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Teacher's Views of Art Education in Primary Schools in Scotland

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Abstract

The majority of art education research in the United Kingdom originates from England; however, the devolved nations each have responsibility for education resulting in four different curricula working concurrently across Great Britain. It can be argued that in comparison to England, art and design education research in Scotland is an under-researched area though one that is increasingly garnering interest. This paper contributes to the field by presenting and discussing some of the findings from a survey of teachers focused on art and design education in Scottish primary schools in 2022. A total of 110 teachers participated and the survey examined the value of the subject, the current delivery in schools, the future of the subject and support for teachers. A wealth of data were gathered so this paper focuses particularly on the value of the subject among staff, confidence levels regarding delivery and the role of training and professional learning. The paper concludes that while the value of the subject among staff is strong, confidence levels with regard to teaching the subject are not. Staff felt that training had left them unprepared to teach the subject, and there was limited awareness of professional learning opportunities in their geographical area.

Keywords

art education, Scottish art education, professional learning, creativity, primary schools

Introduction

Primary teachers in Scotland are given the label of *generalist*. In order to qualify as a teacher in Scotland you must meet the requirements of the Standard for Full Registration (General Teaching Council for Scotland 2021) where you are expected to demonstrate a depth of pedagogical knowledge across all subjects and apply this to curriculum design and delivery in the classroom. Observations from visits to

primary schools and anecdotal comments from students and teachers highlight the lack of consistency in the amount, and quality, of art and design education that children receive in the Scottish primary classroom. Alongside this, arts specialists began to disappear from primary schools from 2000s onwards depending on individual local authorities and budget constraints so primary teachers are reliant on their own knowledge, skills and confidence in order to teach the subject. While this will vary by individual, there are external factors which will have an impact on this: the quality of the teacher education that the primary teacher initially received; leadership within the school; access to suitable facilities and resources to teach the subject; access to quality professional learning opportunities. In Scotland, there is limited evidence of what it means to be a primary generalist teacher teaching the subject of art and design. A survey was therefore distributed to primary teachers in 2022 to find out what the lived experience was; this paper presents some of those findings, makes some recommendations for the future and highlights a need for further research to be undertaken in this area.

Art and design education in Scotland

In the United Kingdom, there are four education systems in place with each of the devolved nations having responsibility for education. This means that there are four different curricula running concurrently across Great Britain. The majority of research on art and design education in the United Kingdom comes from England (Robb 2021), and here, it presents a gloomy picture of the gradual decline and marginalisation of the subject of art and design (Hallam *et al.* 2008; Payne & Hall 2018; Ruck 2020; Caldwell *et al.* 2021; Thomson & Maloy 2022). An assumption therefore could be made that this picture is similar across the rest of Great Britain but with Scotland having a distinctly different curriculum from England this may not be the case.

The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was first introduced in 2004 and was viewed as a progressive replacement to the previous one, albeit one that incorporated a growing neo-liberal agenda with an increased focus on how children should be rather than on what they should know (Priestley & Biesta 2013). The previous 5–14 curriculum was deemed to be prescriptive and did not encompass the early years stages (Humes & Priestley 2021). While the philosophy behind CfE has been praised on an international stage (Tambling & Bacon 2023), its implementation and impact on the learners in the classroom has been deemed less successful (Humes & Priestley 2021; OECD 2021).

CfE is split into eight curricular areas with art and design sitting under the title of Expressive Arts, alongside music, drama and dance (Education Scotland 2010; McAuliffe 2018). With regard to the teaching of these subjects, an emphasis is placed on creativity, through making and creating, evaluation and appreciation (Scottish Government 2009b). The associated Experiences and Outcomes document is structured by each Expressive Art area, with an emphasis on levels; there is no clear signposting for teachers as to how particular aspects of art and design are being developed through these levels (Scottish Government 2009a). However, from examination it can be determined that there are five areas of focus; exploring the visual elements through a range of media; observation and recording; self-expression; design and imagination; appreciation and evaluation. A key point to note in relation to these documents is that they are written mainly in the first person from the

perspective of the child. There is little specific guidance on how teachers should implement the subject in the classroom. In this sense, 5–14 was more helpful for teachers as the outcomes were specific and detailed on what should be covered. Additionally, while there are many excellent texts related to teaching art and design in the primary classroom these are primarily focused on the curriculum in England; there are no art education texts aimed at Scottish primary teachers, specifically focused on how art and design should be taught in Scotland through CfE.

