How girls' achievements in school art are undermined by boys' rejection of the subject: an investigation into gendered attitudes towards art and design education

*or* Why schoolboys drop art

Etherington, Margaret A.

m.etherington@uel.ac.uk

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Abstract: The study concerns how the perception of school art as more suitable for girls than boys relates to its marginal position in the curriculum. By looking at one institution in depth, explanations are offered as to why more than twice as many girls nationally take art at A-level.

A postmodern feminist approach was adopted to investigate the disparity, which was explained by a perception of art as trivial, feminine and an ‘easy’ subject. Boys more than girls view art as irrelevant to their future lives and careers. Their opinions are influenced by gendered learning styles actively produced within acceptable forms of masculinity. Boys’ resistance to art is condoned by parents and links to Bourdieu’s theories on ‘habitus’ and cultural capital. Ultimately, boys could be unwittingly limiting their access to art-related careers, and girls’ achievements in art are being belittled.

There was some evidence to suggest that exposing pupils to an art practitioner in digital media could persuade them, particularly boys, of art’s relevance to later life. However, this increased interest in the subject was not maintained due to poor access to art software in the case study school.

The heightened flexibility inherent in the New Secondary Curriculum ought to encourage more students of both sexes to participate in post-compulsory art, but there remain questions about the relationship between the re-conceptualised curriculum and the needs of industry.

Background and methodology

Research (Archer & MacRae, 1991; Colley et al, 1994) has shown that pupils of around 11 and 12 tend not to view art as either masculine or feminine. Nevertheless, A-level groups are typically girl-heavy, with 70 per cent of A-level art candidates being female, as are 60 per cent of students who sit GCSE (source: Joint Council for General Qualifications, 2008). At some time during their secondary schooling students have decided that art is a more appropriate subject for girls than boys.

The New Secondary Curriculum starting with Year 7 in September 2008 represents a re-conceptualisation of the whole curriculum to provide one that is more flexible, engaging and relevant to pupils (www.qca.org.uk). A stated intention of the art teacher’s union, NSEAD, is that the new art curriculum should lead to a significant increase the percentage of boys continuing with art after Key Stage 3 by getting rid of the compulsory elements that are said to put students off, especially drawing. This study highlights features of contemporary art education, therefore, that are likely to undergo change in the near future.

To place art in context, after Key Stage 3 students are required to follow a curriculum of core subjects such as mathematics, science and English up to GCSE, but make a selection from the remainder. Some of these optional subjects show a recurring pattern of gender influence. At GCSE, design and technology, business studies and information technology attract more boys while languages and arts subjects attract
more girls. Gender differences seen in the uptake of optional subjects at Key Stage 4 are compounded in the post-16 curriculum once the core subjects are no longer a statutory requirement. In the Sixth Form more boys tend to choose mathematics, physics and chemistry, while girls favour languages, English literature as well as art. (Source: JCQ, 2008.)

The gender disparity in both the take-up of art and attainment at GCSE and A-level has been neglected by published educational researchers. There has been a far greater concern (by the Equal Opportunities Commission and feminist writers such as Kelly, 1982; Whyte, 1985a; Arnot et al., 1999, for example) that girls are limiting their ability to do scientific/technical/engineering careers by avoiding these subjects at A-level. By paying greater attention to mathematics and science, the standing of these ‘male’ subjects is further elevated. It is unclear as to whether academics, including feminists, are implicitly dismissing as unworthy of study gender differences in pupils’ attitudes towards a curriculum area (art) not generally associated with boys’ interests and future careers. Perhaps editors and publishers have deemed such subject matter to be lacking in appeal or seriousness. Whatever the reason, I would argue that this omission is contributing to a view of art which, nationally, is predominantly studied by girls in the Sixth Form, as a less ‘weighty’ school subject.

This investigation centred on the perceived importance and relevance of art to schoolchildren and adults, and the extent to which current art education suited girls’ and boys’ learning styles. Most of the research took place within one school, Newburgh Grammar, with myself as teacher-researcher. Although essentially an ethnographic case study using observation and semi-structured interviewing of Sixth Form students as the main data-gathering techniques, there were also quantitative surveys. Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from all pupils taking art between Years 7 and 11, with the intention of tracing any general changes in attitudes towards art between starting secondary school, opting for GCSE and making A-level choices, and to see whether a gendered pattern would emerge. The interviews with Sixth Formers sought to discover the ways in which boys’ and girls’ perspectives on art A-level vary, and to find out why some boys become involved with A-level art if it is considered less gender-appropriate for them to do so. Moreover, there was a need to reflect on what part I play as a teacher in reinforcing or challenging perceptions of art as being more suitable for one sex than another.

