



HOW TO LEAD IT PRIMARY ART & DESIGN

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BLOOMSBURY

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1 Leading art and design

Leading art and design in a primary school is an exciting role. Art allows pupils to explore and develop visual, perceptual and creative capabilities in a way which no other discipline offers. A good art education in a primary school offers pupils a rich blend of learning about the *language* of art and the opportunity to develop the skills and processes to *create* art.

You may feel that taking on the role of a leader for art and design perfectly suits your own interest and expertise in the visual arts. For many people however, it is a subject in which they lack confidence. Maybe you feel unsure about your knowledge and skills or it is your first experience in leading a subject. Whichever applies to you, this book is designed to be a practical guide to help you ensure an excellent provision and experience for every pupil in your school.

When I first qualified as a primary school teacher I was passionate about introducing pupils to the rich and varied world of art. Giving them the opportunity to express and develop their own creativity was something to which I aspired. I soon found that realising this aspiration in my own Year 3 classroom, at a time when the pressures of achieving results in English and maths seemed paramount, was a more remote possibility than I had hoped. Ten years on, I want to impart what I have learned, and what I wish I had known in my early days as a teacher.

This chapter looks at:

- the aims of an art and design education in primary school
- the role of a primary art and design leader
- current challenges in teaching the subject
- opportunities to overcome educational challenges in art and design provision
- how this book can support you in your art and design leadership role.

Aims of primary art and design education

What is art and design in the primary context and what are the aims of a high-quality art and design education?

The current National Curriculum for England (DfE, 2013) sets out how art and design is a blend of:

- Acquiring knowledge and skills to be able to *create* art, craft and design and in doing so developing creative, imaginative and reflective capabilities.
- Developing the ability to think critically and *learn about* art, craft and design from a variety of cultures, thinking about how it can reflect and influence society.

The National Curriculum refers to art, craft and design. In Chapter 3 we will explore the distinctions and overlap between these three definitions and what this means in relation to curriculum content. The rest of this chapter uses the term 'art' to refer to all three areas.

Ofsted's research review series: art and design (2023) echoes how the National Curriculum identifies the dual nature of art in schools (*creating* art and *learning about* art) with the following summary: 'a high-quality art education can build pupils' ability to appreciate and interpret what they observe, communicate what they feel, or make what they imagine and invent. At its best, the subject is both intellectually challenging and creatively demanding' (Ofsted, 2023). Pupils learn by making connections between encountering art by others, and the art which they create themselves.

Rather than an exercise in ticking off a series of skills acquired, concepts learned and names or dates memorised, learning in art goes much deeper. In this subject, the process of looking at, talking about and making art can provide a pupil with an understanding of how art can enrich their inner world and provide a vehicle for expression and identity. As such, it has the potential to unlock life-long interest and pleasure. High-quality education in art is also essential for the creative industries, which are currently central to our economy.

Creativity

Because a large part of the discipline of art is about *making* art, debate about what should be in a good art education often focuses on the concept of 'creativity'. The English National Curriculum says that pupils should produce work using materials 'creatively'. What is creativity and how can we define it? The word is often used in a casual, non-specific way, which can be unhelpful for teachers when considering what we should teach, how to teach it and how to assess it.

Creativity has been described as the ‘capacity to imagine, conceive, express, or make something that was not there before’ (NACCCE, 1999). Defining it in this way captures how creativity is bound up with the idea of self-expression. This is sometimes seen as being in conflict with learning techniques or skills, or what we might categorise as formal art instruction (APPG, 2023).

This tension is illustrated by the National Society of Education in Art and Design’s (NSEAD) response to Ofsted’s research review (2023). The Ofsted review suggests that pupils need to learn specific knowledge before they can express their creative capacity in what they make. For example, on drawing, the review says: ‘Once pupils have learned the components of drawing, they can gain further knowledge and explore creative possibilities’ (Ofsted, 2023).

In their response to the review NSEAD says that this approach, with creativity coming at a later point after learning particular skills, is too linear. They say that this view ‘does not give value to expression, experimentation, invention or communication’ (NSEAD, 2023). Having taught art for many years I tend to agree: creative exploration can occur and should be encouraged at every stage of learning. It is more organic and fluid than perhaps the research review suggests. Creative development and the development of skills may, in fact, occur concurrently. A Reception pupil, for example, may learn that there are three special colours called the primary colours through painting an imaginary creature using blue, yellow and red.

The research review emphasises the need to learn certain skills and techniques before exploring how to use these creatively. This may be to guard against approaches which try to foster the creative process in a vacuum of knowledge. A good curriculum needs to provide opportunity for practising different skills and techniques (e.g. different ways of creating tone with a pencil by way of shading or cross-hatching) which a pupil can develop using their own creative style and imagination. Practising a particular technique so that it is performed with a degree of automaticity and fluidity (for example, shading with a pencil) allows a pupil expressive freedom in how they use, or choose not to use, a particular technique. The balance between creative exploration and learning skills and techniques is discussed further in Chapter 8.