Instead, the emphasis on creativity in Scotland continues to grow with the Scottish Government working with Creative Scotland to create policy focused on creativity and creative learning at all stages in life. Creative Learning Networks were initially established in 2010, and then in 2013, a *Creative Learning Plan* (Creative Scotland and Scottish Government 2013; Creative Scotland and Education Scotland 2021) was published. The original plan was revised in 2019 to focus on two priorities (Creative Scotland 2019): creativity in learning, teaching, assessment and achievement; creativity and employability. Creative Scotland is leading on this work, though a formal agreement was established with Education Scotland in 2015 and their most recent publication is an action plan (Creative Scotland and Education Scotland 2021: 2) where it acknowledges that more needs to be done to affect change in practice.

Evidence-wise, there has been little research undertaken in the area of art and design education in schools in Scotland but this is beginning to change (Cowie 2019; Robb *et al.* 2021; McKinnon *et al.* 2022). In terms of classroom practice, the most recent report to be published (McKinnon *et al.* 2022) does begin to provide an insight. The focus of the report was on contemporary visual art and design education in Scotland and consisted of a survey completed by 65 schools and arts professionals, with 49 of them being teachers and the majority of them secondary school teachers. A significant conclusion from the report is that the subject of art and design is currently undervalued in Scotland, not just in education but across society (McKinnon *et al.* 2022: 35). More specifically in relation to schools, there was a perception that the government were out of touch with the reality of what is happening in classrooms. Participants perceived the curriculum to be restrictive, placing an emphasis on technical skills and that arts provision in primary schools was patchy. Despite the emphasis on collaboration in the Creative Learning Plan, and there being a desire for greater partnership working between schools and visual arts organisations, there are barriers of communication, misalignment between curriculum expectations and opportunities in external organisations that were relevant in supporting this, and a lack of support from management. Finally, the participants felt that more needed to be done to develop a positive image and understanding of careers in the arts sectors, particularly with children, parents and teachers.

Developing a primary generalist art teacher

The report by McKinnon *et al.* (2022) highlights two key issues: firstly, a perception that the subject of art and design education in schools is undervalued across society, and secondly, there seem to be few opportunities for people and organisations who share similar values towards art and design education to connect, share and work together. The latter point is particularly important when we consider the professional development of teachers at all stages in their careers, in primary and secondary

schools; this is not something that can be done in isolation. From a generalist perspective, Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) believe that investment in the professional capital of teachers is essential to have high-performing schools and teachers with positive outcomes for all. Professional capital consists of three forms: human capital in the form of knowledge and understanding of the subject and associated pedagogy, in this case art and design; social capital in the form of collaboration and networks; and decisional capital associated with confidence to teacher and deliver the subject in classrooms. They are keen however to emphasise the role that social capital plays in particular. For them, there is more to be gained in viewing the profession as a group of people, rather than focusing on the individual. Social capital is therefore focused on the networks and connections that people have within the profession and how these are used to build trust and knowledge across the profession, creating a supportive environment for teachers to thrive. It provides teachers with access to the knowledge and experiences of others, thereby supporting them to develop their knowledge and understanding of the subject, the learners and the communities that they work within. Additionally, social capital engenders trust and autonomy, which builds confidence in individuals to make professional judgements based on insight and knowledge (Nolan & Molla 2017) and to be open to feedback and the learning that comes from making mistakes.

