The gendered uptake of post-compulsory school art: a case study

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Abstract: Gender disparity in the take-up of post-compulsory school art, leading to the predominance of girls at GCSE and A-level, appears to be linked to the perception that the subject is vocationally irrelevant, and to the notion that boys dislike drawing. Recently there has been a push in one quarter to emphasise art-based career opportunities and highlight the expansion of the creative industries, and the requirement to draw or paint has been removed from art curricula including at public examination level.

The research examines the ways in which art remains a feminine, marginalised subject despite the aforementioned developments. The research questions are:

- How does the organisation of the post-compulsory art curriculum still contribute towards the gender imbalance in participation and attainment in one particular school?
- Does removing the requirement to draw in school art affect the subject’s applicability to art-based careers?
- How might attitudes of parents and school influence the perception and status of art currently?

The literature review focuses on equity issues in educational achievement and perceptions of gender-appropriate pedagogy, both in relation to secondary school art. A key text is a government report that evaluates art, craft and design education.

This paper is based on a case study of an East End comprehensive art department during 2010-11 when the (outside) researcher taught a small ‘accelerated learning group’ of GCSE art students for one year. The data collected at the school were primarily qualitative, derived from field notes, email questionnaires and interviews. Subsequently, qualitative information was obtained from university admission tutors. The study was conducted according to the ethical guidelines recommended by BERA.

The main findings are as follows:

- Good attainment at GCSE still relies heavily on a demanding homework load and copious preparatory studies, both off-putting to students, particularly boys.
- School management having low expectations of the art department, together with the unimportance attached to art by parents of boys from minority ethnic backgrounds, contribute to the continued undermining of the subject.
- Effective differentiation has the potential to improve subject esteem and attainment without alienating less ambitious students.
- Academic drawing skills continue to be entry requirements on many or most art-based degree courses. Findings indicate that inadequate drawing ability sabotages the UK’s competitiveness in game art design and other digital careers.

This study is significant because art’s reputation as a lightweight, feminine subject devalues girls’ achievements and limits boys’ access to art-related careers including the flourishing digital industries. It is suggested that individualised learning in school can be used to address the skills gap in drawing apparent on some vocational degree courses. Further, a new approach to disseminating information on art-based careers is outlined and recommended.

Introduction

The New Secondary Curriculum for art and design (hereafter abbreviated to ‘art’), implemented from 2008, was intended to encourage greater participation in post-compulsory art by students of both sexes, but particularly boys. GCSE criteria reflected the new flexibility by, for example, removing the necessity to paint or draw. Yet 2011 GCSE results attest to a consistent female domination of Key Stage 4 art at one percentage point higher than in 2010 (64.5% and 63.5% respectively), and a slight drop in overall candidates since the previous year. At A-level, girls constitute almost three-quarters (73%) of candidates (source: Joint Council for Qualifications, 2011.) Likewise, in schools and colleges, three out of four students who pursue vocational courses in art and design are girls (Ofsted, 2009).
I have discussed previously how a perception that school art is vocationally irrelevant strongly influences the gender imbalance (Etherington, 2008). However, the rapid expansion of the creative sector in the national economy should have the potential to dispel this notion, especially as careers education is mandatory in schools. With the art curriculum arguably becoming more boy-friendly due to increased use of ICT and drawing no longer being obligatory, there should, on the face of it, be a greater take-up of the subject by male pupils. This paper is a case study which investigates the status of art at an East End comprehensive school in an attempt to establish how an ‘average’ art department might be unknowingly contributing to the girl-heavy statistics. My earlier research findings were based on the beliefs and attitudes of a predominantly white school population. Working with secondary schools in East London and Essex, I had become more aware that sentiments towards school art were not just gendered, but also influenced by ethnic backgrounds.

The paper also questions recommendations made in the literature regarding best practice in art education where they overlook the reality of being a classroom teacher, or even undermine art’s applicability to art-based careers.

It is hoped that the findings highlight the extent to which the whole school, and notably senior management, need to scrutinise and support an art department, and point to the external conditions undermining art’s status that present a more formidable challenge to teachers than may be suggested in the literature.

This particular art department was selected for the study simply because I was given the opportunity to do so, having a pre-existing connection with the school in a different professional capacity. The school is a co-educational 11 – 16 comprehensive in an inner London borough that has high levels of deprivation and child poverty. There are around 1000 pupils on roll, some 65 per cent of whom are boys. A high proportion of the students are entitled to free school meals, and a very high percentage is identified as having special educational needs. There is wide ethnic diversity among the school population, of which approximately 80 per cent have English as an additional language.

**Literature review**

The disparity between girls’ and boys’ participation and attainment in art at GCSE and A-level, hitherto largely ignored by writers on gender issues who have been preoccupied with improving equity of opportunity for girls (for example Murphy and Whitelegg, 2006; Chevin, 2011), has recently been addressed by both Ofsted in a comprehensive report and by NSEAD (National Society for Education in Art and Design), the subject organisation, in its curriculum support briefings and materials. The apparent underachievement of boys generally has been the subject of much concern across most subjects in secondary education, notably since the mid-1990s, but an essentialist view that all girls are achieving and boys inevitably under-perform, is inaccurate and over-simplistic. Similarly, it should be acknowledged that not all boys fall into the categories discussed below in terms of artwork preferences and aspirations.

The Ofsted (2009) report on school art (or, to be more accurate: art, craft and design education) is the result of surveying 90 primary and 90 secondary schools over 3-4 years. As well as identifying good practice, the document focuses on explanations and remedies regarding boys’ engagement with the subject.

The report is concerned at the low uptake of art by boys, and girls’ ‘significantly’ higher attainment. Popularity and high achievement levels for both sexes are linked to a broad range of materials being used on art courses. Ofsted emphasise creativity and individuality of response, with uniformity of outcomes considered undesirable. There is thought to be a link between the increase in fine art courses and decreasing participation by boys due to the preference of the latter for craft and design-based activities. However, a relatively recent development is that painting and drawing are no longer part of the secondary curriculum for art, nor essential elements in examination syllabi, in order to improve subject esteem, particularly among boys.

Boys are found to do well in art where they are able to take advantage of good ICT facilities such as digital cameras, professional software and the internet, ideally all available within the vicinity of the art department. Such provision is also discovered to halt the loss of boys to the subject. It could be argued that lack of access to adequate ICT facilities is often beyond the capability of subject leaders to remedy. Where resources are scarce, the art department may not be viewed at management level as a high priority in the curriculum. When Coles (2012:7), president-elect of NSEAD, despairs ‘that many art and design departments are not fighting and pushing for an entitlement to ICT facilities’, she is implicitly anticipating managerial indifference as well as optimistically
assuming that finance might be readily available. Currently, art departments are likely to experience cutbacks (Shepherd, 2011) rather than investment.

Nevertheless, the report cites evidence that the effective use of ICT narrows the attainment gap between boys and girls. Further, that staff trained to understand digital media are an integral part of this process. Boys’ increased enjoyment of art via ICT is attributed to engagement in themes relevant to their interests, and the ability to generate and log ideas much more quickly than they can through traditional art processes. It is well known among many art teachers that boys are inclined to be less keen on preparatory sketchbook work than girls, as noted by Bowden (2000).

