a social-media presence whose work might be inherently 'more interesting to the kids'. However, the primary rationale for representational anxiety appeared to be an ethical principle that ethnically-diverse demographics of pupil should see themselves reflected in the curriculum; 'the majority of them are not white students – to have artists that relate to them and their heritage...modelling that there are people from these backgrounds that make art' (Head of department, London).

We're a very multicultural school and there is a need for our curriculum to reflect the backgrounds of the children that we teach and for them to be able to see themselves in the curriculum so that's been a real deciding factor about what we do. Teacher of art, London

For some, this had been a recent revelation; 'I'm conscious now of having a very ethnically diverse cohort', for others an iterative process; 'we review... frequently to make sure that it's not...make sure it's as inclusive as possible'; 'we're just constantly trying to make sure everything's relevant to the students and everyone's represented'.

The one I'm finding hard is we have a lot of Colombian and Ecuadorian children, and find it very hard to find interesting references for them, but they are out there. Head of department, London

Others did not mention their pupils' characteristics, but justified curriculum diversification as about fair or rich access to an enhanced art historical canon; 'more sort of exposure across time and across, don't you know, across diversity'. In addition, others noted that teachers should adapt as art historical conventions have changed; from 'that very old school way of teaching',

'not talking about aboriginal art in the same way as we did, you know, 50 years ago' (Head of department, Birmingham). One teacher did mention their initial teacher education as a space where 'they really got us thinking about how to deliver a broader curriculum and how to decolonise' (Teacher of art, London).

Although not explored in detail, interviewees demonstrated mixed views on whether it was important to surface an artists' ethnicity in the classroom. For example, one teacher from London noted that 'if we say an African name from an African artist, the kids will not pick up on the fact that they're African', as evidence that the artist's heritage should be explicitly taught. In contrast, a Head of department from Swindon reflected on the danger of tokenistic curricula; 'we looked at Frank Bowling...it was in part to diversify, but he was making really good work'. For some, allowing more pupils agency to select influences was seen as an organic means to diversify curricula – certainly at key stage 4, where 'putting ownership on the students and what they want' (Teacher of art, Birmingham) was prioritised over a prescribed canon.

For rich, contemporary research into minoritised ethnic artists in the art classroom we strongly recommend the Visualise report (Begum et al. 2024). This focused exploration of race and art education offers potential explanation as to why an authentic, inclusive curriculum is still atypical in English secondary schools, including those in our sample. Among other findings, the report (Begun et al. 2024, 34/35) cites a 2016 statistic where 94% of art and design teachers identify as white, and makes clear that published key stage 4 exam papers significantly under-represent minoritised ethnic artists (with white artists constituting 91.6% of all named references). In a context where 66% of English school children identify as white British (DfE 2022), it

is positive to see many of our interviewees' commitment to making changes such that the curriculum delivered might connect with the lived experiences of their pupils.

Alongside consideration of ethnic diversification, there was also a noticeable interest in other inclusive priorities across the data – introducing more gender equality, for example; 'wherever it's possible to use a female artist instead of a male artist...to balance that curriculum' (Head of department, Swindon). This change, again, was often mentioned in the context of pupil demographics.

Just trying to build a balanced curriculum...really trying to diversify everything and, you know...because there were women artists in the Impressionist, sort of, era as well, yeah. Because we are a girl's school that is really important. Teacher of art, London

As well as those that spoke of redressing traditionalist art histories; 'to avoid white dead male, Western sort of things' (Teacher of art, Birmingham), one teacher noted the feminisation typical of art education (Dalton 2001), and expressed an interest in pedagogies that might encourage more boys to take the subject at key stage 4 too.

Beyond ethnicity and gender, teachers spoke about delivering or trying to introduce curricula that was intentionally inclusive of artists with disabilities (3), LGBTQ+ artists, (2), and neurodiverse artists too (1). Only one teacher expressed concern that a 'broad range' of artistic sources might lead to a curriculum 'actually, probably quite thin in many ways', suggesting this to be a minority view.

Initially, it might present as paradoxical to see so many teachers describe a curriculum predominantly populated with white, male artists, and simultaneously express a commitment to diversity. However, the impression interviewees created, often, was one of transitionary change – for many, their commitment to inclusive curriculum was framed as an ongoing process; 'I'm trying to feed in diverse artists', 'We're pushing to get more varied artists',

I have been partially successful with making it a non-ableist curriculum, but that's on the list of things to do... Head of department, London

At this time, when so many of our interviewees are caught within narrow orthodoxies of school art curriculum but seek to diversify the content they deliver (although perhaps not uniformly across key stage 3 and 4), we would suggest further research and outreach to empower art teachers to create inclusive classrooms would be timely and impactful.

In this section we highlighted two themes that we identified from our data. Teachers today have less agency to adapt, or personalise, the curriculum they deliver. This appears to be happening despite a thin national policy requirement, and the potential independence promised by academisation. Our data suggests that the top-down control mechanisms of some MATs, and/or the competitive nature of the educational landscape, has led to teachers without authority to make changes, or lacking the time and confidence to do so.

Where teachers are making changes, one influence dominates: a commitment to a more diverse, inclusive range of artists featuring in the curriculum pupils' encounter. It is clear that for many this is work in progress, and that while some have the resource and training to progress, others lack clear

guidance in how best to approach this challenge.

3.4 The processes of curriculum content choice

Downing and Watson (2004, 57) wrote about the 'art department context' as a 'significant' influence in curriculum content choices. In section 3.3.1 we suggested that for our interviewees it was increasingly common, to varying degree, for these choices to be made, rationalised, and reviewed externally. This is problematic where: 'there was no real explanation of why you would do something...no overview of why you were doing it and what the process was' (Teacher of art, Cambridgeshire).

There were however some interviewees who did mention curriculum content choices being made in more collegiate, or local, contexts; we want here to illustrate the nature of these processes, where described. Dialogue was described as pivotal to identifying need for curriculum changes (3), including critical conversation; 'I've had a conversation with my head of department, and like...why are we still doing him [a specific artist]? Surely there's other people out there?' (Teacher of art, Somerset); or 'She was like, "I don't know why we're doing Egyptian art, we've not got any Egyptian kids" and I went, "no, no" - we've got a lot of East Asian kids' (Head of department, Milton Keynes).

Some recognised curriculum design as an ongoing, dynamic concern; 'definitely not a work complete – a living thing I will be picking across, right?' (Teacher of art, Bristol). Here curriculum could be cyclically reviewed and amended:

Obviously, we reflect on this, you know, I mean, we have department meetings every week where we discuss what we're doing, what's working well, etcetera...and if something isn't working, you know, then we're not afraid to take it out. Head of department Warwickshire

When it came to selecting new content following departmental review, in a few examples this was democratically decided:

We try to pick a range of different artists. So, this year xx wanted to put in say, for example, some more traditional artists. So, we swapped out Penkman and put in Zane, which actually related well to the acrylic paintings of pens that we did... Head of department, London

Again, in contrast to Downing and Watson's (2004, 59) findings that a 'considerable amount of autonomy' allowed individual teachers to define content, only one of our interviewees made it clear that individuals might autonomously adapt departmental curriculum to their own expertise or interests:

xx will probably do four of those [British Artists], but he might do four different ones. xx will do a mixture of those as well, and then she might put in a couple of her own and then next year I might do one of hers that she's chosen. Head of department, Cambridgeshire

Our findings indicate that a full continuum of different art department curriculum design dynamics is in place across English schools. Some seemingly have little or no agency to make significant changes to their curriculum content, others work collectively within departments to make ongoing curriculum choices, and only a few trust to individual teachers to decide upon the content delivered in their classroom. Each approach likely brings with it

advantages and disadvantages; further analysis of efficacy would likely be of interest.

3.5 Teacher responses to a selection of art images

In 2004, insights into the way images were, or might be, chosen as curriculum content were gained following what Downing and Watson (2004, 70) termed their 'more experimental research exercise'. This was achieved by showing interviewees a set of eight images of artworks and seeking their response. We retained five images used in the 2004 research, but eliminated one from the original list (made by a pupil at Corstorphine Primary School in Edinburgh). We also added an additional three images made by artists since the 2004 study, to ensure contemporary art practice was represented, and to diversify the artists whose work featured among the elicitation imagery. Attributions and links to the source for each image can be found in Image References.

Images included from the 2004 study:

Damien Hirst (1991) The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living.
Richard Billingham (1995) Untitled.
David Shrigley (1998) Terrible News – no more treats!
Vincent Van Gogh (1889) Bedroom at Arles.
Andy Warhol (1962) Marilyn X 100.

Images added in 2024:

Karla Black (2011) At Fault.
Sonia Boyce (2022) Feeling Her Way.
Julie Mehretu (2008) Of Other Planes of There (S.R.).

As in 2004, we would want to recognise that this list was not designed to be representative of artistic practice by any scientific or rationalised measure, and as with any selection it is acknowledged there were limitations. Our image selection wasn't employed with a particular intention to be 'provocative' as stated in Downing and Watson's study (2004,70), but to provide a breadth of media, artist characteristics, and conceptual complexity across the images shown.

To mirror the 2004 study, the images were shown, one at a time, to interviewees at the end of the interviews. The open questions, 'Is this an image you would consider using in your art lessons?', 'Why, or why not?' were employed to encourage a discussion between the teacher and the interviewer. Because of time constraints, it wasn't possible to replicate this aspect of the interview with all interviewees, but 21 (58%) did return a response on this activity.

The complexity and richness of an artwork can, naturally, be difficult to express when reproduced as a small image. Downing and Watson (2004) recognised this limitation when interviewees were interviewed in person and in 2024; given many of our interviews were conducted online using digital images, we too were aware of this issue. When necessary descriptive context of each artwork (scale, sound etc.) was provided to mitigate this limitation. Some responses relied on, or revealed, interviewees' prior knowledge of the

artwork depicted in the images.

We tabulated teacher reactions using the same categories employed in 2004. Where responses fell outside of the codes Downing and Watson (2004, 71) inducted from their interview data, this is discussed below. The coding is as follows:

• Positive verdict: interviewees answering 'yes' were already using, or would consider using, the image in art lessons.