Although there is not a professional development model specifically linked to art and design teachers, Thurber & Zimmerman (2002) have focused on developing a leadership model for art education that has similarities to professional capital. The "Empowerment Leadership Model for Art Education" (Thurber & Zimmerman 2002) is primarily aimed at secondary teachers and consists of different combinations of four domains representing stages of an art and design teacher's journey towards leadership and empowerment. Of most relevance to this paper is Stage 1 and Stage 2. Stage 1 focuses on self-empowerment, the teacher as an individual building confidence to express their voice and to reflect on their experiences. This is done by combining the domain of knowledge and belief in themselves, with the domain focused on knowledge of the art curriculum and pedagogy. Stage 2 moves this towards a collaborative community focused on networking and advocacy opportunities (Zimmerman 2014) with mentoring and sharing practice being key elements. The sense of a community was key to the model in all its forms (Thurber & Zimmerman 2002; Zimmerman 2014; Gregory 2019) and was reflected in the works of others such as Allison (2013) who believes that teacher identity is linked to confidence and competence; therefore, a strong sense of artistic identity leads to improved art practice in the classroom. This can be achieved through mentorship and quality professional development that supports the individual within a networked environment. Manifold & Zimmerman (2011) believe that this can be achieved by working with those individuals who are already positively predisposed to the subject and can be leaders in their settings as a result, believing that their positive influence will have an impact on others in their setting, particularly in relation to confidence in teaching the subject.

These models contrast with the research undertaken over the years that shows teachers working in isolation, with minimal guidance regarding the teaching of the art and design curriculum, and limited resources and space (Hallam *et al.* 2007; Gurure & Mamvuto 2021). They also fail to acknowledge the external influences that exert power over teachers' attitudes towards the subject of art and design. For example, Gregory (2019) believes that the experiences a teacher had as a child in relation to art have an influence on how they then respond to the

subject and deliver it in class as a primary teacher. Although the term is not explicitly used, there are parallels here with Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) and the notion of accumulating capital, in this case human capital, which can then be drawn upon in the classroom. This is supported by Pavlou (2015) who believes that many generalist primary teachers have limited experiences of art previously which leads to a lack of confidence that manifests in lessons that are limited in terms of quality and delivery. Alongside this are government policies which explicitly and implicitly convey the value that the government places on the subject (Gregory 2019). These documents however can provide inconsistent messaging or limited guidance, as in the case of CfE, resulting in teachers delivering inconsistent practice and pedagogy in the art classroom (Hallam *et al.* 2007; Hallam *et al.* 2008).

The research design

The aim of the project was to gather background data on general art and design education in Scottish primary schools provided by non-specialist teachers. The main overall research question was: What are the experiences and associated knowledge and beliefs of Scottish primary school teachers in relation to classroom art and design education? The data in this paper focus on the teachers themselves, how they value the subject, their confidence levels and their perceptions of training and professional learning opportunities. It therefore examines the current conditions surrounding the primary teacher in Scotland.

The population consisted of post-qualified primary teachers working in Scotland. In terms of sampling, participants were invited as volunteers to complete an online questionnaire; they were notified through social media and networks. The sample can therefore not be considered representative of all primary teachers in Scotland, as participation depended on having social media accounts. Participant consent was included as part of the online questionnaire and the project was reviewed through a university ethics board. In total, 110 primary teachers completed the survey. Nobody from the independent sector responded to the survey and all except two teachers taught in state schools. The majority of responses came from primary teachers working in urban areas in Scotland with the rest located in rural areas.

Data were gathered using an online survey seeking qualitative and quantitative data. An invite and a link to the survey were posted on social media channels. The survey was designed to ensure that all responses were anonymous, and it was not possible to identify individuals from responses. Descriptive statistics were employed and open-ended questions were analysed using a non-linear, thematic analysis approach (Bazeley 2013) which sought to identify codes and themes by reading and exploring the data, then reviewing and refining it while making connections between the groups of teachers with differing lengths of service.

Findings and discussion

This section focuses predominantly on the teachers' thoughts regarding the value of art and design in the curriculum and in their profession, their confidence in teaching it and then their thoughts on the training and professional learning opportunities available to primary teachers.