Sketchbooks in many schools feature annotations. It is reported that boys more than girls dislike, even resent, writing tasks in art (Ofsted, 2009:19&32). A difficulty here can result from examination boards’ expectation that evaluations of work-in-progress are evidence. Fluent writers can sometimes substitute hours of practical work intended to visually demonstrate the development of ideas with an articulate written analysis completed much more quickly. Unless they have access to art software which considerably speeds up recording the thought process trail, reluctant writers can lose marks. Without ICT, the workload associated with producing the quality and quantity of visual preparatory studies necessary for the highest final grades can be excessively demanding. On this matter, a consideration of the notoriously time-consuming nature of examination art courses in general seems apposite, not least in relation to boys’ motivation. Meeting external assessment objectives at a high level during Key Stages 4 and 5 tends to involve substantial commitment to producing work outside lesson time. However, Hallam (2009:5), reviewing a number of research articles on homework, notes

> Girls tend to spend longer (than boys) doing homework, are more positive in their responses to it and take more responsibility for their own learning.

My own experience is of students of both sexes enjoying art lessons but questioning whether to continue studying at GCSE or A-level because of the anticipated homework load, particularly if it is not their ‘main’ subject of interest.

The above-mentioned change to the curriculum with regard to drawing deserves further discussion. Interestingly, at AS and A-level, dramatic and sustained progress is found by Ofsted (2009) to have resulted from life drawing, that is to say, observational studies of the human form, nevertheless the report is slightly disparaging elsewhere about working from direct observation, especially in relation to its demotivating effect on boys in younger age groups. Although traditional objective drawing skills are rarely celebrated in the report, there is a concern that ‘too many pupils’ are over-reliant on secondary sources, including uncritical utilisation of imagery found online.

It was the apparent de-emphasis on teaching pupils how to draw that led me to question whether school art is actually in danger of becoming less vocationally relevant, despite increased usage of ICT and efforts to advertise the subject’s usefulness to an expanding sector of the job market. Michael Powell (2012), a principle higher education lecturer for game art design, whom I encountered as part of my investigation for this paper, laments the absence of basic drawing skills in the National Curriculum:

> The scandal we face at the moment is that we have nearly 400 applicants for 40 places every year and probably 60 per cent of those students, even the ones with art A levels, can’t draw…. Drawing is not a mandatory component of the education system. That is as scandalous as if maths was taken off the curriculum or if English was not taught using grammar and sentences.

In an attempt to make art more attractive to boys by removing the obligation to teach drawing, then, there exists the prospect of the subject being even less able to equip pupils with the practical knowledge needed at university and in industry than it was before.

Additional to a preoccupation with gendered pupil attitudes towards art education, Ofsted (2009:31) is concerned to make it more widely known that studying art strengthens pupils’ prospects of working in a sector where jobs are seemingly in abundance:

> The Crafts Council reports that the creative industries currently employ 1.9 million people. There are 122,000 creative businesses and 15,000 self-employed craftspeople. In London the creative industries are the fastest growing sector of the economy, with £21bn annually. Cultural products including craft account for a turnover of £3,674m.
This ought to make the subject more appealing to boys, not least because ‘male’ occupations such as architecture and computer game design demand artistic competency.

Some secondary schools are criticised by Ofsted for lack of information to parents as to the vocational relevance of art, and a key finding of the report blames schools for weak or non-existent links with the creative industries. There is little indication as to how such a relationship can be created; when, as a subject leader, I contacted a computer game company, I was informed that they were overwhelmed by requests from schools to the extent that they had to refuse all invitations to visit them. Providing careers education for Year 9 students is a statutory requirement, but since schools frequently have a post-holder to fulfil this role, it needs to be clear to teachers precisely who is responsible for disseminating guidance on art-related careers. On their website, NSEAD provides case study sheets giving careers information relating to art, craft and design, but awareness of these teaching resources may, at best, be confined to its membership rather than all art teachers in post. Whether or not many staff would choose to incorporate these optional written materials into the curriculum is open to speculation. In my view, the information sheets are text-heavy (conceivably off-putting for some students), inadvertently gender-specific, and require a degree of extra lesson preparation for the teacher.

Ofsted places responsibility for explicating art’s relevance to school management, teachers, parents and pupils, and for ensuring optimum participation in the subject, on subject leaders. The implication appears to be that by merely communicating information about art’s ‘importance’ in the right way, the subject will be more valued, which ignores cultural and societal factors that impact on the perception of school art; moreover, it is hinted that failure to accomplish this objective would be down to the subject leader’s ineffectiveness, perhaps an inappropriate blame game. I would argue that the onus on the SL to ‘ensure high levels of participation …. In the subject’ (2009:4) is similarly flawed in that factors beyond their control can, and do, contribute to a modest take-up of post-compulsory art in some schools, and this will be discussed further below.

Since, even with drawing being a compulsory element in art, it often had the reputation of being a ‘useless’, lightweight subject (see Etherington, 2008), the question of its current status as providing a worthwhile qualification for all pupils, or perhaps even of its long-term presence in the curriculum, remains unresolved. Thus, ultimately, the statistics for male examination candidates could fall even more dramatically, given the aforementioned rejection of art by boys as vocationally insignificant to them.

Although Francis (2000:19) reminds us that a dominant view of the world is ‘gender dualism’, in which ‘power is assigned to the masculine’, postmodernism rejects the idea of gender conforming to fixed social identities:

Human life does not simply divide into two realms, nor does human character divide into two types. Our images of gender are often dichotomous, but the reality is not (Connell, 2009:10).

In an article based on their own extensive research, and findings from numerous academics, Younger and Warrington (2007:236) discuss how strategies to overcome boys’ underachievement have predominantly used ‘recuperative masculinity approaches’ which assume common, stereotypical male characteristics of a homogeneous group. These endeavours, witheringly termed ‘simplistic notions of boy-friendly pedagogies’, with a tendency towards seeking quick-fix solutions, have ultimately been unsuccessful in narrowing the attainment gap. The authors recommend instead a more inclusive model which meets pupils’ learning needs on an individual basis. Younger and Warrington thereby provide a further clue as to why, despite the revision of the art curriculum, numbers of boys opting for post-compulsory art qualifications are still declining. They also point out that ethnicity and social class override gender as predictors of educational outcomes, so looking merely at biological sex differences to account for differential attainment would tell only part of the story.

I would not be alone in proposing that the status of art in contemporary society impinges on the way that school art is regarded, and I suggested earlier that teachers may have an uphill task to challenge this perception. Dalton (2001) asserts that adults of both sexes employed in the arts undertake work viewed by society as feminine, due to a reputation for being economically insecure, non-intellectual and even irresponsible. The content of art education has become increasingly feminised, she argues, having gendered values such as ‘creativity and a notion of art as leisure and self-fulfilment’ (2001:113). As such, her theories may provide an explanation as to why parents deem an art education inappropriate for their sons.

A current government measurement of school performance, the English Baccalaureate which requires pupils to attain good GCSEs in English, mathematics, two sciences, a language, and either geography or history, is also having the effect of side-lining school art as well as other subject thought less ‘tough’ and academic. Although
not (yet) compulsory, many schools are reported to have implemented restrictions on subject options due to EBacc, and reduced provision for art, music, drama and so forth, in order to do well in league tables (Coughlan, 2011a; Coughlan, 2011b; Shepherd, 2011).