• Teacher expression of personal reaction: teachers responded by expressing their own personal reaction to the image, divided into positive and negative.

• Teacher expression of their prediction of pupil reaction: again, divided into positive and negative.

• Example to pupils: teachers expressed their view on the image as an example to pupils, without reference to a particular aspect of learning.

• Example of genre: teachers referred to the potential of the image to illustrate or represent a particular genre.

• Content/issue: teachers referred to the potential of the image to lead to consideration or discussion of meaning, content or issues in the image.

• Question of art: teachers referred to the potential of the image to stimulate a consideration of the question, 'what is art?', or to be a provocation for debate in the classroom.

• Skills: teachers referred to the potential of the image to support the learning of particular art skills.

• Over-exposure: teachers referred to the extent to which the image is at risk of becoming overused.

Image 1: At Fault (2011) Karla Black. Black's large, floor-based sculpture is constructed from crumpled, pastel-hued sugar paper and chalk. This image was identified by seventeen interviewees as an artwork they could include in their curriculum, although none had. Teachers described the artwork as one that could generate discussion; 'I'd have that on the board and ask, you know, what do you think it's made from?' (Teacher of art, West Midlands), but didn't define how to develop practical responses to the work. Some felt that pupils would question the value of the work, given its ambiguous meaning and lack of readily identifiable application of technical expertise. Interviewees discussed the possibility of the work generating new content in their curriculum; 'I want to bring in more sculpture to our curriculum, which we lack' (Teacher of art, Bristol), but also how it might be employed in existing sculptural projects.

I haven't used that image, but I wouldn't see why we wouldn't because obviously, you know, even in year seven when we've got the sculpture project, you know, we will, we will look at images, you know, and like, you know, analyse them, talk about them. You could have that as a starter activity, for example. Teacher of art, Warwickshire

Noticeably, seven interviewees felt that At Fault could only meaningfully be used with students at GCSE level, or with pupils aged fourteen or higher.

	At Fault	Feeling Her Way	Of Other Plans of There (S.R.)
Positive Verdict	17	17	18
Teacher expression of negative personal reaction	0	0	1
Teacher expression of positive personal reaction	2	0	1
Teacher prediction of negative pupil reaction	4	2	2
Teacher prediction of positive pupil reaction	0	0	1
Bad example to pupils	0	0	0
Good example to pupils	2	2	3
Example of genre	2	1	1
Content/issue	0	2	1
Question of art	2	2	0
Skills	3	0	8
Over-exposure	0	0	0
Most likely to be used	1	0	4
Least likely to be used	3	3	1

Fig.13: Responses of art teachers to a selection of images of artworks

The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living	Untitled	Terrible News	Bedroom at Arles	Marilyn x 100
20	14	14	16	18
2	1	2	2	2
0	3	5	0	0
1	0	3	0	0
0	3	0	0	1
0	0	3	0	0
4	0	1	2	2
1	0	2	2	0
0	2	0	2	1
5	3	5	0	0
0	2	1	3	4
0	0	0	4	3
6	1	1	1	6
0	5	6	1	1

I would definitely not use this at key stage 4 (which is really sad) and the reason for that is...the way all examination boards want to see drawing and painting skills. They don't want to see or hear anything about conceptual art or anything about ideas within the creative process which is very, very upsetting because clearly that's the most important, one of the most important factors of art.. Head of department, Birmingham

Image 2: Feeling Her Way (2022) Sonia Boyce. This artwork is an assemblage of sculpture, installation, sound, and film, first shown in the British Pavillion at the 2022 Venice Biennale. Seventeen interviewees expressed a strong desire to use it, four that they would not; that it would be too complicated to integrate into a curriculum. Over half the interviewees said they would use this artwork at key stage 4 and one teacher would only employ it with key stage 5 pupils. Only one teacher was able to say that they used Sonia Boyce's practice in their curriculum currently.

Commentary such as: 'I would put it on a slide, maybe – I wouldn't develop an entire lesson on it...lack of equipment' (Teacher of art, Birmingham) was suggestive of an expectation that artworks would be introduced into curriculum primarily for technical or material imitation, and that sculptural works were therefore problematic. The sculptural medium was also reason for another teacher to dismiss Feeling Her Way as effective classroom curriculum content; 'because I think you need to see it'. Where it was considered for curriculum content, the conceptual value of the artwork was noted as of interest:

It's not something that I would be scared to teach the students about; to see what their opinion is and see if you could kind of like dig a little deeper in what their understanding would be. Teacher of art, Birmingham

Similarly, Boyce's founding role in the Black Arts Movement was recognised as a means (albeit without definition) to introduce more diverse artist representation into the school curriculum:

And I think that's a really important theme that I don't cover enough in school sometimes, you know, the fact that the Black art movement, [emerged in the Black Country where the school is situated] I think that's something that's kind of coming. Head of department, West Midlands

Yeah, yes - because Sonia Boyce is a diverse artist...something that we are trying to promote in our school. Teacher of art, Bristol

Image 3: Other Planes of There(S.R.) (2018) Julie Mehretu. This artwork – an abstract painting constructed from overlapping colour fields and graphic marks – elicited strong and largely favourable responses, with a number of interviewees (8) expressing how Other Planes of There (S.R.) could be employed in teaching the formal elements, and specifically mark making skills. Remarkably, five teachers independently drew comparison to the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky, and expressed that the combination of these artists' work could enrich a project they already teach; 'it's...reminiscent of kind of Kandinsky's style of movement...within the artwork' (Teacher of art, Birmingham).

Some expressed enthusiasm for the artwork as 'a single piece in a fun lesson with layers and mark making', but that they might 'struggle to string a scheme of work' (Teacher of art, Bristol) around the artist's practice. As witnessed with some interviewees' anxiety attached to Images 1 and 2, Mehretu's contemporary practice (which resists categorisation into tradition-

al genres of representation), again elicited teacher concern about external assessment conventions.

I would...feel nervous about that being a main source of response, especially GCSE... Because it's not showing a traditional technical skill, which is all the exam boards want to see in order to give you top grades.
Head of department, London

Image 4: The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living (1991) Damien Hirst. At the time of the first study in 2004, this artwork – a tiger shark suspended in a glass display case of formalin and part of Hirst's ongoing series Natural History (1991-) – was over ten years old, and had gained notoriety through its exhibition, Sensation at the Royal Academy in Autumn 1997.

In 2004 the image of The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living achieved the highest 'likely to appeal to pupils' score among interviewees. Downing and Watson speculated this related either to the artist's infamy, or a 'morbid fascination with dead animals' (2004, 75). In 2024, it still received a strong response; twenty interviewees agreed they would use the artwork as a classroom resource (including one who simultaneously expressed a personal dislike of the work). Six interviewees felt this the most valuable image to use in school curriculum – and five interviewees noted its potential value when raising the question 'What is art?' with pupils. For one teacher, this led to reflection on recent structural changes to their practice:

Many years ago, when we had a lot more curriculum time and before we became an Academy, you had a lot more freedom with what you were doing. So now the rules are that all the classes have to be doing the same thing. Whereas before you sort of go your own way...we used to do a whole project around the time of the Turner Prize looking at different types of art and what may, you know, what makes art, art - basically was the project.
Teacher of art, Birmingham

Despite the popularity of this image among teachers none thought to comment on the content of the work as valuable, nor the potential for skills to be attached to study of the work. Perhaps, as an artwork that (for many) has come to symbolise British art of the 1990s, some teachers felt a latent commitment to consider it as content but without specific connection through to their current curriculum.

Such an iconic piece, I think we would be happy building a debate around that with year 7 because - with all our key stages really - because it is so accessible, but it would give so many things to talk about.
Teacher of art, London

Image 5: Untitled (1995) Richard Billingham. This photograph, a candid image of the photographer's parents (whom he has described in dysfunctional terms) kissing in a domestic setting, was identified by many interviewees – particularly those who have been teaching for more than ten years – as useful and important. This is in contrast to 2004, when teachers felt very strongly that pupils would have a negative reaction to the image (10 of 36). It is noticeable that in 2024, none felt this way, and three felt pupils would respond positively. This might suggest that teachers today expect their pupils to be more liberal or accepting in their views on photography, social

reportage, and/or displays of affection that in 2004.

In line with teacher's discussions 20 years ago, the image was still primarily associated with specific classroom contexts; to support photography GCSE, or 'A' Level and BTEC curricula. Its potential to initiate rich discussion was highlighted, as was its capacity to connect with curricula themes; 'I would definitely use him in photography to talk about candid photography and themes and you know your personal identity' (Teacher of art, Birmingham).

Yes, I've used [this image] at key stage four photography GCSE and spoken to the pupils around what's happening in the image. We created something similar with their own parents and with pupils we created (not a kiss) but something similar about the affection happening in the photograph, yeah. Head of department, Birmingham

While less apparent, a number of interviewees did (as in 2004) express concern about the candid display of affection depicted in Untitled being potentially problematic in a key stage 3 context – that they 'have to be careful'. While for some the 'strong' reaction they anticipated from pupils was a positive reason for sharing with this cohort, others were uncertain about their capacity to effectively work through the themes surfaced by the image, as illustrated in these two different Head of department reflections:

Interesting, really heavily used, especially at key stage four and five, as a kind of way of depicting, uh, more difficult sides of life. And for me, I think it can be. I'm not a massive fan of the work actually, because I think it can be quite, quite triggering for some students. You have to be really aware of who the students are in your classroom. Head of department, London

Because I think you can get into very dangerous areas of sexuality, you know and intimacy and relationships. I wouldn't feel personally comfortable discussing that with younger groups. Head of department, London

Image 6: Terrible News (1988) David Shrigley. This artwork, a faux naïve black and white rendering of a news-stand text simply reads 'Terrible News! No more treats'. In parallel with findings of the 2004 study, this image was the least likely to be used by teachers. Discussions with teachers about the image were highly polarised, with some strongly in favour of using it, others strongly rejecting it, although interestingly, it was also the image most likely to be highlighted as a interviewees' personal favourite, with five individuals expressing an attraction to Shrigley's anarchic aesthetic.