The value of the subject within the profession

When asked "How important do you consider art and design to be in the primary school?" a majority of over 70% of respondents believed it to be *very important* or *important*. General comments were made such as *"I believe the arts are such an important part of children's learning"* and *"The children love it and it is an important subject."* This is a positive finding when compared to the results of the McKinnon *et al.* (2022) study where the belief among secondary teachers was that it was a subject that was undervalued in Scotland. However, neither of the samples in these two pieces of research could be considered representative.

Only three participants rated it as *somewhat unimportant* (*n* = 2) or *unimportant* (*n* = 1); these people fell in the 5 years plus categories of service as teachers. The person who rated it as *unimportant* stated that they had personal experience of it but no real interest in the subject; they said they had no confidence teaching the subject in the primary school and that they felt their experience on an initial teacher education programme had left them very unprepared to teach the subject. Their feeling was that it should be taught by visiting art specialists and not primary generalist teachers. These responses were also reflected in the other two participants who rated the subject as *somewhat unimportant*. These findings connect to points made by Gregory (2019) in that the context of their personal experiences of the subject seemed to influence their thoughts on the subject. They also demonstrate how the three forms of professional capital connect with one another, with low levels of knowledge and understanding of art and design, seemingly having an impact on their confidence to teach and deliver the subject, and on their sense of being part of a wider community. Their instinct is therefore to entrench an isolationist viewpoint and place responsibility for teaching the subject onto other people rather than be motivated to develop their own skills and knowledge further. From the perspective of Thurber & Zimmerman (2002) and Allison (2013), it appears that these individuals need a stronger sense of identity as a teacher of art and design, to build their confidence and knowledge of the subject in order for them to progress in terms of their own development and have an impact on the classroom.

Some respondents reflected on its value in relation to other curricular subjects, feeling that it was valued less in relation to Maths and Language and that this needed to change. For example, one participant said:

Art and Design should receive the same core status as Literacy and Maths. Art and Design are fundamental to children's learning and interpretation of the world around them from Early Years. Core language and maths should be a 'progression' from art.

Finally, a respondent stated that they wanted there to be a *"Better understanding of how important art can be for children and more emphasis on it in the curriculum."* Another commented on its value but linked this not just to the immediate school context, but the wider societal context emphasising the lack of support for the subject among parents in particular:

I think art education is really important. As this lockdown period has shown that art is important – people turned to the 'arts' whether it was online art galleries etc for entertainment. I am my school's art specialist (primary trained but cover NCCT) & during lockdown a lot of parents said they didn't

have their children engage in my art lessons as it was just 'art' & maths & language was more important. I'd like this mindset to change.

The majority of these respondents appeared to value the subject but felt that this value was not transparent to wider society echoing the findings of the McKinnon *et al.* (2022) study and despite the government in Scotland placing an emphasis on creative learning and its role in society there is clearly a feeling that this is not reflected in wider society. Manifold & Zimmerman (2011) believe that the value of the subject and improvements to practice can come about by focusing attention on those people who are already positively inclined towards the subject but there is a sense in these comments that there is a significant barrier to overcome, and that is in society's receptiveness to the message and the willingness to embrace the subject of art and design in the classroom.

Confidence levels within the profession

There was a broad spread of confidence levels among the participants when asked "How would you rate your confidence for teaching art and design in a primary school context?". The majority of all the participants rated themselves as *somewhat confident* and this was the same when broken down by length of service. Only 14 of the 110 participants rated themselves as *very confident* though and this was predominantly in the 12–24 years group, while 4 participants rated themselves as having *no confidence.*

These confidence levels changed however when teachers were asked to specifically think about teaching a standalone lesson and a programme of lessons. The confidence levels appeared to increase for standalone lessons across the *very confident* and *confident* categories with only one saying they had *no confidence.* When asked how confident they were with regard to planning and implementing a series of art and design lessons, the reverse happened with more saying they lacked or had no confidence. The planning of all lessons requires secure knowledge and understanding of the subject of art and design as well as the pedagogy however this perhaps becomes more apparent for a series of lessons than a one-off lesson. There could also be a connection between confidence and knowledge and understanding which is reflected in some of the free-written responses from the participants.