In addition to an art department’s role in raising the profile of their subject, Ofsted comments on the part that the whole school can play in promoting and valuing art. However, where departments are less successful in providing a stimulating curriculum, there are also failures at school level to challenge poor provision or understand art’s potential for school-wide development. This implies that the support of senior management is crucial to the standing and quality of school art within an educational establishment. Specifically, in Ofsted’s list of recommendations, headteachers are exhorted to enhance pupils’ experiences by ‘developing sustained partnerships between schools, creative industries, galleries and artists in the locality’ (2009:4). It is observed that gallery trips and artists visiting the school have a beneficial effect on students’ attitudes and work, yet availability of these experiences is patchy. Enquiring as to the involvement of the headteacher in relation to art in the case study school will form part of an interview schedule.

A further question to be posed in my investigation will relate to the support given to pupils to optimise learning. Ofsted (2009) asserts that weak art teaching is associated with neglecting to use assessment to develop students’ capabilities. In particular, excessive praise is frequently utilised in place of critically evaluative feedback. In all, this review of selected literature will be used to evaluate provision at the case study school, with a view to understanding why art education remains gendered.

Methodology

The main aim of the research was to account for the continuing gender disparity in school art at Key Stage 4 and beyond, given recent events that potentially make the subject more appealing to boys. The research objectives, then, were to discover perceptions of GCSE art students and an art teacher within a single school that might help to explain the status of art as a curriculum subject, particularly with regard to its esteem among male students.

The methodology used was a case study of an art department, an interpretive, primarily qualitative approach. Case study aims to provide a ‘picture’ of an aspect of social activity in a specific setting, and the factors influencing that situation (Opie, 2004). I was an outside researcher in the sense that I was not a paid member of staff at the school and had a full-time job elsewhere; on the other hand, I taught a small group of GCSE students there for a year, and was a frequent visitor to the school for two years prior to that. As a result, I had access to a certain amount of insider knowledge from my good relationships with teachers and other staff, and was able to amass field notes based on my observations of working in the department. Data were also derived through questionnaires containing a combination of open and closed questions, and from one-to-one interviews. Online questionnaires to students were piloted early in the investigation to assess their effectiveness as data collection instruments. Triangulation, where information is collected from different sources using a variety of methods, and focusing on the same theme, can help to ensure validity. With such a small research cohort, though, it would not necessarily be expected that responses were consistent; however, it can be argued that my results were more plausible and convincing where they reflected research-based substantive literature. There is no claim made as to the generalisability of findings (each art department is unique, just as every school has its own individual ethos), but where they correlate with wider knowledge on art education, such findings may be applicable to other secondary schools and provide a starting point for a self-evaluation of practice.

Questionnaires can encourage openness and frankness if they are able to be completed anonymously, and respondents are then confident that they cannot be identified by the researcher or anyone else. A drawback would be if a significant point was mentioned, or where remarks were ambiguous, and answers could not be followed up or developed later. In interviews, the respondent’s meaning can be checked by the interviewer and s/he can be invited to expand on a topic of interest as the conversation progresses. With this method of gathering information, the subject is not anonymous to the researcher, which may have the effect of limiting or distorting responses to a ‘correct’ answer or a diplomatic silence. I was very conscious of my authority position with regard to the Key Stage 4 students, and the possibility of being seen as a judgemental colleague by the art teacher I interviewed; both scenarios could impact on the validity of data.

The initial rather long pilot questionnaire emailed to students right at the beginning of Year 11 set the scene for my main enquiry the following summer. Of course, these would not then be anonymous. (It was impractical to
use contact time to administer an extensive questionnaire.) They were assured of confidentiality, and prompted to aim for complete honesty in the knowledge that I would not be offended by any critical remarks. The students complied with my request for their opinions, and I suggest that there being no adverse consequences for having openly expressed their views during the several months before the final data collection contributed to the trust they had in me as a researcher. Further, I had built up a good working relationship with them by being responsive to their learning needs, demonstrated by the fact that over the year I received more than 800 emails from individual members of the Accelerated Learning Group, mostly regarding work-in-progress. I intended to interview each of them once they had started study leave at the end of Year 11, but in the event only two could attend and the others were willing to be emailed the interview schedule and complete it online. If any emailed response required clarification, I was then able to contact the student electronically. The students were not encouraged to make negative comments about their previous art teachers and, indeed, there was much evidence that they remained very fond of them. Nevertheless, I believe that their replies were as honest and credible as could be expected, thereby providing a valuable insight into the art education provided by the school.

In addition to the interviews I planned and/or carried out with pupils from the ALG, I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with the adult who was the longest-standing art teacher as well as part of the senior management team, affording him a wide perspective of the art department within its school context. We had a pre-existing professional relationship liaising for the provision of continuing professional development at his school. I consider myself fortunate as a researcher that he was such a candid and self-depreciating interviewee who had the humility to expose aspects of the department’s organisation that might be understood as inadequate. During the interview conversation I paused to check my understanding of his comments, thereby arriving at a negotiated consensus of meaning, as discussed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009:243). Such data are open to accusations of subjectivity and bias because they are based on personal opinion, and interpreted by another. Yet for Kvale (1996), a postmodern construction of knowledge moves away from a conventional notion of objective reality. He argues that objective knowledge is obtained during interviews in that the interviewee is explaining their understanding of the world; rather than a fixed idea of an irrefutable truth, ‘knowledge evolves through a dialogue’ (1996:125).

My observations of the department were undeniably subjective as well, and despite my aim to remain as dispassionate and as self-critical as possible, I cannot be an impartial observer detached from the data (see, for example, Mason, 1996:5-6). My views are inevitably coloured by my own experience as former head of an art department known for its public examination success. I could not help but feel that some of the more able students were ill-served by their art education. Nevertheless, I also admired the amiable and positive relationships that Mr P had with his classes regardless of aptitude for the subject. Having explained the above, it is for the reader to decide the extent to which they are convinced by my findings and analysis.

Observations and other qualitative findings yielded a great deal of written information which needed to be organised as part of a coherent response to the research questions. This can be considered a disadvantage of qualitative investigations. At the time, I had become so preoccupied with supporting the ALG to meet their GCSE target grades that the research focus took a step back. After an interval, I reflected on the themes that had emerged from my time with the art department, and coded the data accordingly. ‘Voices’ of the research cohort were then used to support or challenge arguments, and to bring my account to life.

Ethics

BERA (2011) ethical guidelines underpinned the manner in which the research project was carried out. Ensuring the dignity of respondents was paramount, and it was stressed that participation was subject to their voluntary consent. Further, they were entirely at liberty to omit answering any of the questions. The research cohort was informed of the broad purpose of the study, and that if their comments were reproduced in a paper they, and their school, would be unidentifiable. Pseudonyms were used for the GCSE art students and their teachers; the students themselves chose these to reflect their ethnic backgrounds. Sam, the graduate informant, is also a fictitious name. One-to-one interviews with students were conducted in a room having an unlocked glazed door, off the school reception area.

I have undertaken to represent others’ views fairly and accurately, avoiding the selection or distortion of data to fit a preconceived agenda. I feel a responsibility to communicate my findings to the school, but without individuals being recognisable, so I will make the conclusion section available to Mr P (the art teacher respondent, and member of the senior management team) to disseminate as he sees fit.
Findings

The art department: facilities, pedagogy and creativity

My first impression of a Year 10 lesson at the case study school was of amenable students kept busy doing a series of four copying tasks in different two-dimensional media. The two art rooms were basic, without a water supply. A technician had brought in a number of rusty, used tin cans each containing a centimetre of water for rinsing brushes. The teacher, Mr P, was friendly and encouraging, although giving no advice as to how replicating the art history images provided might be carried out to best effect. From a perusal of coursework folders it was evident that the generation of numerous artworks took precedence over technical competence, and written feedback or marks were conspicuously absent. Mr P explained that this consciously prolific approach to engaging with art had enabled the department’s GCSE results to improve from around 20 per cent C grades to 50 per cent, but that students did not attain grades above C.