Echoing discussion around the image of The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living, this artwork elicited responses from interviewees focused on their perception of exam board requirements or value judgements, or the imposed expectations of their school curricula. Some interviewees thought that pupils would feel confused by this image and the artists' adoption of a crude visual language, and that they would express difficulty in responding to its less sophisticated technical style and textual format.

No I haven't use this at all, it's very different. It's very difficult, to work without an image on it. Yeah, it's really difficult to explain to a child, but also if a child creates something without an image and it is very difficult to explain that to an examiner yeah, so yeah it stops you from doing anything. Head of department, Birmingham

I wouldn't put it in a lesson...because my boss would hang me! I don't think any moderator would be impressed. Teacher of art, Birmingham

I don't think because I feel like that is not, very aspirational for any artists - I think they would think I was having a laugh. Teacher of art, Bristol

No - I don't know what we can take from his visual aspects, because our school is very much outcomes led. Teacher of art, London

These contributions – suggestive of tensions between teachers' personal sense of artistic value or importance and institutional expectations of curriculum content – would be interesting to explore further. Where justification for the potential inclusion of this image in curriculum was given, interviewees looked to connect the artwork with schemes of work that involved typography and graphics, or recognised how the artists' comedic intent had potential appeal to younger years; 'that would fit nicely with our text-based project', 'an instantly engageable, accessible piece of work'.

Image 7: Bedroom at Arles (1889) Vincent Van Gogh. This well-known image elicited both positive and negative responses from our interviewees, as it did in 2004. In the original study, the image was 'admired as curriculum content and dismissed as badly over-used and boring' (2004, 74). Over-exposure was a popular critique of the image in 2024 too, even among interviewees who still felt obligated to introduce the work.

He appears in the portrait project...but I know it does feel...it's a bit too obvious. I would use Vincent. Head of art, London

There were two rationales typically elicited from interviewees as to why they

might use this image in their curriculum. The most common was as technical exemplar (primarily regarding perspective, which is perhaps strange given the artist's disregard for accurate or consistent depiction of three-dimensional form), followed by those who felt it contextually insightful to make reference to the artist's well documented struggles with his mental health.

...so it's used in year eight when we talk about perspective and drawing their own room and spaces. Teacher of art, London

I think it's important to reference work from the past. I think it's better to do it in a way that that is relevant, you have to make it relevant to the students. So, in terms of Van Gogh, we looked at his mental health and we talked about the reason why he created a lot of the work that he did. Teacher of art, Birmingham

So has been used at times to photograph bedrooms and yeah explaining about mental health. I do a lot with mental health yeah, yeah so talking around that about his mental health at the time - Why is the room blue? - What does it mean? Why is there a solitary bed? - all those things around mental health... Head of department, Birmingham

In both 2004 and 2024, there was a sense among teachers that they should include it even if personally disinterested. An observation of interest here, perhaps; in 2004 very few teachers were interested in the content or context of this artwork (of the 30 who did or would include it in their curriculum, 26 based this decision on skill acquisition). In 2024 we see the artist's association with mental health and neurodiversity emerge as rationale for inclusion of the same image. This suggests that perhaps art teachers find themselves compelled to maintain some canonical curriculum content, but adapting their

use of the same images to the variant educational concerns of the time. More research to understand whether such a phenomenon is typical would be of interest to the authors.

Image 8: Marilyn x 100 (1962) Andy Warhol. This image, an oblong of 100 repeat portraits of Marilyn Monroe, half in block colour, the other in monotone, is unmistakably Warhol's work. It was highly placed by many as most likely to feature in art curriculum content. It is worth noting, perhaps, that Andy Warhol was mentioned proactively in many of the interviews, when asked about the artists who featured in an existing curriculum project. Therefore, it was unsurprising to hear many speak positively about including this image in their curriculum content too. Interviewees expressed the ease with which Warhol's artwork can be interpreted by pupils of different ages, how aspects of his varied practice can be employed to talk about and inspire art-making, or that pupils should be taught about his work due to its continued resonance in contemporary practice. Some interviewees, perhaps cynically, expressed that exam moderators find it easier to examine a project that included Warhol too. The two different Heads of department whose comments are illustrated below well exemplify the, sometimes ambivalent, acceptance among many of our interviewees that study of Warhol provides pupils opportunities.

When we introduce Warhol to them, it's how we sort of introduce the idea of artwork having a deeper meaning. So we show them example of his work. And they talk about the meaning behind the work as opposed to the aesthetics of the work in one lesson. And, you know, year seven can do that and do get onboard with that. Head of department, Birmingham

I've used this lots of times before... it's more well-known and it's acceptable

in a GCSE portfolio. It's just used a lot isn't it and almost like when you're moderating something which has got this in, then you go, yeah, yeah of course that's fine, yes that's fine without really thinking about it anymore. It's easy and I don't like to be a lazy teacher. Because I know we should talk about Andy Warhol. But you know, we don't want to always talk about that.
Head of department, Birmingham

3.6 Summary and conclusions

In 2004, Downing and Watson's (2004, 80) *School Art* was able to suggest and provide evidence for a number of factors influencing the 'somewhat limited' curriculum choices they documented in secondary school art and design departments. The strongest influences cited in 2004 included the personal preferences of individual teachers (who had the agency to adapt curriculum to their preference), and inhibiting resource and time limitations. The report found that less than a third of interviewees felt their curriculum accurately reflected 'current developments in the art world, with some questioning whether it could or even should' (Downing and Watson 2004, 81). The authors speculated that 'a slow-changing orthodoxy' (Downing and Watson 2004, 83) paradoxically led to outdated curricula being recycled despite teachers' acknowledgement of its inadequacy (Grant 2018).

Twenty years later, our findings suggest that several of the influences described by Downing and Watson remain as largely unchanged: national curricula with minimal impact on art curriculum content choice; the limitations of diminishing time and art materials; and the disciplinary backgrounds of many art teachers. There was an interesting uptick in the percentile of teachers self-identifying as artists.

New 'progressions' in the influences teachers mentioned included: diminishing agency among classroom teachers to affect curriculum change (and therefore less personal preference in the content) and a significant sense that the artists referenced in curricula are inadequately narrow in characteristics, including ethnicity and gender. Interestingly, the commentary on this latter influence was suggestive of a lasting 'slow-change orthodoxy' – while many interviewees were aware of the issue and committed to change, the curriculum they delivered was yet to be amended to be materially more inclusive or diverse.

When asked to respond to images of Modern and contemporary artworks as potential content for curricula teachers' comments were mixed, although some developing trends might be noted. Generally, interviewees were open to a wide breadth of images featuring on their curriculum and were typically more likely to find reason for inclusion than exclusion. This included instances where teachers expressed personal disinterest in an image but still felt It a useful teaching resource. There was a distinct bias towards artworks easily associated to practical skill acquisition, with those that eschewed technical artmaking (Billingham's candid photography or Shrigley's faux naivety) named least likely to feature on classroom curriculum. There was also more interest in artworks that opened general, paradigmatic questions about the nature of art practice, than there was artworks included for the value of their own internal content, or the individual issues artworks raised.

Questions for policy makers and practitioners

• If a new National Curriculum is forthcoming in England, how might this provide more influential guidance for practitioners, and in what directions might it effect change? Without additional time, space, and resource for art

curriculum delivery, can any meaningful change be affected?

• Is there evidence that an increase in art teachers self-identifying as artists has had a perceptible impact on the nature and content of the curriculum they deliver?

• Should ITE in England provide additional opportunity for student teachers to consider the content of the curriculum, and practise the design and delivery of new curriculum content?

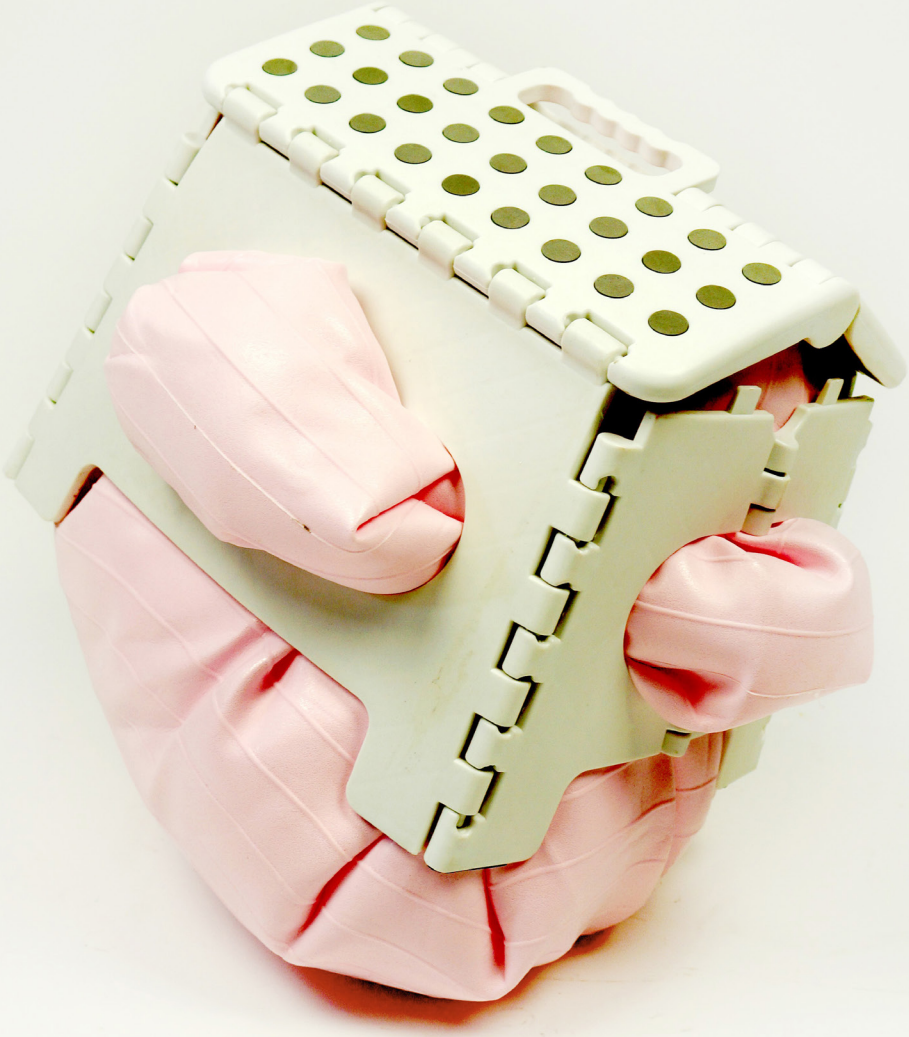
• How can the collective potential of multi-academy trusts be employed to share good practice, without disempowering individual teachers and art departments to respond creatively to their own contexts, experience, and expertise?