For example, one said that *"I wish I had more knowledge and confidence"* while another stated: *"I personally lack confidence in this area and although I value it's importance my lessons at best are woeful and probably not meeting the needs of every child in my class."*

Another respondent said: *"I would love to see more confidence and passion amongst primary teachers for art and design education as I believe it's not so important that teachers have the ability but rather demonstrate the willingness and confidence to try and have a go."* This response separates out confidence and passions from ability. The individual perceives that there is a lack of confidence and passion for the subject among their professional peers. What is not clear is what the person means by mentioning *ability* and whether this includes knowledge and understanding of the subject or an ability to make art. Put in more stark terms, one respondent said *"I also feel those subjects can't be taught well by people who have little or no knowledge of the subjects."*

These responses reveal that in Scotland, we are perhaps currently stuck in the equivalent of the first Stage of the Thurber & Zimmerman (2002) model and that expectations of improving the quality of art and design education in primary

schools are unrealistic until the fundamentals of primary teachers believing in themselves as teacher of art and design, and being secure in what this entails in terms of knowledge and understanding of the subject, are actually addressed. The question is whether this can be addressed while developing social and decisional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan 2012) or whether there is a case for concentrating solely on the individual first as in the Thurber & Zimmerman (2002) model, developing a sense of identity as an art teacher (Allison 2013).

The responses from teachers suggest that a number believe that rather than working with teachers to address the core issues of developing an artist-teacher identity (Allison 2013) they would rather the responsibility lay with someone else either in the form of a specialist who taught the class instead of a generalist or in the form of delivering content that was planned for them by someone else. For example one person said *"A programme that teachers can follow with lesson plans available so they know exactly what should be covered"* while another said *"Easy pick up and go series of art lessons that are based around the benchmarks/outcomes and could be tailored to a number of IDL topics."*

There is no mention of who is responsible for this guidance though it could be taken that the expectation lies with the government. Currently, the Curriculum for Excellence (Education Scotland 2010) has six art and design outcomes at each level and while each outcome provides a clear art and design focus such as engaging with the visual elements or using a range of media, the language is quite general. Further guidance in the form of Benchmarks was then published to supplement this (Education Scotland 2017). The responses in this survey would suggest that teachers would like more support. If this group of people who seem to be positively pre-disposed to the subject of art and design are requesting further support, then it throws into question how the rest of the teacher population are managing the delivery of art and design education in their own primary classrooms.

There seems to be little evidence of emerging future leaders of art and design education in Scottish primary education, and instead, we are presented with a group of people who are willing to be told how to teach the subject. The most recent work of Zimmerman (2014) reflects on their leadership models and identifies a need to include creativity within them. The responses to the survey would suggest that this is currently not present in the profession in primary schools and that instead we have a compliant profession wanting more guidance from the government or local authorities on how to teach art and design. It is a workforce which seems to lack confidence and knowledge reflecting the findings in other pieces of research (Hallam *et al.* 2007; Gurure & Mamvuto 2021).

The role of training and professional learning

Nobody said that their teacher training had left them *very prepared* for teaching art and design education. In fact, there were just under 70%, who felt that their training had left them unprepared for teaching art and design in the primary classroom to some extent, compared to those who felt they were prepared to some extent, around 30%. This means that regardless of length of service, and when these respondents were students on teacher education programmes, the majority felt that their experiences during this time had not prepared them for teaching art and design in the primary classroom. Comments included:

ITE needs to include higher quality teaching on Art and Design to better equip teachers for implementing lessons.

More training during teacher training. I only had around a 3h tutorial during my PGDE.