Further information was subsequently collected through interviews and questionnaires conducted with Mr P and the students taught in the ALG (see following section). Rabia reported that the only art materials available to them were paint, pencils and colour pencils and, when asked, neither she nor Taura knew what a kiln was. Mr P conceded that alternative facilities were:

…very minimal. We bought Macs but no-one knew how to use them. They were in an art room trolley but there was no software, no printers. The IT technicians couldn’t do it.

Other school computers blocked images useful to art students. Furthermore, due to lack of space, any large-scale three-dimensional work would need to be carried out at home. It was not usual for the department exhibit students’ work in school at the end of GCSE, again because there was perceived to be insufficient room to do so.

Not surprisingly, when asked whether students were encouraged to use traditional drawing and painting skills, Mr P responded:

That’s all they’ve got. Every project starts with an observational focus… They don’t do it in depth, it tends to be quick and pacey, but they are not pushed in craftsmanship. We do push skills in printmaking because boys like it. They have terrible painting skills. The skills taught are very surface because they aren’t doing it at Key Stage 3. We are focused on outcomes, not skills.

He was not aware, though, of the existence of the New Secondary Curriculum, or that drawing and painting are no longer essential elements of an art education.

With regard to the GCSE syllabus, certain aspects followed a trend of being preferred or resisted:

We struggle with the contextual side, note-taking and research, because of the (poor) facilities here to do it. We can show examples of a good art studies sheet, then they download from Wikipedia. They like printmaking, don’t like painting, like 3D. The (exam) prep work is good in lessons but they struggle to develop it independently. They are spoon-fed… They do a still life in Year 10 but we can’t leave it up. It’s very quick – done in a double lesson. They hate doing it but like the results.

Mr P admitted that their coursework projects offered little opportunity for individualised learning, but that students had a freer rein with regard to their art ideas for the final examination. However, the standard of work produced was deemed too low when this degree of freedom was conferred, compelling the art teachers to be ‘70 per cent prescriptive’. Thus students were not truly independent even when preparing for their end of course timed test.

It was acknowledged by the teacher that the ability of students to meet coursework deadlines and produce good quality art was adversely affected by the department’s loose approach to setting homework, which tended to comprise:

Mr P: Ongoing projects and finishing off. It is not rigorously followed up if not done. Year 11 have done it in the end except for the naughty boys, but not to a good standard, and not enough of it.

Taura: We didn’t have proper deadlines. We did it if we wanted to.
Mr P claimed that parents were contacted if their child was behind with coursework, but two students in the ALG refuted that their teacher took such action.

Taura: If I didn’t finish, it was left unfinished. They set deadlines and if you didn’t do the work they shouted at you but there were no further consequences.

Where homework was forthcoming, some type of assessment of was either not always available to students, or of limited value in facilitating progression:

Mr P: It’s not done every time. I put homework out on the table and give verbal feedback. It’s shared with all the students. It isn’t taken in to mark except sporadically if learning walks (senior management visits) are expected.

Rabia: The feedback (on homework) was positive, but didn’t tell you how to get better.

Reactions by the teacher to classwork could be similarly enthusiastic.

Nilofar: They said it was very good every time they saw a piece of my work.

Uzma: They loved all our pieces and were quite amazed by them.

Taura: They tell you to improve but don’t say how.

Calum: I… feel my teacher… would only set work rather than teach it.

As mentioned, written assessment was rare:

Nilofar: My art teacher did not… hand me written feedback or comment apart from the yearly report.

Although Mr P had misgivings regarding the standard of work produced if his students were allowed to be autonomous, it appeared that he also lacked confidence in meeting the needs of those with higher potential. Replying to a question on whether he could differentiate his lessons to cater for the aspirational as well as the less motivated students, he confessed that he did not ‘feel up to it’ because he does not possess the skills in drawing and painting himself. He did describe himself as a painter, but ‘I can’t get my enthusiasm across’. He thought that differentiation would require more space, and that he would therefore need to get out of the classroom setting, which he saw as impossible with his senior management commitments. He also considered the standard and content of the work produced by the ALG to be ‘not possible’ from the other GCSE students.

The Accelerated Learning Group

It was decided that I would teach a small group of students from the end of Year 10 for the remainder of the GCSE course, three boys and three girls. Designated the Accelerated Learning Group (ALG), the concept was to provide a pedagogy and curriculum that might enhance their prospects of attaining either grade A or A*. Since I could not be sure of my availability for every lesson, and given my teaching background in which independent learning was an essential facet of art education, they were required to be students willing to undertake homework regularly. To this end, the art teachers made recommendations from the students who put themselves forward for consideration, which unfortunately failed to result in the gender balance I anticipated. The initial group comprised five girls and one boy, other boys being either not interested or lacking the necessary homework ethic. The only boy was one of very few white British male students among a school population of around 65 per cent boys, mostly from minority ethnic backgrounds. One of the girls subsequently dropped out, leaving five young people who attended the group until the end of Year 11. Their family backgrounds are as follows:

Calum – British

Nilofar – Afghan

Rabia – Bangladeshi

Taura – East European
The curriculum provided was informed by the limitations of the working environment (finding any room in which to teach the group proved highly problematic), few school facilities, irregular contact with the students, and my previous experience of working with high-achievers in a selective school. I also kept in mind that good drawing was present in the examination board top grade exemplar material on a day course I attended. Thus there was an emphasis on teaching observational drawing, setting a large-scale 3D project to be carried out predominantly at home during the summer holiday, mixed media illustration, photography (they used their own equipment and manipulated imagery on home computers) and written evaluations.

A great deal of tuition was conducted by email, which enabled a high level of individualised learning with students sending photographs of the work-in-progress they wished to discuss. As these were able students who did not present behaviour problems, it was evident that they had been 'left to it' in lessons, and were therefore unaccustomed to automatically following instructions. At first, punctuality, attendance, deadlines and listening fully to the objectives of a lesson were often treated as optional. Their new curriculum, therefore, entailed a shift in their attitudes. In addition to frequent formative assessment via email, both finished and unfinished work received written marks and/or comments. The students generally responded to the demands of a different teaching style and higher expectations good naturedly.

None of the students reported being coerced by their regular art teacher into joining the ALG.

Nilofar: It was my idea, I wanted to be challenged. I felt that I was losing my ability by staying in a classroom where I did not receive criticism and advice on how to improve my work.

All thought they worked much harder once in the group, and offered these reasons:

Nilofar: It was the pressure and the advice and information provided by the teacher. I also realised how hard the teacher worked, she really put an effort in helping us excel so I felt I should put in an equal amount of effort.

Uzma: I was determined to pass the GCSE with at least an A grade. And Dr E definitely made it clear we weren't allowed to slack!

Rabia: I wanted more accuracy and precision. With Mr N it was more 'do what you feel'.

Taura: All the deadlines. Didn't want to miss them and I wanted to improve my work because it wasn't that good.

Calum: It was about that time we joined when I realised I wanted to go into art for a career.