• If most art teachers are committed to delivering a more inclusive curriculum, yet many do not, what are the barriers preventing the transition to a meaningful diversity of artists and cultural references featuring in curriculum content?

• Has a reduction in the agency afforded to individual teachers to create curriculum content improved or diminished the quality of curriculum content?

• Looking beyond contemporary art as opportunity to acquire disciplinary knowledge (Ofsted 2023a), to what extent can the themes, issues, and internal value of individual contemporary artworks be explored theoretically in the classroom?

The perceived impact of the secondary school art curriculum



4 The perceived impact of the secondary school art curriculum

4.1 Introduction

Downing and Watson (2004, 84) produced a fourth section to their report specifically concerned with the perceived impact of 'contemporary art practice in the secondary school curriculum'. In our research we chose to make no distinction between schools with a supposed 'contemporary art practice' evident in their curriculum and those without. Therefore, in this section we will briefly discuss the perceived outcomes of the art curriculum, without making comparison between two samples. While this discussion may touch on the specific impact of contemporary art practice, when mentioned by individual teachers, we make no attempt to drill into this data with the specificity evident in 2004.

Teachers were asked, 'What is your perception of what students gain from the art curriculum delivered here?', and were asked to elaborate on any perceived contributions to wider learning.

4.2 The perceived outcomes of the art curriculum

While research literature from the past decade has not included considerable empirical studies on the content of curriculum, there has been a more noticeable discourse on the purpose of art education in English secondary schools (see section 1.2.1). The recently published Ofsted research review was limited to reporting on the aims outlined in the National Curriculum (2013), although the authors also noted that:

> *The study of art enables pupils to understand, appreciate and contribute to a dimension of life that taps into and expresses human innovation, imagination and thought... At an individual level, a high-quality art education can build pupils' ability to appreciate and interpret what they observe, communicate what they think and feel, or make what they imagine and invent. At its best, the subject is both intellectually challenging and creatively demanding.* Ofsted (2023)

In 2004, Downing and Watson categorised their interviewees' comments on the perceived outcomes of their curriculum against seven suggested in Harland et al.'s (2000) Arts Education in Secondary Schools: Effects and Effectiveness:

- Intrinsic and immediate effects of enjoyment and therapeutic outcomes.
- Art form knowledge and skills: knowledge, understanding and appreciation
- Social and cultural domain knowledge (cultural traditions, awareness of environment, social and moral).
- Creativity and thinking skills – e.g. problem solving.
- Communication and expressive skills – as a tool of expression.
- Personal and social development – sense of self and others and social skills.

• Extrinsic transfer effects (research and evaluation skills).

These categories remain useful today, and little empirical work has been undertaken since with such targeted consideration of secondary school arts education outcomes in focus (see section 1.2.1). However, we felt it important to extend the categorisation of outcomes to recognise that there have been developments in the thinking and language applied in the wider field of arts educational literature over the past twenty years. Therefore, we undertook to synthesise Harland et al.'s original categories with six additional sources about arts educational outcomes (Biesta 2017; Eisner 2002; TALE 2019; Ofsted 2023; Wild 2022 and Wild 2024). These were selected from the literature review as particularly apposite, contemporary, and/or impactful, to the issue of expanding the category descriptions employed in School Art in 2004. It should be noted that while we are confident this exercise accurately recognises developmental change in the literature, we did not make this selection through any scientific process. The result were seven categories as follows:

• Enjoyment, wellbeing, and agency.

• Dialogic knowledge with materials – leading to competencies, understanding and appreciation.

• Dialogic knowledge with social, cultural, and natural environments.

• Flexible purposing and growth in tolerance for uncertainty.

• Meaning-making.

• Empathetic and ethical relationships with self and others.

• An aesthetic way of being.

In Fig.14, the frequency with which the full sample of teachers' responses accorded with these categories is recorded. It emerged that a significant majority of our interviewees' perspectives fitted within the typology we synthesised from the literature; where this was not the case we discuss why below. Percentages are given to draw comparison across the effects highlighted by interviewees, although it is worth noting that the overall numbers are small.

As in 2004, these perceptions of the effects of the art curriculum are based on responses to an open question and interviewees were not asked specifically about each type of effect. Thus, the outcomes identified are those that teachers chose to highlight. Downing and Watson (2004, 86) were right to make clear the limitation of this data; we would not assume that interviewees reject categories they did not think to highlight at the time of interview, and there may be effects (such as knowledge of materials) that some consider so inevitable that they did not feel the need to mention.

Enjoyment, Wellbeing, and Agency

For Harland et al. (2000, 26) pupil enjoyment, with potentially 'therapeutic' outcomes, were the 'most immediate or obvious effects of engaging in the arts'. Following more recent literature, we would directly connect enjoyment or wellbeing to pupils' sense of agency (TALE 2019; Wild 2022). Elements of this expanded category were frequently encountered in interviewees' responses. Most common was celebration of the 'independence' pupils were

Effects of art education	No, of times teachers cited effect	% of times teachers cited effect
Enjoyment, wellbeing, and agency	16	24%
Dialogic knowledge with materials – leading to competencies, understanding and appreciation	19	28%
Dialogic knowledge with social, cultural, and natural environments	7	10%
Flexible purposing and growth in tolerance for uncertainty	7	10%
Meaning-making	8	12%
Empathetic and ethical relationships with self and others	10	15%
An aesthetic way of being	1	1%
Total	68	100%

Fig.14: The frequency of interviewees' responses to the question 'What is your perception of what the students gain from the art curriculum delivered here?' tallied against our own categories of effect.

afforded in their art lessons, with the implication that this was rare elsewhere in their schooling; 'something completely different that is completely different to all other areas of the curriculum'. The degree of agency or independence interviewees described pupils as enjoying ranged from aspirational through to 'complete'. Directly linked to notions of independence were comments on the freedom to think differently within art curriculum; that there is 'not one specific fixed way of doing something'. Clearly, given commentary relayed in earlier sections of this report, there is a tension between claims of 'complete' independence, and a counternarrative of increasingly mechanised curriculum delivery. This was evident in interviewees' framing:

In year 11 they apply their own ideas...but I think their ideas are restrained and constrained by what they have been taught...
Teacher of art, Birmingham

OK, it seemed quite prescriptive the way they do it, but they can be experimental or they can like get their hands dirty, they can make a mess.
Head of department, London

Another observable element within this category was that of 'enjoyment', also framed as unique to the subject discipline. This was described as 'the complete joy of making', and often connected to notions of a nourishing classroom environment, where 'you quite literally see them coming in with their shoulders up here and then by the end of it, they're relaxed'. Where interviewees made comments about the 'atmosphere' being 'quite different' in art departments (feeling 'calmer', for example) we are reminded of Thomson & Hall's (2021) research into the positive feelings the atmosphere of an art classroom can engender.

I was told yesterday that one of the students with severe learning difficulty really looks forward to coming to my lesson because it's just a really nice environment. Teacher of art, Birmingham

In the context of the UK's 15-year-olds presenting with the lowest life satisfaction in Europe (Chollet et al. 2024), and in the wake of Covid, it is reassuring to see art education often conceptualised by those who deliver it as a space where pupils can temporarily let go of the tension or anxiety in their lives. In 2004, 17% of responses perceived this effect among pupils; in 2024, 24%. This suggests art teachers may have, over the last twenty years, increasingly positioned their subject's curriculum to have pastoral impact as

much as advancing academic outcomes.

Dialogic knowledge with materials – leading to competencies, understanding and appreciation

This category was the most prevalent across interviewees' responses, with a total of 19 mentions of new skills or material capabilities being central to curriculum intent. As noted above, it may also be that other interviewees felt this outcome so inevitable that it need not be mentioned. The level of ambition in this space varied, with some expressing the importance of focused study in specialist technical processes or specific media, 'how to manipulate a particular medium···in a very traditional way' (Teacher of art, Birmingham). Others wanted to communicate the breadth of their offer, viewing exposure to many materials and media as their prerogative:

A really broad range of skills...we try to teach every possible material that we have the capacity to teach at this school. Head of art, Swindon

There was a sense among us as interviewers, that for many of the teachers we spoke to, knowledge of materials was prioritised as a means to an end; that pupils with high technical skill level would produce outcomes capable of high marks against public examination criteria. While such instrumentalism might present as superficial, the literature notes that an art education that promotes dialogue with materials rather than mastery, or a curriculum where pupils can think through a material, could have significant or authentic value beyond verifiable competency (Biesta 2017; Eisner 2002). While we encountered no suggestion of material interaction encouraged explicitly to manifest dialogic thinking, interviewees did note that a curriculum of technical competency could also be means to build creative confidence.

Skills to make and confidence to create. Head of department, Bristol

Dialogic knowledge with social, cultural, and natural environments

This was not among the most popular effects of art curriculum mentioned by interviewees, but where it was noted there was often a rounded sense of its value. At times this was once again about 'skilful knowledge', about establishing how to achieve an outcome pertinent to the examination board's success criteria: 'we've taught them the skills to investigate different artists from all over the world, and locally, and personal to them' (Head of department, London). There was also a solid connection through to the concept of 'cultural capital', as defined by the DfE (2024d); 'essential knowledge that children need to be educated citizens', for example, 'a curriculum that shows the diversity of art···including work that is produced around the world by different artists···as well as traditional and contemporary forms' (Ofsted 2023c). While there is some overlap here with an intent to build empathic learners, the focus in this statement (and other, similar statements) was arguably oriented primarily towards the transactional value of knowledge gained from learning about global cultural practices. For some, the acquisition of cultural capital was an issue of social justice, and tied up in the intent many had expressed to diversify curricula (see section 3.3.2).