The research gathered information on primary teacher awareness of professional learning opportunities, in relation to art and design education, that were currently available in their local authority. Nearly 90% of the participants stated they knew of no opportunities to support them with professional learning in primary art and design education. Only 3 of the participants had accessed an opportunity once and 11 participants were aware of some opportunities but had not accessed them. The role of professional development was commented on most in the free-text comments which asked teachers to consider the future of art and design education in primary schools. Many wanted an increase in the professional development opportunities available:

More CPD opportunities to raise the profile of the expressive arts. After specialists were removed this void was not filled.

Greater training opportunities for teachers and secondment opportunities for teachers to develop art within the primary school to ensure skills progression.

Cpd courses which give teachers qualifications.

Suitable CLPL for teachers that actually links to feasible lessons within a classroom setting and where those resources used can be obtained easily. Greater opportunities to take learners to art shows and galleries.

What is curious here is that the work of McKinnon *et al.* (2022) demonstrated that cultural organisations are offering support in terms of professional development for teachers and would like to do more of this, but this is not apparent to the respondents in the survey. It throws into question whether teachers are actively seeking these opportunities or waiting to be presented with them by their employer. A key driver in building professional capital is the individual having the confidence to drive their professional development rather than be subject to it. Social capital gathered from networking is also a driver and professional development opportunities can provide an ideal opportunity to build this: it is essential in terms of developing art and design education leaders of the future. The responses appear to indicate that schools and organisations that offer professional learning opportunities such as museums and galleries, are currently operating in separate spheres with the result that the training is not being received by the people who need it. This is something which needs to be addressed if teachers are to build their professional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan 2012) or become leaders in art and design education in schools in the future (Thurber & Zimmerman 2002), as networking and collaboration and community are all integral to this.

Conclusion

Scottish Government documents place an emphasis on creative learning and so the conditions for quality art and design education in primary schools should be in existence but the research indicates that this is not the case. Instead, it presents the viewpoints of a group of teachers in Scotland who believe in the value of the subject of art and design in the primary curriculum but indicate a lack of confidence to deliver this in their classrooms, particularly in relation to lessons that required depth and breadth of understanding of the subject. The majority of participants stated that their experiences on teacher education programmes had not prepared them to teach the subject of art and design. They seemed to be unaware of professional development opportunities which would support them to address this but state that they would like more opportunities to be available to them. Finally, they were keen to have guidance and tools that removed the requirement for them to have to draw on a depth of knowledge in order to implement quality art and design education in their classroom, such as prepared lesson plans.

General professional development theory (Hargreaves & Fullan 2012) and theories which focus on developing leadership in art and design education (Thurber & Zimmerman 2002; Manifold & Zimmerman 2011; Zimmerman 2014) both start with the individual and the importance of secure knowledge and understanding in order to deliver the subject with confidence. Essentially, primary teachers need to embrace an art teacher identity (Allison 2013). In the case of the current Scottish context, the research suggests that we have teachers who are floundering in terms of delivering a quality art and design education in practice; they do not view themselves as art teachers when teaching the subject in the primary classroom and rather than driving the subject forward they are waiting for someone to tell them what to do.

In terms of policy, there needs to be an open and honest reflection on the part of governments in relation to how policy is or is not being put into practice in schools. The research gathered here and by others suggests that at the moment there is a discord between policy and practice and that the value of the subject as written about in policy documents is not manifest in Scottish classrooms. In terms of practice, local authorities and teacher education providers need to reflect on their role in this seeming discord and this is an area that is worthy of further research. The research suggests that there are people across the fields of education and cultural organisations who have a shared belief in the value of the subject and as a result have the potential to create a climate where art and design are valued more in society. Finding a way for teachers to be integral to this will support them to develop their sense of an artist-teacher identity, building their capital and autonomy and becoming future leaders of art and design education in Scotland, improving the quality of art and design education for children across the nation.

Dr Anna Robb – Anna currently works at the University of Dundee in the School of Education and Social Work, on initial teacher, masters and doctoral level education programmes. Prior to this, she was a primary teacher. Her areas of expertise are primary art education, children's voices, identity and visual methods. More information is available here: https://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/en/persons/anna-robb.

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