In fact, Calum's aspiration to pursue a career in art did not emerge until a few months after the group started, whereupon he became motivated and productive; prior to that his pace had been leisurely and deadlines disregarded.

Some of the group had been ambivalent initially about the focus on observational drawing:

Uzma: Although observational drawings aren't my strongest point I realise that to achieve a good grade the exam board requests a great amount of observational drawings and so I tried my best.

Rabia: At first, I used to dislike it because I was terrible at it. I used to smudge. I learnt new things. I made progress and started liking it.

Calum: It makes sense but it can get irritating when you end up spending ages getting your line drawing drawn accurately.

However, when asked whether they would have preferred not to carry out this type of work, they were more positive:

Nilofar: I think it is an essential skill, it really helped me realise shadows and highlights.

Taura: It's useful because it helps to prepare for the final piece.

It was making their 3D structures, though, that they declared enjoying the most, even though they were undertaken during holiday time.
Nilofar: I think the sculptures were amazing…
Rabia: I realised that everyone produced something completely different.

They also found a trip to the Tate gallery pleasurable and useful (the four girls had not been before), particularly as inspiration for their own work. However, having to carry out extensive preparatory studies for the final examination sufficient to attain their target grades proved to be challenging, especially at a time when they were studying for their other subjects.

Rabia: Harder than the mock because of revising for other subjects. Other subjects took a back seat.
Taura: It was hard to sort it out. Stressed about exams in other subjects.
Calum: I managed very little revision for other subjects in that time.

Nevertheless, they understood its significance to their work, if somewhat grudgingly.

Nilofar: I disliked it but it made it made exam day less stressful.
Rabia: Quite demanding. Enjoyed at some points. Hard as well. Without the prep, the work wouldn’t have been as good so it was a great help.
Calum: I don’t see why we should need to show we can plan a project to (the) examiner with every project but then the more prep you do the better your work can get.

Homework and deadlines were a more rigorously applied than they were used to, but when I enquired whether they thought strict deadlines in art important or unnecessary, all said ‘important’, and qualified their opinions along the lines of Nilofar’s response:

If there was no deadline I wouldn’t have probably never (sic) started my work.

Everyone in the group stated that their confidence in their artistic ability increased as the course progressed, and all believed that they now had the potential to do an art-related career if they had wanted to. Three of them felt more confident asking me questions by email than they would in the classroom, and all enthused about having that type of access to their teacher.

Uzma: I think it’s brilliant. I don’t have to wait for the following lesson to tell the teacher I don’t understand something. It wastes less time.

The exhibition of their work mounted at the end of Year 11 was met with unanimous approval.

Rabia: I liked it because people appreciated my hard work.

Among the students who were not involved in the ALG, there were some who would have liked to participate, whereas of the remainder, many were happy to work at their customary pace.

Mr P: Others thought ‘Thank God’ because they didn’t want to work that hard.
Nilofar: My friends think I am crazy doing so much work.

The GCSE results for the two main Year 11 classes that year followed the previous pattern of 50 per cent attaining grade C, but no higher. In the ALG, Uzma, Nilofar and Rabia were awarded A*, and Calum and Taura achieved B grades. In the case of the latter students, art outcomes were A or A*, but their preparatory studies were mediocre in quality. They were unable to generate the quantity produced by their classmates either, observational studies were less numerous and skilful, and written work was the weakest element of all because Calum was dyslexic and Taura had only begun to speak and write English at the beginning of Year 10.

Mr P considered that a major impact of the ALG was seeing that the students produced outstanding work despite poor facilities, and realising that there was no excuse for teachers to be coasting. He reported that the group also raised aspirations among some of the other students.

At the end of her interview with me, Rabia said unexpectedly
Thank you for teaching us. It was the best thing ever.

Information on art-related careers

There is careers advice available through the school; however, there appears to be some inconsistency as to whom benefits from this. Calum and Taura claim not to have received such advice. Taura may have missed out by not starting at the school until Year 10, and cited parents and relatives as providing the most information. Calum’s attendance record was variable which may account for missing out on careers education; as mentioned elsewhere, non-attendance has not been addressed successfully by the school in the past, potentially giving rise to gaps in many students’ knowledge. Calum has received most of his careers information from parents and at college interviews.

Mr P asserts that some effort is applied to explaining art’s relevance to pupils and their parents when GCSE choices are made, without much success.

Parents don’t understand what children can get out of art. It’s a challenge. We try to address this through PowerPoint and pamphlets with a big PR push. It doesn’t change minds – they’ve already decided. The rooms put them off.

Members of the ALG said that their art teachers did not inform them as to the usefulness of the subject in career terms when they were in Year 9. By Year 11, art’s vocational relevance is unlikely to be communicated by anyone other than the subject teachers, and even then this is inconsistent:

Mr P: There are one-to-one careers interviews in Year 11. Art is not high profile at careers events. There are only informal conversations about art careers among GCSE candidates. We don’t address the transition to the future during GCSE.

Furthermore Mr P, who had been teaching art for 12 years, does not belong to NSEAD and had no knowledge of the careers information on their website. He thought that such support materials would not be used with his GCSE students because they were too busy getting through the (other) work. When being observed for Performance Management, the art department brought in a practising artist to work with classes to demonstrate a vocational link to the curriculum, but he admitted that the focus on applied learning was only present during very occasional senior management scrutiny.

He has noticed gendered and cultural attitudes towards take-up of art in further education.

Parents don’t want them to carry on with it, especially Asian parents. Happy for them to do it at school but not after that. Girls are more likely to be allowed, but not boys, who are encouraged to take up business studies or accountancy at college.

The instigation of an art course specifically linked to the workplace might look like a step in the right direction, but its presence in the curriculum is more to do with improving league table statistics than preparing students for careers. BTEC extended art and design has been provided for the less able: 24 boys and 4 girls in Year 10 because its pass mark, ostensibly the equivalent of two C grades as GCSE, is found by Mr P to be ‘much more achievable’. His stated view is that BTEC is a ‘dumbed down’ version of GCSE art. He finds the lessons ‘depressing’ because of the students’ bad behaviour, and he admits the quality of his teaching is affected by his preoccupation with his senior management role.

Attitudes towards art: the school

In Mr P’s opinion, art is not a valued subject at the school.

The attitude is ‘it brightens the place up’. The head didn’t say anything about the art show to us. He laughed at (the work of) the artist in residence. There is no opportunity to show off art in the school, only in the art department.

I taught the Accelerated Learning Group for a year free of charge. The art department wanted me to continue the following year, at which point I requested expenses for my future train fares because I knew that the school had acquired a considerable amount of money for curriculum development. The headteacher declined on the grounds that it was ‘only art’. The previous (acting) headteacher had arguably betrayed a similarly dismissive attitude towards the subject when an arranged gallery trip was abandoned at short notice.
Rabia: In Y10 a Tate Modern trip was cancelled by Dr W because it was a normal school day and we would miss lessons. We only found out on the day of the trip.

I asked ALG participants about impressions they had received from other teachers and students as to the usefulness of school art to later life. Interestingly, their perceptions of others’ perspectives on relevance were not as polarised as concepts of ‘importance’ and ‘challenge’ (see below).

Uzma: Some realise the importance art holds and what it can help with in the future. Some think it’s useless. Some people also don’t realise that a good art grade shows someone has an eye for detail therefore an optometrist or a doctor with a good eye would be very wanted!