It was hoped that the findings would also indicate whether the case study institution had common characteristics with other schools that have featured in published research, such as the perceived gender-appropriateness of curriculum subjects and the disparity in attitudes towards coursework. The research data did indeed reflect wider findings, which helped to justify any generalised recommendations being based on a single case.

The Literature

Since the research relates to gender differentiation in subject choice, research texts on gender provided the background to my observation and analysis. Many of these are by feminist academics focusing on the inevitability of female disadvantage due to patriarchy.

During the 1970s and ‘80s, feminists saw social learning or ‘sex role’ theory as accounting for the perpetuation of unequal gender roles in society. Women’s inferior status was deemed to be as a result of socialisation taking place first within the family, and then in school. It was argued that the ‘hidden curriculum’ conveyed
assumptions about girls being less important than boys, resulting in the lower confidence and expectations that contributed to girls’ educational failure (see, for example, Sharpe, 1976; Delamont, 1980; Whyte, Dean and Cruickshank, 1985; Claricoates, 1987). Feminist researchers described how boys dominated teachers’ time and attention in lessons (Stanworth, 1983; Kelly, 1985), and the ways in which boys harassed and denigrated girls in and out of the classroom (Jones, 1985; Whyte, 1986; Lees, 1987). They also demonstrated that in a patriarchal educational model generated by men (Spender, 1981), much teaching material omitted or trivialised females (Lobban, 1987; Northam, 1987) and that ‘feminine’ subjects were considered to be of less value than typically masculine ones (Rollason, 1987).

Sex role theories started to lose favour when it was realised that girls were at least equalling, and often surpassing, boys’ educational attainment, despite continuing to experience discrimination and disadvantage in the classroom. Moreover, feminists (such as Anyon, 1983; Davies, 1983; Walkerdine, 1987) began to challenge the notion that girls were uniformly reproducing fixed gender roles. (See, too, Francis, 1998:5; Beasley, 1999:81.)

Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (1998) also invite us to reconsider the limitations of ‘identity politics’, which explained issues relating to gender and schooling in terms of girls and women being in a fixed subordinated position in society. The ‘new politics of cultural difference’, to be found, for example in Mac an Ghaill’s postmodern theories on how masculinities are constructed, provide a framework which takes into account multiple social categories and identities, including power relationships between women and men (Mac and Ghaill, 1996). In my research, therefore, I aimed to guard against making unsubstantiated and over-simplified assumptions about any gender patterns that I uncovered. Although liberal feminist concepts provided my initial standpoint, I expected reality to be complex, varied and changing. The postmodern view is that people rarely fit into prescribed social groups, and there is a need to allow for the possibility that empirical data may challenge and contradict the established (modernist) feminist underpinnings of the framework.

At a time when gender as an explanation of underachievement is receiving so much attention from academics and the media, Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ helps to balance the argument. Selecting gender as the most important statistical category in research could be misleading since class and race frequently have a greater bearing on educational outcomes (Francis & Skelton, 2005). For Bourdieu (1986; 1991), those individuals with cultural capital who benefit most from the established order and gain the best qualifications are able to confirm their superior social status, while the culturally disadvantaged who appear to have had the same educational opportunities remain socially subordinate. The ‘invisible’ nature of habitus can also provide a deeper understanding of how preconceptions relating to gender are unwittingly transmitted and how these contribute to an unequal society. Throughout this study, the influence of parental opinions was often found to have had a profound effect on pupils’ attitudes towards art; these are attitudes that would have developed from the values associated with the home background and absorbed unconsciously by pupils, according to Bourdieu’s theories.

Reasons for attitudes towards art as a school subject cannot be fully revealed solely through educational theory. It was also necessary to engage with ideas about the status of art in contemporary society (Fine, 1978; Dalton, 2001), and women’s invisibility throughout the history of art (Greer, 1979; Hedges & Wendt, 1980; Parker & Pollock, 1987; Korsmeyer, 2004), both of which are inextricably bound up with patriarchy. Girls may show a greater commitment to the subject, as is suggested by
public examination results, but if they continue studying and practising art after they leave school, they will enter a world where male artists still predominate, despite the emergence of several significant women artists over the past few decades.