...this deeper level of understanding, which I think we take for granted...not all children do have the same cultural information being fed to them.
Head of department, London

More specifically again, when considering the opportunity to study an art curriculum where content had been designed to meet the lived experience

of pupils and provide agency in artmaking activities, this was described as having 'powerful' effect on pupils' sense of belonging to a social or cultural environment, '...a lot of kids in our community don't realise that they have that' (Teacher of art, Somerset).

Flexible purposing and growth in tolerance for uncertainty

Harland et al. (2000, 98) chose the category, 'creativity and thinking skills', the latter including 'problem solving'. We would make the case that the skills highlighted in 2000 typically result in imaginative means to respond to ambiguous or uncertain tasks or contexts. Therefore, our category takes a wider view on the effect of an arts education; that it might act as an education in subjectivity – building pupils' competence and confidence in realms where problems have more than one solution and questions more than one answer (Eisner 2002).

Despite our expansion of Harland et al.'s category, surprisingly few responses were aligned to such notions (10%). In 2004, 24% of interviewees mentioned creativity, imagination, or lateral thinking skills as gained from the art curriculum delivered (Downing & Watson 2004, 88), over twice as many as in our study. There were teachers in our study who told us they 'try to encourage...thinking about things differently' (Teacher of art, Wiltshire), or 'outside the box' among their pupils. There was another who felt their curriculum delivery was designed to help pupils 'build resilience' in uncertain scenarios, but there were very few whose response directly addressed creative growth. In one instance, a teacher of art in Oxfordshire spoke about academically-able pupils being 'stripped away' from study in art, and that among those that remained, they attempted to encourage a 'quiet creativity' – framing such action as transgressive where such effects were undervalued.

Perhaps, as with the development of material skills, our interviewees felt creativity (or pupils' increased tolerance for uncertainty) a category of effect so obviously associated with art curriculum that discrete mention was unnecessary.

Meaning-making

In 2000, Harland et. al wrote about secondary art education as 'a tool of expression' (2000, 113), and the expressive potential of the subject has since been highlighted by others too (Eisner 2002; TALE 2019). Taking a more nuanced – but we would argue – related view, Biesta (2017) writes about art education producing meaning and connection in a learners' life; similar perhaps to Eisner's description of the arts helping children 'learn to say what cannot be said' (2002, np.).

While only eight instances of such effect were evident in interviewees' responses, where this was mentioned there was often a strong conceptual connection. For example, one teacher told us that their art curriculum had been designed to improve pupils' 'ability to look at things and actually verbalise what they're seeing and what power it might have' (Teacher of art, Somerset) – making meaning in dialogue with images. For others, it was really important that pupils' own artmaking was informed by a sense of purpose, whether personal expression or 'as a platform to deliver a message' (Teacher of art, London).

It's not just a pretty picture, what does your work say? What does it do?
Teacher of art, London

We get them thinking about what's close to their heart, what they feel passionate about... Head of department, London

One teacher was keen to stress that 'having something tangible to take away that they've created from their brain' (Teacher of art, Bristol), the uniquely physical construction of an artwork, was a meaning-making experience difficult to attain through theory. Another teacher, a Head of department in London, was similarly secure in describing their art curriculum as enabling pupils to 'express themselves in a way that they can't anywhere else' in the school.

Empathetic and ethical relationships with self and others

Harland et al.'s category of personal and social development was attached predominately to a pupils' enhanced self-esteem and awareness of others (Downing & Watson 2004, 85). Again, we wanted to nudge the borders of this category a little, primarily to accommodate Biesta's (2017) arguments for art education's existential effects; how coming into dialogue with the world through artmaking and appreciation might help us understand what it means to exist in the world, with each other. As one of our interviewees, a teacher of art in Swindon, suggested; 'opening their eyes a little bit'.

Concepts of self-knowledge were more frequent in this category, with interviewees citing pupils love of 'talking about themselves', 'learning about themselves' or how the art curriculum might be the only 'chance within their day to fully express themselves or talk about ideas that relate to who they are' (Teacher of art, London). Again, the notion of the art classroom as a uniquely personal, and personalised, space in pupils' experience of schooling was prevalent.

Some of the stuff that I read is so personal and so secretive, and it's maybe they can't show that visually and they wouldn't want to say it, but [in art] they will write it. Head of department, London

This might be explained by curricula providing an enhanced 'sense of confidence in self and identity' (Teacher of art, Bristol), or as another Teacher of art in Bristol explained, the 'good relationships' that are engendered by their art curriculum.

Regarding relationships with others, this was most often associated with teacher/pupil dynamics rather than learning within or through peer group interaction. One teacher felt that teachers' reassurance that 'their creativity is valuable' was an important effect of art curriculum on pupils. Another felt that teachers' positive affirmation that a pupil was 'in school and that's good' was enough to have effect on learners. Finally, one teacher highlighted the way in which relational dynamics among art department colleagues was a helpful exemplar of social interaction:

I think the way the kids see us collaborating with each other is really important and they then like know you can work as a team.
Teacher of art, Wiltshire

It is worth noting here that no mention was made of the empathetic effect the study of other artists' work, context, and intentions might have on learners. Similarly, when asked about their perceptions, there was no mention of pupils gaining from collaborative working among interviewees' responses.

An aesthetic way of being

Hardly touched upon by any teacher in our study, we want to recognise a final potential category of effect an art education might have on the learner. This is a sense of enhanced aesthetic existence; as Eisner (2002, np.) wrote, 'the arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor numbers exhaust what we can know'. This is a complex concept, but is perhaps best summarised as recognising a different way to be in and to encounter the world than that taught in subjects outside of the arts. This knowing can have value when applied beyond the arts too, as it is about framing the way learners might want to live their lives. No teacher made discrete reference to their curriculum facilitating critical reflection on paradigmatic issues of what it means to be in the world today.

Further thoughts

While almost all teacher responses could be categorised using our updated, working typology of the effects of art education, there are a few additional points to raise that sit outside of the descriptions provided above. First, for some interviewees, they struggled to perceive the effects their curriculum might have beyond very instrumental, or concrete, concerns. For example, one teacher answered this question by talking about the academic aspirations of their school leadership, and the requirement that their curriculum must demonstrate 'big gains' on the Progress 8 metrics used to review a school's effectiveness. We feel this might hint at a wider disconnect between art teachers and the potential for art education to have authentic effect on pupils in secondary school contexts.

Second, Downing and Watson included comments on 'confidence' as an effect of art curriculum within the category of personal development. We have taken a different approach, instead treating 'confidence' as a macro-category – one that sits above the typology of effects we list in this section. We do so because many interviewees spoke about pupils' confidence, but not confined only to issues of self-esteem. Frequently, confidence was named as apparent as pupils improved their technical skills, solved a problem, or took a personal risk. While we don't doubt confidence can be developed through the study of art, it would be interesting to see research that investigated exactly how concepts of confidence are understood by teachers of art, or that undertook to chart the effective development of confidence through a particular art curriculum. The cynical reader might suggest that the challenge of quantifying the effect of art curriculum on pupils' confidence make it an attractive response for teachers uncertain about their curriculum's measurable effects.

If confidence has become comprehensively associated with learning in art, perhaps it has replaced creativity. As noted under Flexible purposing and growth in tolerance for uncertainty, we were surprised by the lack of direct responses that spoke of creativity (in only three instances was the term referenced by interviewees). Maybe creativity is so firmly attached to the discipline that interviewees felt it unnecessary to mention discretely, or interviewees have spoken about creativity so frequently in the past that they are apathetic to do so further. It is not impossible that institutional and policy prioritisation of logic and objectivity in school curricula, have made teachers of art apprehensive about celebrating the ambiguity and risk attached to creative actions and effects. Again, further research into the specific relationship art teachers have with concepts of creativity would be interesting to develop.

4.3 Summary and conclusions

Teachers in our sample of schools identified a range of effects associated with the study of art in general that largely reflected the typology of effects we proposed, founded on Harland et al. (2000), and updated to include a number of subsequent academic sources.

• The most commonly cited category of effects was dialogic knowledge with materials, a knowledge that resulted in competencies (or technical skills), understanding and/or enhanced appreciation of art. Second most frequently cited was the category of pupils' enjoyment, wellbeing, and agency.

• Beyond these two categories, other effects were cited much less frequently with (i) knowledge with social, cultural and natural environments (7), (ii) flexible purposing and growth in tolerance (7), (iii) meaning-making (8), and (iv) an aesthetic way of being (1) collecting only 34% of citations despite making up a majority of the categories listed. This suggests some shared priorities, and de-emphasis across our interviewees' perceptions of art education's effect.

• Popular among interviewees' responses was comment on the effect art education might have on a general sense of pupils' confidence. Uncommon was direct reference to the concept of creativity.

Unlike Downing and Watson (2004) we did not ask specifically about the effect contemporary art practice might have when featured in school curricula. In the original report, it was noted that where schools did incorporate contemporary art practice into their curriculum, they:

Did not seek to displace a skills-based approach, but rather to support it through the inclusion of contemporary art practice. Downing & Watson 2004, 101

Anecdotally, we would suggest this practice to remain common; where schools did include more contemporary artists, or deliver more inclusive pedagogy, this rarely challenged the paradigm expectations that new content would still support a 'typical' overall curriculum design where technical skill and pupil enjoyment were prioritised.

Questions for policy makers and practitioners

This final section poses some questions concerning the perceived impacts of art education. The questions have been framed in response to the findings discussed in this section but also to recognise where similar questions remain as those posed in 2004.

Variations on the questions asked in 2004 that remain pertinent and unanswered, based on our findings:

• Is an overemphasis on building a dialogue with materials diminishing the breath of effect art education might provide to secondary school pupils?

• Are teachers underestimating the importance of meaning-making, among other effects, as an outcome of art lessons and therefore neglecting to address it as a specific learning objective?

• To what extent do teachers' own understanding of practice – traditional, modern, and contemporary – impact the priorities of their curriculum intent?

New questions asked in light of our 2024 findings:

• What does confidence in the art classroom look like, and how does curriculum content effect its effective development?

• Where has creativity gone in the language used by teachers to describe the effect of their art curriculum?