(Uzma subsequently transferred to another school where she has just completed the first year of A-level studies in mathematics, chemistry, biology and English. She has decided to apply for a degree course in dentistry for which she needs to demonstrate manual dexterity. She therefore intends to take a portfolio of her GCSE artwork to the interview.)

When it came to the status of art within the curriculum, group members felt it was not seen as important, or even a ‘proper’ subject, by other teachers, and believed that many students and teachers thought it ‘easy’.

Nilofar: I get the impression that students and teachers think it’s an easy subject because most of the students who are not particularly clever pick art because they think it’s the easy way out, similarly teachers place the mentally incapable student in art as to say that this subject will be less challenging for them.

Attitudes towards art: students

Mr P concurred that ‘GCSE art is usually done as an easy option’. Some ALG students recalled the prevalence of similar attitudes when they were in Year 9.

Taura: Some people did it because they thought it was easy or because their friends are doing it.

Calum: The majority of boys who chose art saw it as an easy subject.

There were some insightful comments regarding the gender imbalance in school art participation nationally, and in answer to a question I put to them on the influence of cultural backgrounds, which also turned out to relate to gender.

Nilofar: Boys do not like to sit down for hours, they would rather go out and play football whereas girls have the patience and perseverance that boys do not have... Most Asian students usually do not see a career in art.

Uzma: In general, girls enjoy it more. Boys think art too girly. Most boys especially Asians go for maths and most boys here are Asian. A lot of parents from the Asian culture are very big on education and grades and like to know their children are being educated as a lot have hopes for their children being lawyers and such. Some parents don’t mind as much as long as the child is getting good grades.

Rabia: I guess girls like it more and do work more, but it depends on individual people. The amount of work probably puts boys off. Art is continuous whereas in science you just revise for 1 or 2 weeks for a final exam.

Taura: Boys don’t take it as seriously.

Calum: Boys in secondary schools’ work ethic is generally lower at GCSEs than girls. I think from what others have said a lot of parents from ethnic backgrounds don’t take the art GCSE as serious as more academic subjects

I raised with Calum the notion that boys at his school seemed to lose interest and/or confidence in their ability to do art, and wondered whether he had any views on this.

We never had any real art lessons till Year 10. It felt like they’d put something on our table and just expect us to teach ourselves how to do it so when it came to Year 10 no one was really ready for GCSE art so they stopped coming to lessons or in some cases not taking art lessons very seriously.
Attitudes towards art: parents

Attitudes of parents have already been discussed because to some extent they are inextricably bound up with students’ perspectives. Mr P has observed a lack of interest among parents in the progress of their children who opted for GCSE art. Out of 24 Year 10 students, parents of only three made appointments to see an art teacher on consultation evening.

Mr P: It was no better in Year 11. Core subjects, yes. White middle class parents are more interested. Bangladeshi parents in particular are not interested in art, only business studies and maths for both daughters and sons... When we had the art show, only parents of the Accelerated Learning Group turned up, the governors and a few staff.

Parents of ALG members were happy for their offspring to be studying art at GCSE, either because they wanted them to do an option subject they enjoyed, or to increase the likelihood of a high grade whatever they picked, or for both reasons. Based on a single male student, it would perhaps be rash to make assumptions that Calum’s white British background had a bearing on his atypical participation in post-compulsory art, but it would seem pertinent that his parents, who were equally supportive of his option choice, both taught arts-related subjects.

Whole school: the organisation of the curriculum and other issues

I would argue that there are aspects of the way in which the whole curriculum is organised and staffed that influence art’s standing in the school. Moreover, the school’s approach to monitoring attendance can be understood as affecting student commitment to the subject.

At the time of the ALG project, the school was intending to have a selection of students following English Baccalaureate subjects, with the brighter ones being actively discouraged or excluded from taking GCSE art from September 2011.

Mr P: Higher ability children who opted for art have found they are doing geography instead. They are not happy about it. If parents complain, their appeals might be upheld. If the parents don’t complain, there’s no chance we’ll change the options.

Thus Nilofar, Rabia and Uzma, who all attained A* for GCSE art but were very able in other subjects as well, would have been under considerable pressure not to take art if EBacc had started a couple of years earlier. The message could therefore be conveyed that art is not appropriate for clever children.

Another example of art being treated as a less important subject is an implicit assumption that it can be taught by anyone at Key Stage 3, which is unlikely to be the case for science or mathematics, for example. Mr P thought it ‘massively’ problematic that non-specialists taught art to the younger pupils.

They are not teaching any skills. There is no care of children’s learning at all. It’s perfunctory. They are forced to teach art if there are gaps in their timetable. Non-art teachers are supposed to cover observational studies for one double lesson in Key Stage 3 but the work is naïve due to lack of subject knowledge.

Mr P is also critical of the school’s practice of automatically placing new Year 10 students with English as an additional language into a GCSE art group more than into other option subjects. The ALG students had noticed this as well.

Rabia: More than half the class came to the school late so they didn’t have a choice and were put in art. Most of them were foreigners.

Taura: If they came at the end of Year 9, they were put into the art group. Some liked it and some would have chosen something else.

Homework for art not being structured, checked or marked as a rule reflects a school-wide inconsistency with homework setting. This is apparent from students responses when asked about their parents’ views on the time spent doing art homework.
Nilofar: They felt that I should be pressured by my other subject teachers to spend as much time on other subjects as I do on art.

Taura: Mum and dad thought I only had art homework to do because they only saw me do art homework.

The school was reported to deal ineffectively with truancy, which had an impact on attendance to art lessons and therefore work output. Mr P estimated the attendance to art lessons to be 85 per cent in Year 10 and 55 per cent in Year 11. He added that this related considerably to output because students do not undertake art outside the classroom and he ‘loses sight of them’. He described the school system as ‘atrocious’. Students were not being tracked once they had registered and form tutors did not give detentions even if absence was discovered. ALG students confirmed that it was easy to miss lessons at their school. According to Calum, it enables boys to drop out of art by not coming to lessons. When I asked whether this was followed up by the school, he replied

No idea. All I know is throughout the two years (of GCSE) our classes slowly got smaller.

School targets to increase the percentage of students attaining C grades in art drove the decision to place the low-achieving and disaffected into the BTEC course rather than GCSE art. This strategy had the desired effect, and in 2012 the GCSE statistics rose to 80 per cent grade C and above, and BTEC had a 100 per cent pass rate. The senior line manager for art, who confessed that he had no understanding of the subject, informed me of this delightedly as evidence of improved art teaching, whereas the results were clearly an outcome of organisational tactics. Such a situation could thus further the perception of art being an easy subject in which to do well. Although not all are necessarily applicable solely to art, it can be argued that the above examples constitute an accumulation of systemic factors that subtly reinforce its marginal status as a school subject.

**Beyond school: the relevance of drawing ability**

From informal enquiries to higher education lecturers staffing promotional stands at the ‘Design Your Future’ exhibition for schools and colleges in December 2011, I obtained a cursory overview of drawing’s significance to those ultimately hoping to secure art-based employment. I picked at random representatives from six universities to answer my questions on drawing, and then approached Michael Powell from De Montfort University where one of my ex-A level candidates was studying.

A tutor from the institution I shall refer to as University 1 believed drawing to be essential for their fine art, design and illustration courses, and very important for animation too, explaining that it was not enough just to be good on a computer. They were therefore seeking evidence of good drawing skills from all foundation course applicants.