Although art history is primarily male, Dalton views artists of both sexes as undertaking ‘feminine’ work. A welcome exception to the dearth of literature on the subject is her book *The Gendering of Art Education*. Dalton’s insights may offer an explanation for the rejection of art after Key Stage 3 by the predominantly middle class boys at Newburgh school. She contends that creative work, including the content of art education, is gendered as feminine, and that “the role of the art teacher is that of a feminised service worker” (Dalton, 2001:123). As such, it is claimed, most painters, sculptors, fashion designers and performers are not taken as seriously nor generally paid as well, as those in non-‘creative’ professions (high-profile artist(e)s are, of course, the exception).

**Methodology**

The main aim of the research was to try and establish the reasons why girls constituted the majority in the art A-level group, when boys and girls were equally mixed within the Sixth Form. The research objectives, therefore, were to find out from pupils themselves possible gender differences in attitude towards various aspects of their art education, and to trace the development of these attitudes from Year 7 (age 11) onwards.

The ethnographic case study took place in the school where I taught. A pilot study using questionnaires was conducted, leading to full-scale research involving a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Grounded theory arising from the early data gave direction to subsequent ethnographic research. Written surveys were often the starting point for semi-structured interviews. As Yin (1994) points out, the unique strength of the case study lies in its ability to deal with a range of evidence such as documents, questionnaires and observations. Using various sources of evidence that converge on the same set of facts (triangulation) was used to check the consistency of gendered attitudes. However, there was an awareness of Silverman’s (1985) argument that the concept of triangulation contradicts a naturalistic methodological approach where findings are expected to be specific to individual situations. Thus, I was anticipating discrepancies occurring between sets of data, in addition to discovering trends and patterns.

For optimum accuracy, I recorded on tape the interviews that I conducted, after making sure that the interviewees agreed and were comfortable with the idea. Other, informal, conversations yielding insightful comments were logged in a research diary. A content analysis of transcribed interviews helped to categorise the responses to each question, although sometimes just one individual made a key point. This material, together with data from other sources, formed the basis for the final write-up. I envisaged that spoken comments would be richer and more illuminating than written responses, and that quoting from the case study interviews would bring my research account to life and make any recommendations more convincing.

A benefit of researching the pupils that I taught on a day-to-day basis was that being immersed in the setting and interacting constantly with the subjects of study is an important aspect of ethnographic research. The ethnographer writes about people’s everyday lives, and interprets their experiences from their own point of view (Fetterman, 1998; Robson, 1993). I endeavoured to understand the world from the
subjects’ perspectives through the use of the semi-structured interviews. Kvale (1996) views the qualitative research interview as an aspect of the move towards postmodern thought which rejects the notion of objective reality in favour of socially constructed reality. He asserts that the knowledge produced in the interview conversation is a meaning negotiated by the participants of the world we live in, rather than the result of an attempt to pursue objective reality. It incorporates a phenomenological approach to understanding and explaining their experiences by studying individual events that occur and how they relate to a wider social context. Phenomenologically oriented research embracing multiple subjective realities sets the scene for theory grounded in empirical data to develop (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Fetterman, 1998). This is how I intended to find explanations for the information I collected, in preference to seeking a fit for preconceived ideas. The fact that I did not predict my eventual conclusions at the beginning of the study reassured me that I was not merely trying to find evidence to support an initial hypothesis.

As a feminist researcher, the social constructions of gender, and the belief that they fundamentally affect people’s lives, were central to the investigation. Although compatible with the methods of data collection discussed above, one way in which feminist research differs from other qualitative approaches is that it takes a political stand and aims to dismantle social injustice from within (Weiner, 1989:48; Lather, 1991:71). If it appeared that there were inequalities in art education at Newburgh, it was hoped that findings from the study might provide opportunities for me to instigate changes.

But how achievable would effective change be? Although the liberal feminist movement has helped to create greater equality of opportunity, the way in which gender characteristics are perceived by society, and the value that is attributed to them, is reflected in strongly gender-differentiated roles in the workplace. Hence the ‘glass ceiling’, through which women can see and theoretically aspire to positions of power, positions which are often unattainable due to traditional attitudes having remained largely unchanged (Francis, 1998). The equal opportunities discourse is an aspect of liberal feminism that has focused on the assimilation of women into a male-dominated world and improving accessibility to traditionally male jobs; hence the proliferation of feminist research concerned with girls and science, and other ‘male’ curriculum areas where girls used to underachieve. One can argue that liberal feminism has been ‘allowed’ to bring about some change because it leaves the social, economic and political order intact in terms of male privilege. In published feminist research, the notion that boys might be limiting their educational opportunities and career prospects by not pursuing art to the extent that girls are has not been an issue; however, girls’ access to boys’ subjects has been a liberal feminist preoccupation. In this way the pre-eminence of male values is implicitly being upheld, and such assumptions continue to account for the scarcity of feminist research on gendered differences relating to art in schools.