• Would it be beneficial for more initial and in-service teacher education to be oriented to exploring the diversity of effect possible through art curricula, particularly an aesthetic way of being?

• To what extent do school performance metrics and public examination criteria impact art curriculum design, and how aware might teachers be of such pressures when describing the effect of their curriculum on pupils?

• Can other subject disciplines delivered in secondary schools learn something from art teachers' capacity to foreground pupil enjoyment, wellbeing and agency in the effect their curriculum achieves?

Implication for policy and practice in visual art teaching

5 Implication for policy and practice in visual art teaching

5.1 Introduction

Having explored the contents of the school art curriculum in previous chapters, we now seek to look to the future. This short chapter is designed to ignite further reflection, debate, research and/or practice in the art classroom. It is structured, largely, around a series of questions on the art curriculum as a whole, concerning the choice of content and, perhaps more fundamentally, issues around the purpose of art teaching. While we recognise that it is difficult to remove our personal and professional positionalities from the framing of these questions, it is not our intention to provoke negative or positive conclusions concerning contemporary school art education. Instead, as we believe Downing and Watson (2004, 103) succeeded in doing, we seek to 'set out some of the questions that seem to be already exercising teachers in the hope of stimulating further debate'.

5.2 The context within which art curriculum choices are made

Teachers do not decide the content of their curriculum in a vacuum. All aspects of this work are loaded with philosophical, ethical, political, social and cultural pressures. Some of these influences are explicit and externally mandated, while others are the result of historicised practices and personal choices predicated on the values, dispositions, and interests of individual teachers, departments, and institutions. While many of our interviewees had inspirational aspirations for the potential impact of their curricula, this cannot always be realised within the resource and realities of a teaching timetable. As Downing and Watson (2004, 104) alluded to, schooling and art have long been uncomfortable bedfellows; arguably 'serving different purposes and constrained by different considerations'.

This tension presents a very tangible tension for art teachers as they consider curriculum content. Indeed, some argue that the notion of 'content' is itself problematic, suggesting as it does prescribed conduct and predictable outcomes. Atkinson (2018, 18), in pursuit of what might be considered an authentic art education, has long championed a classroom that promotes 'new ways of seeing, thinking and making and the creation of new worlds', rather than one reliant on instructional pedagogies and the learning of content.

The challenge that was visible within our interviewees' data, often at a latent level, was the extent to which they might balance authentic artistic activity – 'forays into the unknown' (Downing and Watson 2004, 104) – and their accountability and moral responsibility to conform to institutional norms. When teachers spoke enthusiastically about more diverse artistic referenc-

es, or creative material use, open-ended projects or conceptual outcomes, this was for many curtailed by a practical pragmatism. One reason for such pragmatism is perhaps the policy environment that has emerged over the last 20 years. Introduction of the English Baccalaureate in 2011 restricted the number of creative subjects many pupils could choose to study beyond key stage 3. As a symptom of a wider political strategy to promote job creation in science and technology sectors, this change also impacted the perceived value of art education to stakeholders such as school leaders and parents. As we heard from many of our interviewees, time to teach key stage 3 pupils has diminished, and the number of pupils entered for public examinations has reduced.

It is interesting to us that in 2004, Downing and Watson wrote:

> *Neither the curriculum itself nor the process of assessment was seen by most teachers to be a restriction on the choice of content of art teaching in schools. But this does not necessarily mean that they were not restrictive… if teachers do not report the curriculum as restrictive, they in fact mean they agree with its contents*. Downing and Watson (2004, 104)

We felt (particularly regarding the potential influence of assessment process on curriculum design) that something of this phenomenon remains. While our interviewees made very infrequent reference to assessment, this silence presented as a tacit acceptance of the potentially restrictive requirements (or perceived requirements) of examination board moderators and assessment descriptors. Rather than responding to developments in the discipline, the shape of key stage 3 and key stage 4 art curriculum may very well be directed, even at times unintentionally, by the inherently standardising spectre of league tables and market competition. This would provide partial explana-

tion as to why many interviewees eloquently described what they knew an art curriculum could be, but found themselves describing something other in their classroom: school art.

If this reads as critical, we would rather it was read as equivocal – 'school art' may very well provide fertile foundations for creative curriculum content (Wild 2024). Indeed, this research does not assume that one approach to art teaching has greater validity than another – data was not gathered to correlate curriculum content with pupil achievement. Instead, the following section sets out a number of questions that spring from the findings reported in previous chapters.

5.3 Questions raised from the research process

As you may recognise, two of these questions directly revisit those posed in 2004, the remainder have been drawn directly from our own findings.

• To what extent are art teachers empowered to respond to the needs of their pupils, and design curriculum content to engage them?

Our data points towards an intent among many teachers – latent in the practice of some – to respond directly to the needs of their pupils through a curriculum designed to engage with the specific interests of classroom demographics. This marks a departure from Downing and Watson's findings, where easily the most cited factor influencing curriculum choices was the teachers' own preferences, their existing skills and interests (2004, x). While it is possible for curriculum to include content that satisfies both the pupil demographic and the teacher's personal preferences, the response of our in-

terviewees suggested interest in a move away from a philosophy of teaching content, towards one of teaching pupils. This was not true in every instance, and the continuing prevalence of pedagogies led by materials provides a counterpoint to this argument. However, an intent to build curriculum that was representative of pupils' lived experiences was a defining characteristic of our findings. Where teachers perceived their pupils as arriving at secondary school with very low cultural capital and confidence in artmaking, this also acted as catalyst for a curriculum designed to meet their specific, foundational needs.

However, while we feel confident that art teachers want to respond to the needs of their pupils, that does not guarantee them the means to do so. Indeed, despite such intent being palpable the curriculum content described by many interviewees remained similar in content and design to that on offer in 2004. Artistic references were far from representative of English pupil populations and there was little evidence of contemporary artists selected to engage pupils through relatable processes or purposes. This suggests that while some individuals may find means, within contemporary institutional frameworks and cultural conventions art teachers are not typically empowered to design the curriculum as they would wish it.

• Does control of the curriculum by multi academy trusts lead to simplistic understandings of what a quality art and design curriculum looks like?

In 2004 Downing and Watson were able to claims that art teachers 'did not see guidelines and requirements at···school level as restrictive' (2004, ix) and had 'very considerable control over what they include in their curriculum content' (2004, 112) (to the extent that they suggested the potential for a more specific National Curriculum). As above, our interviews indicate that

this ubiquitous empowerment may no longer persists.

We therefore felt that this question should be asked, given that over the last twenty years (and despite relatively consistent National Curriculum), curriculum agency appears to have diminished in concert with a significant restructure of school governance and leadership. Specifically, in concert with the establishment of multi academy trusts, the organisational structure of which draws decision-making powers away from individual schools. We would not presume a causal link, but it was clear that among our interviewees those working within multi academy trusts, particularly early career teachers, typically felt compelled to conform to institutional expectations on 'the things that "they" believe should be within the curriculum' (Head of department, Swindon).

In theory, there is nothing to prevent an institutional approach to curriculum encouraging sophisticated art-making, and such a process could counter the potential for curricula build on unmoderated 'personal predilection' (Downing and Watson 2004, 113). Networks of federated art departments within a multi academy trusts might establish active communities of practice and enable increasingly sophisticated, rich and diverse curriculum content as a result. However, among interviewees we spoke to in these settings, hierarchical leadership structures and the influence of generic educational research was more likely to steer curriculum content towards traditionalist or reproductive models.

• Given art teachers' interest in diversifying the artistic genres and cultural references of their curriculum content, what support would allow them to realise this intent?

Data from the 2023 Labour Force Survey and the 2021 Census (in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) points to a lack of representation of those from minoritised ethnicities in the arts. This data suggests that by 2024 around 90% of those working in the UK Arts, Cultural, and Heritage sectors were white, just 1% of those in managerial positions were black (McAndrew et al. 2024) and that 41% of black people and 36% of Asian people are unlikely to participate in any cultural activities.

In 2004 the issue of representation did not feature in Downing and Watson's report, in our interviews with art teachers it was an almost constant concern. Whereas the notion of a multicultural curriculum featured in 2004, this was framed much more in terms of art from other cultures, often included in ways that would be considered problematic today, such as the 'African Mask' or 'Aboriginal Art' project. In 2024 teachers are far more aware of their responsibility to engage with curriculum design that is not othering or tokenistic and some take seriously the need for decolonisation of the curriculum rather than simply diversification of resources. However, as the Visualise (2024) study also found, this is not something that they necessarily feel equipped or confident in doing. The Visualise study rightly places responsibility for championing the task with the GCSE and 'A' Level exam boards. Our interviews suggest that art teachers are also empowered by engaging with networks surrounding cultural institutions and projects where the task of diversification and decolonisation is already underway.

• Is the oversupply of artist references at key stage 4 leading to superficial engagement and understanding?

Our research didn't supply an answer to this question but did recommend it be posed. In 2004 Downing and Watson asked if a 'wider range of artistic

genres or cultural references is necessary for a more effective art education?' (2004; 106). In 2024 access to images, artists, and information has never been easier; what could be described as a comprehensive global repository is available to art teachers and their pupils through the click of a few buttons. This could be conceived as an oversupply – a disorienting range of cultural references capable of making both teacher and pupil anxious and unsure about navigating a relativist digital landscape. Simultaneously, it offers art teachers a much-enhanced opportunity to curate a purposeful selection of cultural references to complement a theme or programme of study, and our interviewees didn't express any difficulty in sourcing artistic references once a curriculum choice had been made.

Downing and Watson (2004, 109) noted that effectively gatekeeping reference materials – balancing pupil freedom to source engaging artistic references with the risk of cognitive overload – was a challenge. Given the exponential increase in access to imagery since, we are likely all at risk of overload or superficial engagement with reproductions of artwork today; especially the flattened, pixilated works we view on screen. One strategy that might effectively address this issue in the context of secondary art curriculum, and provide additional benefits, would be the direct engagement of pupils with singular, physical artworks. Visits to galleries or museums, engaging in gallery-run projects, or employing visiting artists can enable both teachers and pupils to develop deep, contextualised, relationships with art and its maker. It is therefore reassuring to see suggestions in our data (see section 3.2.2) that this work is taking place.