University 2 placed an emphasis on applicants who were in the habit of ‘drawing a lot’, not merely those possessing good technical ability, for their fine art (which included sculpture), illustration and graphics courses.

University 3 confirmed that observational studies were highly regarded and specifically sought by admissions tutors. Drawing was deemed ‘crucial for textiles’ and any other design course including fashion. The staff representing this university art department considered some teachers in further education to be misleading their students into thinking that the ability to draw from observation was not necessary on degree courses.

Drawing ability was pronounced ‘absolutely essential’ by University 4, and that graduates were more marketable with good drawing skills. Just being able to produce good computer-based artwork was insufficient. Applicants with strong ideas but weak at drawing were supported by the university to undertake ‘quite traditional’ observational studies including life classes.

University 5, which specialises in fashion, textile and surface design, also declared graduates with competent drawing ability to be more employable and marketable. Students accustomed to relying solely on ICT ‘get overtaken by those who can draw’. The tutors admitted accepting applicants unable to draw because they were in the business of ‘selling courses’, but such individuals were obliged to acquire these skills on a compulsory course, and if unsuccessful at doing so were found to be ‘at a disadvantage when looking for jobs’.

Only one university (6) expressed the opinion that ‘being able to draw is useful but not essential’ for their degree programmes.
Michael Powell was vigorous in his condemnation of the decline in drawing at A-level: ‘It’s crippling us’. He oversees the Game Art Design course, described in the university prospectus as the only industry accredited programme of its type in England, with two-thirds of their graduates gaining employment in the games industry within three months of graduating.

We’ve just started interviewing applicants for next year, and already it’s clear that many... have little or no drawing experience. This is a serious handicap, and in some cases can lead to either not being accepted for the course, or failure to progress beyond year one (Powell, 2011: email correspondence).

My former A-level student, Sam, attained a first class honours degree from the same game art course, and shortly afterwards gained employment in the industry. His degree and subsequent appointment are very much ICT-based, so I asked him whether the extensive drawing and painting he carried out during the sixth form had any use later on.

The key thing I took away from school was the ability to see accurately and represent that via drawing. My artistic eye is essentially what got me through university and into the job I now have. At my interview for my current position I focused heavily on my artistic eye and traditional background as my main selling point. I believe in an industry of gamers trying to be artists, that is what set me apart. I am an artist just interested in making games (email correspondence).

Ultimately, then, his traditional skills learnt at school had enabled him to be more competitive in the digital age.

Although not all GCSE and A-level art candidates aspire to a career in art, it is timely to ask questions as to the appropriateness of students missing out on an entitlement to learn drawing.

**Discussion**

Art’s peripheral status at the case study school derived in part from the low expectations of students, notably at Key Stage 4. The department did not stand out as a leading good practice, or inspiring students to produce exceptional work. Instead it was one of a number of subject areas at the school in which teachers did not encourage students to attain higher than grade C, whereas in mathematics, English and science, the more able were urged to aim for A*. Thus the gulf in esteem between the prestigious core subjects and others was maintained. Art staff were unable, or not inclined, to provide fully differentiated learning opportunities; Mr P considered his Year 11 class to be ‘self-sufficient’ because they did not cause trouble, so he focused his attention on the more demanding Year 10 BTEC group. Those who might be designated ‘gifted or talented’ were not catered for with personalised projects that might also have included the varied use of materials. Teacher dependency even for the more able was evidenced by the pastiches that were uniformly produced on my first visit. Quantity was prioritised over quality, work was set rather than taught, and over-praising was arguably used to dodge formative assessment, thereby concealing teachers’ lack of confidence in their expertise. In addition to the dearth of individuality and creativity in artworks, depriving students of information on how to improve technically also limited their self-expression to a standard below the GCSE A* to B range. Without a firm homework policy, self-development, work output and the potential to achieve an ambitious final grade were constrained. End of course artwork was not normally showcased within the school. Inappropriate praise, a lack of formative assessment, and uniformity of students’ work have been identified by Ofsted (2009) as serious weaknesses in provision.

The industriousness, commitment and final results of the accelerated group demonstrated that, disadvantageous roaming and inadequate facilities notwithstanding, considerably raising expectations among an enthusiastic and determined cohort of GCSE art students enhanced their motivation and enjoyment. Factors that facilitated their rapid progress included setting demanding projects with firm interim deadlines, teaching them how to draw to a competent standard and providing comprehensive formative feedback. The latter gave them confidence and optimised progress. Members of the group were keen to aim higher than they had previously, even if it meant working appreciably harder and for longer. They were willing to carry out two substantial art projects during their summer holiday at the end of Year 10, which included a sizeable 3D structure. Although it put them under pressure, they understood the significance of preparatory studies for the terminal examination to their final grade, and applied themselves with dedication, especially during non-contact time. Although the art department did not have ready access to ICT and space to produce three-dimensional projects, both found by Ofsted (2009) to appeal to boys, the ALG produced successful work in these media. Group members came from quite modest
socioeconomic backgrounds, yet possessed the resources to take photographs and manipulate imagery using personal or home technology, subsequently emailing me evidence of their progress. Large papier-mâché sculptures required only cheap or free components and were built at home, being photographed periodically for online tuition. In this way we were able to overcome the limitations of an under-resourced department and undertake interesting, motivating topics.

An unknown factor at the beginning of the ALG project was how those not in the group would react to their peers producing coursework visibly different to their own. Would they see the with a sense of injustice that their former classmates might end up with a top final grade? It emerged that others thought the ALG a good idea and appeared happy that they were doing different work with the intention of achieving more highly. Some would have liked to be in the group themselves but accepted that they were not chosen; others were content to be working at their existing pace. Two students thought it unfair that there was a separate group to which they did not have access. The findings suggest that there is scope within the school's art classes for an increased number to be taught sophisticated techniques and engage in a more exacting schedule, without other students taking umbrage at this degree of differentiation. Just as there are students who enjoy being 'stretched', there are those who are content staying within their comfort zone and expressing their ideas in a way that is easier for them to achieve. Of course, personalised learning is taking place in art departments across the country, but the point here is that differentiation in the case study school was not present, but could be used to address art's reputation as an unchallenging, insignificant subject, as well as the low levels of technical competence, not least in drawing, that adversely affect its applicability to higher education courses and art careers. Similarly unexceptional departments elsewhere might also benefit from such an approach.

However, there are further circumstances contributing to a negative perception of secondary art that may well be beyond the capability of specialist teachers to counteract. In a school where the majority of students were boys, there were almost twice as many girls taking GCSE art. Moreover, both Mr P and the student respondents had remarked that parents from an Asian background were particularly unlikely to encourage boys to continue with art after Key Stage 4. Raising the esteem of the subject by specifically linking it to careers would be no instant solution. Minority ethnic parents referred to in the study expected their children's education to lead to a certain type of career, not any career. Art tends not to figure in their aspirations for their sons, and this may be a more polarised view among minority ethnic groups than for white British families. It is no surprise, then, that art is not taken seriously by some students, leading to low levels of engagement and attendance. Both situations would seem to support Dalton's (2001) assertion that art activities are understood as feminine.

Despite embedded attitudes as to the importance or relevance of school art among parents, due to the performativity agenda of state education the onus is upon teachers to raise attainment and reach imposed targets. Teachers are held responsible for underachievement, regardless of social factors that could be largely beyond their control. It can be questioned as to whether it is morally just for them to be held wholly accountable for the GCSE grades of students subject to the powerful influences of home cultures.