My feminist viewpoint challenges and rejects this liberal perspective, which “gives a positive value to womanhood” (Beasley, 1999:54). But because radical feminists deem sexual oppression to be so profoundly entrenched, the solution would have to be in revolutionary social change. Herein lay my dilemma as a feminist researcher: if boys at my school were not taking up a post-compulsory art curriculum due to its gendered construction as a school subject, how much change would a single individual (myself) be able to bring about to make it more appealing to both sexes? I return to this matter later on.
Validity Issues

There are those who would question whether such a small-scale enquiry would be justified in that it may have no generalisable validity, but I agree with Millman (1987) who points out that a localised study of this type is still capable of bringing about improvements within the teacher’s own department; in this instance I am part of the case study, researching and developing as an art teacher. Kvale (1996) counters criticism about the case study’s inability to produce generalisable findings by expanding the concept of generalisability, claiming that even the findings and recommendations of the relatively small case study can suggest possibilities to the reader of the ways in which social situations can be enriched and improved.

The data collection methods were potentially problematic as all of the evidence is, to some extent, subjectively interpreted. Reflexivity was thus an important element in the account in that I strove to expose my own effect on the matters under scrutiny. My position as an authority figure, and pupils’ attitudes towards my persona, were revealed throughout the study through direct quotations, even if the children’s comments were not very flattering! It became clear that my success at meeting both public examination targets set by the school and Ofsted standards, achieved through a very structured art curriculum, could have been one of the factors putting students off continuing with their art education.

Ethics

A central aim of social science is to contribute knowledge to ameliorate the human condition and enhance human dignity (Kvale, 1996:109).

The moral imperative, therefore, was to undertake research primarily for philanthropic reasons rather than solely for the writer’s prestige and career advancement. Although it sounds quite humble compared to Kvale’s exhortation, my own aim was to attempt to bring about improvements in my school and to provide information that may be useful to other practitioners. As an investigator, I had to consider the ethical implications associated with using human subjects for my research. Firstly, they had a right to know why they are being asked to help me, and what for. I explained to respondents in a way that they could understand (without academic jargon, for example) what my research aims were, why I was doing it and what I intended to do with the information they supplied. It was made clear that their participation was voluntary. Secondly, they should have been able to trust that I would protect their privacy. Their contributions were not identifiable as having come from them; anonymity was assured, and it was my responsibility to maintain that confidentiality. There might have been a concern that the research would be ‘contaminated’ by the information given to interviewees before asking them questions, but, ethically, informed consent of the participants was essential.

Gaining consent and approval of senior management was ethically desirable, too. The Headteacher at my school was fully aware of my ongoing research and was happy for me to have access to relevant sources of information, including the pupils.

Conclusion

Throughout the methodology account there was a tension between the aspiration for an unbiased and accurate truth and the essential nature of the case study approach which is likely to produce findings that are not only unique to that context, but are also interpreted by an ‘insider’. In such a situation, generalisability may be unrealistic, calling into question justification for the research project.
By definition, a feminist perspective contests positivism and therefore neutrality. The researcher starts from an assumption that women as a whole are disadvantaged by patriarchy even before the data are collected, and contemporary postmodern feminism anticipates plural and contradictory findings. Nevertheless, the researcher as participant-observer aims for neutrality but, as this cannot be achieved, strives to reveal their preconceptions and estimate their effect on the respondents. There is also the possibility that the researcher has contributed to the research problem under investigation!

Even with these challenges, a transparent methodology has the potential to illuminate at least the conditions in the case study institution so that local improvements can be planned. The effectiveness, or not, of subsequent actions could in themselves be revelatory to a wider audience.

Findings

When I started teaching at the case study school in 1996, art had a reputation as an ‘easy’ subject, especially at GCSE. Grades for GCSE were A* - E, and A – E at A-level. At GCSE there were over 40 students, approximately half of whom were boys. About one-third of the A-level students were boys.

Art started to be taught in a more rigorous way, with higher teacher-expectations. GCSE grades improved to 100 per cent A* - B grades. From 1998, all A-level students achieved grade A at A-level, helping to raise the profile of art within the school. Initially, this appeared to be responsible for attracting a higher percentage of boys to opt for A-level art.