A final note on creativity: it is good to provide opportunities for pupils to express themselves but we don’t want to restrict their art experiences to only self-expression and novelty. There are some artistic disciplines that require extensive practice and the ability to follow established conventions very closely, such as some Islamic art and traditional Chinese brush painting. It is good to give pupils exposure to these sorts of disciplines too.

The role of a primary art and design leader

As primary art and design leaders we need to make sure that there is a clear plan about what pupils are going to learn in their art lessons and ensure that they are learning effectively. This means having a specified curriculum, and monitoring and reviewing its implementation. We should aspire to promote the subject, allowing pupils in our schools to discover the rich cultural and creative opportunities it provides.

We can break down what this means for subject leaders into six areas.

1. Curriculum development

Subject leads should:

- Have an overall vision of the aims and purposes of the art and design curriculum.
- Oversee and work with teachers to develop a rich, balanced curriculum which incorporates both a breadth and depth of knowledge.
- Develop a long-term plan which details how pupils' knowledge and skills will progress from year to year.
- Ensure the curriculum is inclusive and has high expectations for all pupils including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and English as an additional language (EAL).
- Oversee consistent curriculum implementation including ensuring appropriate timetable allocation.
- Develop appropriate systems which monitor pupils' overall progress and curriculum effectiveness.
- Implement appropriate modifications as a result of monitoring.

2. Resourcing

Planning and acquiring resources for your subject will involve:

- Managing resources in line with budget and curriculum requirements.
- Ordering, allocating and storing resources.
- Auditing resources on a regular basis.
- Ensuring all risk assessment and health and safety requirements are met.

3. Monitoring teaching and learning

Ensuring successful implementation of the curriculum is known as monitoring. We can think of this as gathering evidence, reviewing and improving. This includes:

- Regularly reviewing planning.
- Observing lessons.
- Undertaking informal learning walks.
- Looking at and discussing sketchbooks/outcomes with pupils.
- Undertaking pupil voice.
- Giving feedback to teachers/discussing findings with SLT.
- Implementing modifications to improve.

4. Supporting colleagues

You can foster a supportive working environment by:

- Encouraging regular subject updates in staff meetings.
- Ensuring teachers understand what is going well in art lessons and give clear, achievable targets from lesson observations.
- Agreeing a clear strategy for the best use of support staff in art lessons.
- Making time to plan together.
- Creating the opportunity for peer-on-peer lesson observations.
- Providing staff training in areas pinpointed for development.

5. Raising the profile of art and design

Art and design in a school is not just about lessons. Promoting it as a subject could include:

- Running art clubs.
- Arranging class trips to galleries and museums.
- Investigating and using parental expertise, e.g. Class talks/demonstrations.
- Investigating local opportunities for visiting artists/workshops.

- Participating in gallery/museum projects/competitions.
- Creating displays to celebrate pupils' work.
- Having a yearly whole-school art event.
- Using technology to showcase pupils' work to a wider audience.

6. Professional development

As subject leads it is important that we are supported in our leadership role so that we make the best of it, which in turn will help us to provide the best art and design education for children in our schools. Developing our own knowledge can include:

- Attending courses/training delivered by museums/galleries, subject organisations or advisers/consultants.
- Sharing expertise with other art leaders in other schools from the local area, multi-academy trust or federation.
- Keeping up to date with the latest, subject specific educational research.

Finding focus and prioritising

The list of responsibilities above can seem overwhelming at first. It is important to realise that we can't focus on everything at once. We need to decide each academic year what our priorities are and make a realistic, time-specified plan. A good method is to create a subject development plan in the first half of the Autumn term each year, which can be reviewed throughout the course of the year. A suggested format using the focus areas set out previously is provided in the following table.

If art is a subject which has been neglected in your school before you took on your leadership role, the focus may be devising and implementing a new curriculum in the first half of the year, with regular milestones for monitoring how it is going. In contrast, in a school where art is a well-established subject the focus may be on keeping a regular check on how the curriculum is being implemented, addressing any issues which are highlighted by monitoring and focusing on profile/enrichment.

Action	Responsibility	Timescale/resources	Progress
Curriculum development			
Resources			
Monitoring teaching and learning			
Supporting colleagues			
Raising the profile			
Professional development			

Current educational challenges

The general picture

Despite the benefits of a high-quality education in art and design, reports on its position in schools over the last decade paint a bleak picture.

- The Fabian Society report on the arts in general stated that ‘there has been a dramatic decline in both the quantity and quality of arts education in primary schools in England’ (Cooper, 2018).
- By 2023 The Arts in Schools report found ‘a lack of value ascribed to the arts within the state education system in England’ (Bacon and Tambling, 2023).
- In 2024 the Cultural Learning Alliance reported that numbers of arts GCSEs taken had fallen by 42 per cent since 2010 and there were 14 per cent fewer arts teachers in schools than there were in 2010 (CLA, 2024).
- In a recent survey 76 per cent of teachers agreed that art education is not prioritised in schools (Art-K, 2025).