• To what extent can art teachers in 2024 use their classroom and/or contemporary art to explore difficult or transgressive social issues?

In simple terms, no policy mandate restricts art teachers' capacity to offer an issues-based curriculum or explore contemporary art practices with their pupils. The National Curriculum's (DfE 2013, 2) expectation that pupils should be taught about 'periods, styles and movements···up to the present day' arguably recommends contemporary art practice be a curricula component

However, in 2004, contemporary art was avoided by some interviewees as too 'intellectually challenging' (Downing and Watson 2004, 111). Given recent political narratives (DfE 2022) around teachers' professional responsibility of impartiality, there may also persist a classroom caution towards introducing the social, emotional, or political issues sometimes addressed in contemporary art practices. Burgess (2003, 108) describes such prudence as 'missing an opportunity' and cultural 'gate keeping', where in reality 'these issues are as relevant to the developing subjectivities of students as they are to the 'actual, existing subjectivities' of young artists.

More recently, Dash and Addison cite Ward (2015, 202) to demonstrate the importance of contemporary art practices for pupils, as means of opening up to challenge and to 'make sense of the world' – not just art. It might be asked, if not in the art classroom, where do young people find safe, supportive opportunity to critically engage with structured, personalised investigation of difficult or transgressive issues pertinent to their lived experience?

• Is contemporary art practice intellectually, emotionally and socially accessible to students in school?

We did not speak with pupils to elicit their thoughts on the accessibility of contemporary art practice, so only consider the issue through the lens of their teachers. In 2004, this very question saw 'the most polarised views'

(Downing and Watson 2004, 111) from interviewees, where 'even concerning the same image, one teacher could regard it as incomprehensible to pupils while another regarded it as entirely accessible'. There were instances where such subjective superdiversity was mirrored in our conversations (for example, in relation to Richard Billingham's Untitled, where most teachers in our sample felt uneasy about introducing it to pupils, but one habitually employs the work as a conversational provocation), but largely we found teachers open to the potential inclusion of the contemporary artworks we shared with them. This should be caveated by the frequency with which teachers expressed interest in showing a contemporary artwork as a prompt for discussion, but then expressed concern about the capacity to build any extended study or scheme of work around it (especially those that were 3D/lens-based formats).

Downing and Watson (2004) speculate on several potential reasons for teachers' mixed view on facilitating pupils' access to contemporary art practice, all of which remain plausible in 2024: perceptions of adverse pupil reactions, teachers' own disinterest or lack of understanding, social backgrounds, cultural capital, or perceptions around the purpose of school art education. On this last reason, in 2004 it was noted that some teachers 'are more active than others in seeking to challenge and disturb pupils' perceptions either of art or of their social environment' (Downing and Watson 2004, 112). We might characterise our interviewees as active in challenging pupils' perceptions, or (in the majority of instances) willing but unable to do so in their context; none would be described as closed to the potential of contemporary art practice to intellectually, emotionally, or socially stimulate their pupils.

• Are there alternative foundations, other than the formal elements, that the secondary school art and design curriculum may be built on?

The 'formal elements' were mentioned by almost all interviewees; either employed as discrete thematic or structural framework in curricula, or as a design principle referenced in departments as they undertake curriculum development and audit. This lens was so normative for many interviewees that when discussing the contemporary painting Of Other Planes of There (S.R.) by Julie Mehretu, there was no attempt at analysis or contextualisation, little interest in the artist's motivation (the protests that emerged against Donald Trump's anti-immigration policies), and no critique of technique; it was framed exclusively as a potentially useful addition to pre-existing technical exercises exploring line and mark making.

Among others, Walton (2021) has been active in promoting a re-evaluation the use of the 'formal elements' as curriculum pillars, instead advocating for appropriate contextualisation of the emergence and historical application of this formalist philosophy in the art classroom. His argument extends to a total curriculum model posited to introduce concepts that encourage pupils to inhabit historicised artistic thinking processes, rooted in traditional, modern, and contemporary schools of practice. If a 'thinking historically' approach is one alternative curriculum model available to art teachers, Chris Francis and Jon Nicholls' threshold concepts is another. They describe their threshold statements as 'the big ideas' that open doors to 'troublesome knowledge' (Francis and Nicholls 2024), populating with dynamic concept-centered disciplinary projects.

Both Walton, and Francis and Nicholls, have drawn on personal principles to construct sophisticated frameworks of artistic knowledge that can function

as curricula foundations. Perhaps the strongest alternative to the ubiquity of the 'formal elements' is that teachers reconsider curriculum designed around their own rationales or frameworks for art-making, appreciation, or investigation, as was more frequently the case 20 years ago. False accusations of bias, or prejudice fail to recognise the reality that any curriculum requires subjective choices be made – why not embrace the enthusiasms, or expertise of the teachers in the room? If centring the teacher feels tacitly hierarchical, there is a further proposition: why not look to the pupils, not conceptualised as deficit, in need of foundational understanding of artistic building blocks – but by exploring and unfolding their existing knowledge through artistic enquiry?

• Are critical analysis, issue-based learning and the communication of meaning in and through art sufficiently integrated and balanced with the acquisition of the craft skills of art making?

This very same question was asked by Downing and Watson following their own research. They, as did we, found that technical, artistic, or practical skills were regarded by a large majority of interviewees as 'the bedrock of the curriculum' (2004, 108). That this focus has remained unchanged over twenty years suggests a deep rooted and wider social orthodoxy aligning effective school art predominantly with pursuit of technical proficiency. There is a lot to unpack when one asks why, and what impact this may have. Perhaps pupils push for practical activity in the art classroom, starved of active learning opportunities elsewhere, exam board moderation is perceived to reward visual verisimilitude, or teachers feel strongly that a sophisticated artistic vocabulary must be built on technical fluency. Does this phenomenon contribute to art's frequent, informal positioning outside of the respected 'academic' school subjects? Could pupils develop exclusionary, fixed notions

of artistic success as synonymous with technical competency? Are technical, or practical, artistic competencies those most valued by the creative industry?

Our research was largely limited to art teachers' interpretations of their curriculum, rather than a direct evaluation of materials delivered. It is possible that critical analysis, issues-based learning, and meaning-making are well integrated among the priorities that interviewees chose to name in their curriculum content. However, we were surprised that meaning-making was cited only 8 times. Even less frequent were mentions of tolerance for uncertainty and knowledge of social, cultural, and natural environments, closely related to Downing and Watson's categories of criticality and issues-based learning opportunities.

Where curriculum review or redesign is appropriate, it is likely that recalibrating revised content to enable a wider diversity of potential effects would be beneficial to learners. This might include purposeful inclusion of content than enables pupils to experience meaning-making, growth in their tolerance for uncertainty, dialogic knowledge with their environment/s, and encounter an aesthetic way of being.

• What is lost from pupils' learning in art and design by the huge reduction in exposure to three-dimensional materials, techniques, processes and ways of thinking?

The huge drop in the number of projects involving 3D materials, techniques, and process from 56% in 2004 to just 15% in 2024 is disappointing but perhaps not a surprise given the previously commented on reduction in curriculum time, and budgets available to the subject of art over the last twenty

years. It may also reflect the dominance of the digital image as a resource in art classrooms and life more generally and point to a narrowing of practice towards perceived outcomes required to reliably meet examination criteria, removing the element of experimentation and risk that are inherent within 3D art processes.

It is worth reflecting on Biesta's advocacy for 'educative power' of art as providing opportunities for students to encounter resistance '…in order to explore possibilities, meet limits and limitations, and out of this create forms, establish forms and find forms that make existing-in-dialogue (with the world) possible' (Biesta 2018 p.17). Materials such as ceramics, papier mâché, plaster, wire, and found materials arguably provide more immediate hands-on dialogue with the 'stuff' of the world than two dimensional ones. Repeated exposure to working with them enables pupils to gradually build their tolerance for uncertainty (Wild 2024). Art teachers also need to be willing to step out of their comfort zone in their teaching of three-dimensional skills and processes and embrace their own uncertainty.

- **Where has creativity gone?**

In 2004 one of the areas where there was most discrepancy between the CAP and randomly identified schools was in the teaching of what Downing and Watson (2004) described as creative thinking process. Just under 60% of modules in CAP schools were understood to develop the creative thinking of pupils, compared to approximately 15% in the randomly identified schools. Despite this discrepancy however, teachers in both sets of schools were fairly equal (approximately 24%) in their belief that one of the perceive impacts of art for their pupils was creativity. Downing and Watson (2004, 99) defined creative thinking processes as 'giving personal responses, experiment-

ing with both materials and ideas and thinking conceptually'. It is interesting to us that in 2004 only 14% of modules described by our interviewees were concerned with teaching creative thinking skills and, despite us expanding the category to 'flexible purposing and growth in tolerance for uncertainty' only 10% identified this as a possible impact of their curriculum. This is a remarkable reduction from the first decade of the century where creativity was the first of the four key concepts outlined in the 2007 iteration of the National Curriculum for Art and Design. The opportunity to give a personal response and to develop one's own concepts seem to us to be key to building student engagement in the subject, something that teachers have elsewhere reported is currently frustratingly low (Visualise 2024). We wonder if these two phenomena are linked.

• How can the notion of artist-teacher practice (to encourage contemporary understandings of art and design) be supported in schools?

Artist-teacher practice has been shown to introduce creative ways of being into the art classroom, provide resources for brokerage between art teachers and their students, and to aid pupils in imagining a future aesthetic life for themselves (Thomson and Hall 2019 & 2021; Wild 2021). In 2008 Ofsted noted that 'the most effective professional development [for art and design teachers] provided for individuals' needs, both as artists and art teachers and drew attention to the Arts Council England funded Artist Teacher Scheme as a 'particularly successful example' of this (Ofsted 2008). Whilst it is encouraging to see the growth in numbers of teachers (in our sample at least) identifying themselves as having an artistic practice of some kind we are also aware that funded opportunities for art teachers to engage in sustained continuing professional development based around their practice, and enabling to engage at a deeper conceptual level with the development of

their own work and ideas is virtually non-existent. What opportunities that do exist are self-funded and take place in teachers' free time.