However, the improved recruitment of boys onto the course was accompanied by a large drop-out rate which was not present among the girls. There was evidence that Sixth Form boys generally underestimated the level of academic challenge in art. They also attributed the ‘difficulty’ of the subject to organisational and motivational factors rather than to demands on the intellect. Thus by implication, art was a subject that generally suited more girls’ learning styles than boys’, but was not seen by the older boys as intrinsically difficult.

Also, the increased rigour from the Lower School upwards coincided with fewer boys opting to do GCSE, and the decline in boys increased to such an extent that in 2002 and 2004, there were no boys at all in the Lower Sixth art groups. (A GCSE grade in art is a required for progression to A-level.) Surveying the attitudes of Year 9 pupils became an important part of the study because it is at this age that they make their option choices. The boys in particular often rejected art unequivocally:

I find art difficult because most of the work is very time-consuming.

I feel art should be optional from Year 7.

It is much too high a standard for my way of working, especially observational.

I don’t like art whatsoever because I feel it is not needed in the modern world. The homework is too hard, boring and time-consuming. I HATE ART!!!
I dislike art due to the amount of work and how we have to try as hard as we can... It is also no use in the real world. Drawing pictures or surreal objects. I HATE ART IT SUCKS.

I don’t like art.... The teacher criticise(s) although they can’t draw or paint or do anything remotely to do with art themselves. Artists are weirdos.

(On why he is not taking it for GCSE) I would never be able to complete the homework and would be too much hassle.

Throughout the research period, there were other factors that may have contributed to the lower take-up of post-compulsory art by boys. A change in national assessment procedures for art had necessitated greater emphasis on preparatory studies as a large part of the coursework and final examination; typically, these are less favoured by boys. Key Stage 3 pupils became aware from older students of the heavy workload entailed in producing GCSE preparatory studies of a high standard, and this was more off-putting to boys than girls. The introduction of AS examinations in the Lower Sixth meant that there was less time in which to overcome weaknesses before being examined externally; there was some evidence that boys needed longer than girls to attain the highest grades in art.

The school reduced the number of option subjects (which includes art) to be taken by GCSE students in the hope of improving their grades in other subjects and thereby contributing to better League Table statistics for the school. The contact time for art at Key Stage 3 was considerably reduced by the school to allow for Information Technology and other curriculum priorities. Double art lessons totalling 1 hour 20 minutes were changed to single lessons of 50 minutes in Years 7 and 9. Numbered levels for attainment in art at KS3 were introduced. As well as conveying messages about the importance, or not, of art in the curriculum, there was less time in which to fulfil expectations for grammar school pupils to achieve around Level 7. The standard of work generated in Year 9 declined, and boys in particular showed less motivation to produce good quality artwork in the reduced timescale.

When the case study school underwent an Inspection in 2004, Ofsted identified that expectations and quality of teaching were higher in art than in other subjects, representing a change since the previous inspection of 1997 when there was greater parity between subjects. Boys more than girls seemed to be less inclined than before to choose a GCSE subject with a reputation for being more challenging, even if they knew that their final grade was likely to be higher.

Other findings from the case study institution had a bearing on the gendered uptake of the post-compulsory art curriculum. Year 9 and Year 11 boys were less disposed than girls to opt for a subject they saw as irrelevant to their future working lives, and boys at the school were much less likely than girls to aspire to an art-related career. Girls were more willing to choose art for GCSE or A-level just because they enjoyed it. Parents of Key Stage 3 boys were less disappointed than girls’ parents if their sons received low assessment Levels for art.

Even if students did continue with art to GCSE, it was often seen as less of an achievement than success in other subjects:

Harry: Well, my family are a bit old-fashioned so I go ‘Yeah, I got A*’ and they go ‘Oh wow, what did you get it in?’ ‘Art’ and they’re like ‘(sarcastically) Oh…. well, that’s a great achievement. What’re you going to do with that?’ Well, I wouldn’t know how to answer it because...
Alastair: They don’t understand what you’ve been through.

Harry: They think it’s easy. All you have to do is just splash a bit of paint on the paper. They can’t appreciate it.

A number of students from Chinese families had studied art at GCSE over the previous ten years, and had all achieved very high grades. None, though, had gone on to take art at A-level, despite my encouragement to do so. Parental expectations played a big part here; art was not viewed as an appropriate subject or career for either girls or boys.

Contrary to the belief that boys are more competitive, both sexes were found to be competitive in art. However, a group interview with Year 9 boys revealed that they would only do GCSE / A-level art if they felt that they could ‘win’, or be one of the best.