The case study findings point to the nature of the fine art syllabus, which is taught widely (Downing and Watson 2004) discovered that a traditional curriculum is predominant in school art, also appearing to relate to girls' interests and strengths, as implied by Ofsted (2009). Those aspects of art held to be disliked by many boys: writing, observational drawing and preparatory studies, are still credited highly by the examination board used by the school. To reach A or A* grades, diligence and persistence with homework, not notably male characteristics, appear essential. Even for the highly motivated, the body of preparatory work required in order to attain a top grade is difficult to manage alongside revision for other GCSE subjects.

The whole school ethos may similarly be difficult for a single department to confront. Ofsted (2009) stresses the importance of the headteacher's role in supporting an art department. It was clear that the head thought art an unimportant subject, through derisory comments, non-attendance at the school's art exhibition and reluctance to target school resources at supporting or celebrating the art department. Senior management's decision to designate barely adequate facilities to the department during a rebuilding programme, and routinely allocate non-specialist staff to teaching art at Key Stage 3, both underline its marginal position in the curriculum. It is difficult to believe that the latter would occur in the case of science or mathematics. Using GCSE art as a failsafe repository for students new to speaking English conveys the subject as lightweight and undemanding. Boys being 'permitted' to drop out of art through poor monitoring of attendance similarly undermines, as do bright students actively discouraged or excluded from taking GCSE art because of EBacc. The approach taken to conducting learning walks, that is to say senior managers observing lessons, is to announce well in advance when they will occur and the member of staff involved, allowing the possible neglect of good practice during the
remainder of the time. Homework, set inconsistently across the school, remains unmarked unless observation has been scheduled (I have argued above that GCSE art is unsuitable for a no-homework curriculum). School management has not recognised gaps in art teachers’ expertise and therefore the need for professional development.

Two aspects of art education mentioned at the beginning of this paper as being influential to its take-up by boys, their lack of interest in drawing (and painting) and art’s applicability to an economically successful careers sector, are discussed below with recommendations for future action. The first, I suggest, would involve retracing our steps in order not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, and the second necessitates a re-think of how we communicate vocational information.

Drawing

Although they found observational drawing to be an exacting discipline, the ALG could see for themselves how it helped more creative work to develop successfully. A selection of higher education tutors confirmed the importance of drawing to art and design-related occupations. A return to systematically teaching academic drawing to everyone would have the predictable effect of putting off many art students, the reason why its obligatory presence in the curriculum was removed in the first place. However, not having to draw should make teaching it understood as optional rather than unnecessary, and effective differentiation would ensure that students can access this learning opportunity if they wish. In order to make an appropriate choice, art students with career aspirations in the creative industries (and their teachers) need to be provided with accurate information regarding the skills required. The means by which this knowledge could be disseminated is proposed below.

Art-related careers

The study shows that these schoolchildren were not helped to understand how their art education can provide skills and abilities relevant to the workplace, and did not routinely receive advice on art-related occupations. Findings data indicated that by Year 9, when many pupils made option choices, most had already decided whether or not to continue with art; the art teacher interviewed told of his lack of success in ‘selling’ his subject to pupils and their parents.

There are other schools in which options are selected in Year 8 prior to a Year 9 start on GCSE courses. It is therefore suggested that information on art and design-based careers should be communicated to Y7 through ready-made homework and class worksheets that require no preparation by the teacher. This would be particularly useful where Key Stage 3 art is taught by non-specialists, as in this school. Anyone teaching art, specialist or not, would become more knowledgeable and confident about including careers information in lower school schemes of work. Case study sheets of the type currently available from the NSEAD website could provide a basis for this initiative but modification of these would be essential for a young learner. For this art department, including the NSEAD sheets during GCSE lessons was an unrealistic prospect due to the time-consuming nature of coursework generation. The government-driven accountability ethos of schools ensures that teachers are striving to elicit art coursework from students to meet grade targets.

For younger pupils, examples of occupations could include design of film sets, websites, computer games and sportswear, digital illustration including comic books, and makeup artistry. Unlike current case study sheets, they would show both a man and a woman as examples of practitioners so as not to unwittingly stereotype the nature of the work. A further change to existing resources would be brief explanations as to how the child’s art education provides skills for that particular career rather than the extensive descriptions of adult experiences which could lack immediate relevance. More illustrations (ensuring that they are interesting and appealing examples) of the artwork involved in the adult occupation, and much less text, would have the possibility of being user-friendly and accessible to a wide ability range of early secondary students, with tasks focused on creative imagery as a response to the type of art shown in the resource; writing would be minimal. As occasional home learning topics, parents might become more informed as well. Ideas and understanding would override technical skill in terms of the required involvement in the task. As such, it ought to interest a wide range of learners including those initially put off by writing, objective drawing and dull themes. A flyer mailed to each secondary head of art informing of free downloadable worksheets and online tasks for Year 7 would surely assist in promoting such a venture.

I suspect that advertising art’s usefulness to later life in this way would not, of itself, counteract widely held adult perceptions to the contrary. It would need to accompany enjoyable and meaningful practical work, so that
eventually art might be understood as a subject equally appropriate for boys and girls. Even for the most cash-strapped, facility-challenged department, following up on Coles’ (2012) recommendations for ‘fun’ and vocationally pertinent projects such as creating comics, CD covers and customising clothes prior to GCSE have the potential to be relevant to both children’s interests and the workplace, as well as engaging.

Conclusion

The case study department exhibited features of art provision discovered to be particularly uninspiring for boys, as identified by Ofsted. It contributed to a perception of the subject as being of little significance, and primarily appropriate for girls, by adhering to a limited fine art curriculum, widely found to discourage boys. As such, it followed a GCSE syllabus that involved learning practices resisted by more boys than girls. Low expectations in terms of student attainment had the effect of further underlining its poor subject status, and the teachers had been unable to convince students or parents that art is vocationally important. External factors had an appreciable bearing on art’s standing in the curriculum. The organisation of the school was revealed to be unsupportive, even obstructive, towards art, and parental attitudes (notably those of boys’ parents) appeared especially negative for reasons largely beyond the department’s ability to address.

As many art teachers know, they cannot overcome commonly held negative perceptions of art through their commitment and enthusiasm alone. The headteacher, with overall responsibility for the education of her/his students, should ideally be making strategic decisions to ensure that the art curriculum is supported. Early careers education that is made fun could give children more awareness of art-related occupations of interest to them, and help them to make decisions regarding any art skills they might need. Better use of individualised learning offers the possibility of engaging the disaffected and challenging the enthusiastic, as might be the case in ‘setted’ core subjects. It could also ensure that schemes of work retain an entitlement to learn drawing for those aiming high. In addition to its applicability to careers, drawing is an important element in doing well on fine art GCSE courses, and would enable students to excel in the subject and visibly demonstrate this excellence to the whole school.

Thus far, attempts by organisations to increase awareness of art’s vocational relevance, and to improve school art’s accessibility and appeal, do not seem to have increased take-up of the subject, or been able to transcend entrenched attitudes and values. Instead, the status of art is increasingly at risk. Now more than ever, with dwindling candidate numbers at GCSE and financial cutbacks, it is crucial that where an art department is mediocre, it prioritises raising its profile within the school. Genuinely accommodating a range of interests, abilities and aspirations, the visibility of good quality work, and a new approach to highlighting links to the workplace, all have a part to play in keeping art education relevant.

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