This connects with the question raised above, considering the lack of importance placed on personal response and conceptual and critical engagement in the curriculum more broadly. We suggest that one way to improve pupil engagement and increase opportunities for them to experience flexible purposing and a growth in their tolerance for uncertainty is to support their teachers with funding and time to participate in CPD that engage them as artist teachers.

• What is the place of craft and design in art teachers' concept of curriculum?

In section 1.1, we express our preference for the subject discipline to be considered as 'art, craft and design', albeit employing 'art' as shorthand throughout this report. Over time, the subject as it is known in schools has gone through iterative name change: 'Art', and then 'Art and Design' in the National Curriculum, 'Art, Craft and Design' in most Ofsted references and examination board specifications. This ongoing uncertainty is illustrated in Ofsted's (2023a) Research Review: titled 'Art and Design', it explores the 'nature of art, craft and design', while referring to 'art' throughout. This raises a perennial question that transcends title and concerns curriculum content; to what extent are the rationales, knowledge, and processes of design and craft disciplines experienced, alongside art, in the classroom?

In answer, our interviews would suggest that curriculum delivered in many school art departments are programmes of fine art education. Almost no project or module discussed with interviewees had instrumental intent – they

did not seek to systematically solve a problem, nor purposefully connect to a local industry or functional tradition; the pupils' outcomes were assessed on their aesthetic or conceptual qualities. There were two 'architecture' projects listed among the curriculum content of interviewees, but here the built environment was explored through an artistic lens, rather than pupils being introduced to the conventions of the architectural discipline. Perhaps, given 58% of our interviewees described themselves as having a fine art background, and only 31% as having an applied arts (graphics, textiles, design) background, the origin of art teachers has impact on this phenomenon. It is likely that limited resources, time, equipment, and specialist professional development for art teachers also restricts the viability of intensive craft processes in schools.

As a counterpoint, the lack of explicit visibility afforded to craft and design in teachers' concept of curriculum does not erase associated practices. Design thinking, and craft skills, certainly appear within the pedagogies of the art classroom, and in many respects the projects that we encountered were defined by these domains, dominated by predetermined external briefs, and heavily invested in technical skill acquisition. Perhaps unpicking this quality of the school art paradigm – where design and craft traditions are employed for largely artistic ends – would help to create constructive alignment in curriculum content.

5.4 Contributing to the body of research into visual art learning in schools

The literature review indicated that there has been limited research into art curriculum in English secondary schools over the past 20 years. While healthy academic discourse has been maintained on issues of art education's purpose and impact, and there has been growing scholarly advocacy for art in schools, empirical studies have been rare. Where they have occurred, they have made valuable contributions to the field, but often with a distinct research agenda or object in view. This context was reason for us to undertake this review, twenty years after School Art: What's In It?.

This research builds on the foundation of School Art (2004), providing opportunity for policymakers and practitioners to reassess the reality of curriculum as delivered in secondary school art classrooms; what has changed, progressed, stalled, improved, or worsened over two decades.

In the first instance this report is a contribution to the field of methods in art education studies; an experimental proposition, a suggestion that in quiet research spaces an echo can contain something worth hearing. A critic might call this approach plagiarism; to take fragments of an earlier work and reanimate it twenty years later. We would choose playfully, or paradoxically, to argue both sides of the coin – that there might be meaningful connections between our findings and those of Downing and Watson, while arguing that this work is far from a copy. Reconceived and produced by different researchers, with different interviewees, in a different time and place, it is something new. In this sense, any attempt at comparison through time and space has been made in the original spirit of *School Art* (2004), with hope that the (re)collection and (re)presentation of rich data may have utility, but

in full awareness of the limitations of such subjective activity.

Regarding findings, there are a number of themes in this study that connect with the body of existing research into visual art learning in schools. First, interviewees were more likely than in 2004 to self-identify as artists (possibly in an act of institutional identity transgression), a finding that supports work already undertaken in this area (Matthews 2018; Wild 2022). This suggests that the impact of the Artist Teacher Scheme, despite now having been defunct for over a decade, enjoys a long tail of influence in the profession.

New findings that in many schools, particularly during key stage 3, technical skills and the 'formal elements' still maintain a privileged position as and in curriculum framework, strengthens research and criticism published on this phenomenon over the last few years (Atkinson 2011; Grant 2020; Walton 2020; Wild 2022). In connection, where pseudo-formalistic concepts of the subject still predominate, this may explain why curricula described in our interviews rarely centered inclusive, decolonised practices and content, despite so many interviewees demonstrating a genuine interest in diversifying their classroom. With recent research recognising problematics regarding the inclusivity of the subject (Millet 2019; Penketh 2020; Wild 2022; Begum, et al. 2024), we hope our evidence, alongside others, helps practitioners and policymakers stop and reflect on why this might be, and how to affect change.

In many respects, the worrying frequency of early career art teachers describing the limit to their curricula agency during our interviews, connects to a wider discourse on diminishing professional autonomy in educational research that transcends subject discipline (Priestley et al. 2015). This research made apparent that there is a diversity of practices in school art

departments regarding planning and designing curriculum content, but that some teachers feel excluded from this process entirely and are frustrated by the curriculum they deliver. Many teachers no longer expressed a freedom to build curriculum around their own interests and expertise; perhaps due to centralised academy trust structures, perhaps due to an educational culture which has embraced 'evidence-based' scientism over teachers' subjectivities (Hordern and Brooks 2023), or perhaps due simply to a lack of time, energy, and professional capital to innovate. That some teachers encounter this reality is naturally disappointing and amplified where we spoke with others describing contexts where signature pedagogies of the subject and the affective space of the art room were the foundation for curriculum content. Where this was seen, there was obvious connections to the 'arts rich' practices described by Thomson and Hall (2022).

There was one theme in the literature review which went unspoken in our interviews: the role and opportunity for art education in secondary schools to address the climate crisis (Hall 2023). If this is conceived of as an issue ripe to provide content for a curriculum, then its absence might be explained by the limited number of our interviewees who framed their curriculum content around issues. If it is imagined a paradigmatic concern for art teachers, impactful on all variables of curriculum design (material use etc.), then its invisibility in our evidence remains unexplained.

There was also one theme in the findings which did not feature in the literature review; the exponential expansion of digital technologies over the preceding 20 years, and how the potential for pupils to see artworks from beyond the limits of school libraries might have shaped the subject curriculum significantly. This may highlight a gap in the existing research literature.

5.5 Possible future strategies to address issues concerning art curriculum content

There is no assumption of 'right answers' to any of the questions posed in section 5.3. However, as the world continues to change around us – politically, socially, culturally, ecologically – we might suggest that it is an art teacher's responsibility to reflect on whether there are 'better answers' for pupils in their classroom today.

In 2004, one of Downing and Watson's suggested future strategies was the development of 'a dialectic that might further promote the consideration and refinement of the curriculum' (2004, 114). What they meant was, given the variable rationales, design process, and quality of curriculum content they observed, it would be a good idea if art teachers could talk about this vital work and share their best practice. Has this happened more in the last 20 years, or not? We know of social-media forums, subject association publications, and regional teacher networks that have emerged over this period and provide significant dialogic value to participants within these communities of practice. However, despite islands of collective activity, we might argue that the profession is still largely fragmented where classroom activity is concerned (perhaps more united on issues of advocacy), the influence of local generic policies more powerful that any inter-institutional consensus on art curriculum content development. Given the opportunities digital technologies provide, both for rich research activity and professional connectivity, there remains the potential for development of a more extensive dialectic. This might focus on both curriculum refinement, and the collective defence of 'arts rich' approaches where institutional expectations otherwise supress the character of our subject.

Not all our interviewees had their ambition suppressed. Some teachers in this research were empowered to respond to the needs of their pupils; they had the knowledge, resource, and leadership support to create curriculum content that embraced contemporary arts practice, recognised the cultural capital of their pupils, and/or explored issues directly relevant to modern society. They were empowered to create curriculum content that impacted on their pupils in diverse, meaningful ways. It would be of great interest to the profession if more visible, detailed, and contextualised case studies of these practitioners were publicly available, such that the innovations they have been empowered to activate might have impact beyond their own classrooms.

Across the profession, our research would suggest that there is work to do in transforming the diversity of curriculum content to be truly inclusive. This recommendation is not satisfied where tokenistic additions to existing canons are made; it requires a complete review of content in recognition of the pupils taught and the society served. Where the range of art genres and references in school art in general is limited, it is hard to excuse this if the only bounds are the confidence or capability of individual teachers to effect change. Professional development to support art teachers to achieve the curriculum changes they want to make would be strategically impactful, as would the institutional freedom and resource to do so.

We suspect that the impact of examination boards on curriculum design and content at key stage 3 and 4 is so significant as to be perceived as normative by most art teachers, and therefore infrequently critiqued. This is problematic when, for example, only 2.3% of artists named in art and design exam board papers are from Black or South Asian backgrounds (Begum et al. 2024). We also suspect that examination boards, and their moderators, might

do more to encourage diversity and richness in school curriculum if exemplar materials and guidance was more explicit on this issue.

In light of their findings, Downing and Watson (2004) went so far as to suggest a more instructional National Curriculum. We remain wary of strategies that might mandate specific approaches to curriculum content and would rather promote strategies that facilitate and incentivise art teachers to take an active role in recognising the live development of their own curriculum as a responsibility and a right. Creating these conditions requires policymakers, school leaders, art teachers, initial teacher educators, parents and pupils to trust that the best qualified candidates to curate an 'arts rich' curriculum are the passionate, informed, and invested art teachers in our classrooms.

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School Art: Where Is It?

(Re)exploring visual arts in secondary schools

In this innovative research study, Joanna Fursman, Will Grant, and Carol Wild begin by revisiting the work undertaken by Dick Downing and Ruth Watson in their Tate-sponsored 2004 *School Art: What Is It?* report. Twenty years later, they replicate the processes employed by Downing and Watson – asking secondary school art teachers across England about the curriculum they deliver: its contents, structure, and impact.

Candid interviews with 36 participants provide illustrative insight into the state of art education in England's secondary schools in 2024. Through comparison, contextualisation, and critical reflection, Fursman, Grant, and Wild construct a new set of questions for today's policymakers and practitioners.

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