The perception of art as a ‘useless’ subject, particularly by boys and some of their parents, as well as non-art teachers, derives partly from a belief that there are few art-related job opportunities in the adult world. This is a misconception. The rapid expansion of vocational paths for young digital artists in industries such as computer games, film animation and website creation may reflect the interests of many young men and boys, but for various reasons school art departments have not been able to keep themselves abreast of such developments. It was speculated that inviting a digital artist into school to talk to Key Stage 3 pupils might help to make the skills they acquired in their art lessons seem more relevant not merely to the employment market in general, but also to jobs that are appealing and potentially lucrative.

A male artist, Paul, did come into school to demonstrate his working practices to a Year 8 audience. He was also able to show pupils how their existing (traditional) art curriculum teaches them skills used in his digital designs. When surveyed, the Year 8 pupils who attended Paul’s presentation viewed art as more relevant to people’s future lives and careers, and aspired more to an art-related vocation, after the event than they had beforehand. Boys showed the larger increase in the perceived usefulness of the subject. However, lack of access to ICT facilities in the art department meant that pupils were not able to produce similar work themselves in school, and the positive impact of Paul’s presentation was short-lived; only 3 boys from a year group of 150 opted to take GCSE art a year and a half later.

Discussion

Some of the above findings are due to unique circumstances: the researcher’s own approach to teaching art, the visiting artist’s presentation and the school’s decisions about the curriculum, for example. There is also the atypical profile of the school population in that it is not mixed-ability, but selective. Other findings are linked to published research, thereby relating to a wider social framework. Feminist writing points to gender inequities in education and society adversely affecting girls and women. Newburgh girls’ success at school art is not entirely a triumph for them because it is undermined by low subject esteem and its seemingly tenuous relationship to the world of work; subjects and careers with greater masculine associations usually hold the highest social status (Spender 1981; Kelly 1985; Whyte 1986; Connell 1996).
The views of Newburgh boys support Dalton’s (2001) argument that art education and art activities are widely understood as feminine. The case study boys’ opinions also underline Bowden’s (2000) observations on the resistance of boys across the board to carry out preparatory work in sketch books. The relatively low numbers of students of both sexes taking art GCSE seem linked to Gillborn’s and Youdell’s (2000) assertion that secondary pupils recognise the low status of non-compulsory ‘arts’ subjects, and Stables’ and Wikely’s (1998) findings that art is seen as relatively unimportant. It can be argued that these connections to previous research on boys’ relationship to art education help to support any generalisable recommendations that are made based on findings from a single school.

The study adds breadth to work on masculinities (Connell, 1989; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Martino, 1999), which tend to focus on underachieving and alienated boys, by expanding on the educational aspirations of middle class boys. Although at Newburgh Grammar there are frequently instances of male resistance to learning, and to a much greater extent than among the girls, the overriding culture is of both sexes achieving academically and progressing to university. Thus boys’ disinclination to engage enthusiastically with art at school was not simply due to a general antipathy towards being educated, but was at least partly attributable to various other factors including art’s low subject status.

Without access to adequate ICT resources, the lack of which Ofsted inspectors of art and design often criticise, and having a traditional curriculum that Downing and Watson (2004) discovered is predominant in school art, the case study department’s pedagogy could be viewed as anachronistic: it frequently failed to reflect current practices in the art world or children’s attraction to digital media, or to clarify its relevance to the employment market, particularly to the younger pupils.

This study provides a new perspective regarding gendered underachievement arising from the low take-up of a school subject that has parallels to Kelly’s research of the 1980s on girls and science (Kelly, 1985).

It also fills a gap in published academic and feminist critiques of education on girls’ and boys’ differential attitudes towards school art. The omission of art in discussions on the gendered nature of practical subjects (see Green, 1998; Paechter, 1998) is rectified.

At Newburgh, art being dismissed as an ‘easy’ subject had a bearing on boys’ non-participation in the subject, but making it more challenging and successful in terms of results and approval from Ofsted was ultimately ineffective in improving its status and appeal. The solution to raising the esteem of school art appeared to lie with giving it visibly more pertinence to the world of work, including the computer and video game industry. This proposes an update to previously published feminist literature on gender equality with regard to girls accessing technology-based careers (see, for example, Whyte, 1986a).

Most Newburgh Grammar boys do not resist learning in general and are not normally derided for achieving, especially once they are in Years 10 and 11 and studying for GCSE examinations, which challenges claims by Connell (1989), Martino (1999) and Frosh et al. (2002) as to the experiences of most boys at school. Findings were more consistent with observations by Mac an Ghaill (1994) that white middle class boys are keen to be seen as academically successful at GCSE (but this did not include an eagerness to do well at art). The difference of around 10 percentage points between boys’ and girls’ attainment of five A* to C grades at GCSE nationally is not reflected in Newburgh’s statistics; nearly all students achieve these grades.
Those boys who do choose to take GCSE art do as well as the girls. Boys’ educational ‘failure’ is therefore not an issue at the case study institution; their socioeconomic contexts bestow on them the type of cultural capital compatible with the aims and values of the school and the masculinities they produce are primarily the socially acceptable ones.

The findings also support an extension to Bourdieu’s theory (1986; 1991) that academic success depends on the extent to which children acquire cultural capital from their home backgrounds. The predominantly middle class pupils at Newburgh are reproducing their parents’ preoccupation with the need for education to facilitate career status and power within capitalism. Attitudes towards school art suggest that parental dispositions towards their children’s education are often gendered too, in that boys’ subject choices are expected to be more career-focused than girls’ choices.

It is suggested that gender differences in attitudes towards art, and an accelerating predominance of girls taking the subject at GCSE and A-level, have two significant effects on pupils. Firstly, to diminish further art’s perceived importance in the curriculum, especially when compared to the ‘masculine’ and high-status subjects of mathematics and science. Thus, girls’ hard-won achievements in art may be viewed as less impressive and prestigious. Secondly, to reduce boys’ access to art-related careers. (From time to time, I was approached by Sixth Form boys who wanted to do a ‘crash course’ in A-level art because they had realised too late that they needed this qualification for their intended careers.) Nationally, a great deal of funding has been made available over the past two decades to encourage girls to pursue traditionally ‘male’ subjects, thereby implying that these subjects are superior. Boys have at least as much artistic potential as girls do, but they may be restricting their life-chances by opting out of it on a large scale in school, and this is doing nothing to enhance art’s standing in secondary education.

It can be claimed that the professional status of male artists versus the marginalisation of women artists throughout history is echoed in gendered attitudes towards art in Newburgh school today. It was usually men who were commissioned to create art in previous centuries; the needle arts practised by women were likely to have been unpaid domestic work, and drawing and painting were sometimes deemed suitable amateur pastimes for female members of upper class families. So, it has been largely men who have made a living from art, not women. Findings from this investigation suggest that grammar school boys will only opt to take art for GCSE if they think that they can be very successful at it compared to their peers, and will not usually take A-level art unless it fits into their plans for Higher Education and a career. As very few boys do this, art is perceived to be ‘useless’ to most people’s future lives which contributes to its marginality as a subject at the case study school. The view of art as feminine is reinforced by the higher proportion of parents who are happy for their daughters to opt for post-compulsory art whether or not it leads to a career. Beyond school in the employment market, though, men are likely to hold the highest positions in the art world, and most high profile exhibitions today feature work by male artists.

Recommendations for schools that boys should analyse critically those forms of masculinity detrimental to their education, and that both sexes should deconstruct gendered subject choices, seem to be excellent suggestions that are unlikely to be put into practice. Schools are more driven by the publication of league tables which forces them to optimise examination results for all children, to avoid financial cuts or even closure. At the case study school, departmental targets for public examination results are very high. Compared to these demands, finding time in an overcrowded
curriculum to examine the formation of gender identities is likely to be a low priority for most schools. Moreover, recent initiatives towards an increase in vocational training at secondary level tend to endorse traditional, gender-segregated career choices, potentially cancelling out any deconstructive analysis if it were to take place.

One might object to education being seen as existing primarily to serve the national economy, but the individual teacher can do little to change this on their own. However, there exists the potential to use its workplace-training function to ameliorate the status of art in Newburgh school and in others. The New Secondary Curriculum is intended to enhance pupils' motivation and engagement across all subjects at Key Stage 3 and beyond, and emphasises risk-taking, originality, creativity and individualised learning (www.nsead.org; www.qca.org.uk). It allows schools much greater flexibility to devise their own curriculum that focuses on students' culture; thus there exists an increased opportunity for art departments to facilitate activities in job-related areas that reflect students' interests: digital illustration, computer game art and 'street' fashion, for example. There is therefore the capability to provide a curriculum that motivates both sexes in art. Often, the justification for academic research lies in its potential to influence policy. In this case, the government has already provided for a potentially beneficial change not only by devising a new curriculum but also by making it statutory. It is up to art teaching staff, though, to press for essential ICT resources when a school reviews its curriculum provision.

Yet if the status of art as a school subject is tied to its vocational value, there may be new problems ahead, and this could be the subject of a future research project. I recently visited two schools where art was more popular among boys than at Newburgh, in an effort to discover their appeal. One was a co-educational state school in which far more boys took A-level art than girls did, and the other was a boys' public school. The common factors were that both schools had invested in state-of-the-art computer suites for the exclusive use of their art departments, and drawing skills were a low priority compared to the case study school. A close examination of the digital work produced at the state school, proud of its high A-level grades, showed that the imagery was produced largely by forming montages of existing artwork found online rather than students creating new images themselves. At the public school, images in sketch books, the backbone of GCSE and A-level coursework, were often collections of printed pictures from magazines or the internet with few hand-drawn additions. The notion of 'creativity' here, as in the new curriculum, was more to do with ideas alone than the realisation of ideas into a demonstration of practical skill. With drawing no longer being a requirement in the new curriculum, and the 'rearrangement' of secondary source material being highly rewarded, I question the extent to which school art will meet the needs of the workplace. There are already indications that video game degree courses have little job relevance because students lack vital skills for industry (The Mail on Sunday, 24.8.08). Proof of proficiency in drawing is still a necessity for applicants to architecture courses at university. This state of affairs clearly demands wider and more rigorous investigation. An ostensibly work-related curriculum notwithstanding, if art's vocational value ultimately becomes diluted to maximise its appeal, it could return to being a low status subject rejected by boys once again.

**Conclusions**

It can be argued that vocation-orientated masculinities constructed by the grammar school boys justify their failure to pursue school art beyond Key Stage 3. Their attitudes towards art are reinforced by the outdated views of their parents' who think
of the subject in terms of poor career opportunities, and by the school through the marginalisation of art in the timetable and remarks made by individual teachers. Girls are more likely to study art whether or not they intend to continue with it after they leave school, and there is a greater inclination among their parents to support their daughters’ choice.

Throughout art history it is men who have earned a living as artists while women were commonly engaged in art practices for reasons other than as a paid job, a pattern that is broadly replicated at Newburgh. Boys will not usually pursue A-level art here unless it fits in with their plans for a career, whereas girls taking A-level art do so for a variety of reasons and only a few of them will progress to an art Foundation Course.

There was some evidence to suggest that introducing Key Stage 3 pupils to digital artists and other art professionals engaged in industries that reflect boys’ as well as girls’ interests can start to reverse the notion of art’s ‘uselessness’. However, this positive attitude has to be reinforced by providing art departments with good quality ICT resources. It was hoped that if school art could become less associated with only girl-related skills, it would acquire greater esteem; also, that boys would become more cautious about limiting their career options by giving up art too early. The flexibility inherent in the New Secondary Curriculum would appear to offer considerable opportunities to broaden art’s appeal to students, and to make it more relevant to the workplace. But if the result is a ‘dumbing down’ of the subject by sidelining practical skills such as academic drawing, art education in school may turn out to be even more ‘useless’.

The main recommendations, therefore, would be to utilise the opportunities available through the New Secondary Curriculum to facilitate an improved understanding of art’s application in modern-day careers. The new requirement for individualised learning should mean that learning takes place according to need and motivation, so that girls and boys pursue their own interests but can also be provided with different challenges if their career plans demand certain skills. The latter would necessitate closer links with practising artists and designers of all types, and access to up-to-date software is essential. Some schools are already implementing this type of curriculum, and their artwork projects are being used as exemplar material for the new statutory requirements (www.nsead.org). I would argue that an increase in boys’ take-up of post-compulsory art would be less likely where schools fail to invest in ICT for art departments, art departments ‘tweak’ existing curriculum structures instead of a complete remodelling, and in the long run, where there is an avoidance of teaching painting and drawing to those who might turn out to have considerable potential.

Returning to the issue of the impact I alone could have on improving gender equality within an art department, I would argue that the re-conceptualised curriculum, and being free from the constraints of the old National Curriculum orders, have the potential to influence gendered attitudes towards art to a far greater extent than a single researcher might accomplish. The purpose of this study, then, is to point to those factors that could result in a squandered opportunity to enhance the standing of a subject that is currently highly gendered. It is to be hoped that raising the profile of school art through its links to attainable careers for both sexes would allow it to be understood as a subject appropriate for both girls and boys.

Margaret Etherington  September 2008
m.etherington@uel.ac.uk
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This document was added to the Education-line database on 11 February 2009