A summary of the challenges

Various surveys of teachers and pupils show significant challenges in providing a high-quality art and design education at school level. These include the following.

Teacher knowledge, confidence and training:

- **Primary teachers' lack of confidence teaching art and design.** A lack of understanding of the subject leads to fewer art lessons and a narrower range of experiences offered to pupils (APPG, 2023).
- **A deficit of training in initial teacher training.** Trainee primary teachers receive between three to 12 hours of training to teach art and design (APPG, 2023).
- **A lack of subject-specific training in art and design.** Around 21 per cent of primary teachers say they had never attended any subject-specific training since their initial teacher training. (APPG, 2023).

Workforce and teacher morale:

- As many as 68.6 per cent of primary art leaders have considered **leaving the profession** (APPG, 2023).
- For teachers teaching art and design, 86.4 per cent said their **workload had increased** in the last five years (APPG, 2023).

Decrease in financial resources:

- **A lack of money for resources.** Around 93.2 per cent of teachers say that there has been a decrease in resources since the Covid pandemic (APPG, 2023).
- **A decline in extra-curricular provision** since the Covid pandemic. Schools report cutting 50 per cent of trips and outings for financial reasons (APPG, 2023).

Lesson time:

- It's reported that 18 per cent of primary teachers spend **no time at all teaching art in an average week** (Art-K, 2025).

Decrease in fine motor skills:

- Around 77 per cent of teachers have witnessed a **worsening in pupils' ability to perform precise movements** such as holding a pencil, drawing, writing or using scissors since 2020 (Art-K, 2025).

Racial and social inequities:

- In 2025 the Cultural Learning Alliance reported that there is a **clear relationship between the poverty of an area and pupils in that area not studying the expressive arts in school**. Expressive arts take-up at GCSE and A Level is lowest where there is the highest level of free school meals and levels of deprivation (CLA, 2025).
- The Education Policy Institute highlights that **children in independent schools are much more likely to attend extra-curricular arts activities than children from state schools**. Students who are eligible for free school meals are also much less likely than their peers who are not eligible for free school meals to attend arts activities (CLA, 2025).
- The Sutton Trust reported that young adults from working-class backgrounds are **four times less likely to work in the creative industries compared to their middle-class peers** (CLA, 2025).

Opportunities to overcome the educational challenges

All this paints a rather bleak picture for art and design in schools. However, my own experience of working with subject leads in schools in recent years suggests a more hopeful perspective.

In primary schools, art is a compulsory subject in all four national curricula of the UK and plays a significant part in the life of lots of schools. Since the introduction of the Ofsted inspection framework in 2019, there has been more emphasis placed on the teaching and inspection of discrete subjects. As a result, in recent years primary schools have been more motivated to ensure arts subjects are treated seriously and appropriate hours are allotted within the primary timetable. Whilst there is still a battle in Year 6 to persuade primary schools not to drop subjects that are not examined by Key Stage 2 SATs, Ofsted's emphasis on focusing on the successful implementation of a coherent and well-sequenced curriculum seems to have had a positive effect.

The decline of the arts in schools has motivated interested individuals and arts organisations to advocate and campaign for their resurgence. At the same time, they have provided opportunities and resources, many of which are referred to in this book. The Ofsted research review series: art and design (2023) raised the profile of the importance of art in schools and provided clarity about curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment. This is invaluable for subject leads.

If we are passionate about the benefits of art in schools, it can provide motivation to make a difference in our own particular setting. It is within our power as subject leads to do that. I have seen many schools where subject leads have made art central in their schools by driving the successful implementation of a well-sequenced, balanced curriculum that allows all pupils to thrive. This book aims to help you do just that.

How this book can support you

This book offers practical support for subject leaders with limited time. You may like to dip into chapters/parts of chapters out of order, where you have identified a particular area where you need support.

Throughout the book you will find:

- examples to illustrate best practice
- advice about teaching different skills/technique
- case studies for further exemplification
- suggestions for staff professional development
- reflection questions
- follow-up reading and suggested resources.

The next chapter discusses how we can get the best from research evidence. Chapters 3–5 look at principles of curriculum design, planning a curriculum and what makes an effective lesson.

Chapter 6 discusses the importance of looking and visual literacy in art lessons. Chapter 7 considers how to guide practice through modelling/demonstration and scaffolding and Chapter 8 discusses practice and the importance of process. Chapter 9 looks at basic principles in drawing, painting and sculpture and discusses key resources in relation to each area. Chapter 10 discusses assessment, monitoring and how to implement change.

Chapter summary

- Learning art at primary school includes acquiring knowledge and skills to be able to *create* art and developing the ability to think critically and *learn about* art from a variety of cultures.
- A good curriculum should provide opportunity for practising different skills and techniques, which a pupil can develop using their own creative style and imagination.
- As primary art and design leaders we need to ensure there is a specified curriculum, and monitor and review its implementation.
- Significant educational challenges exist in art education, which include teacher knowledge, confidence and training, a lack of funding, a lack of emphasis and importance placed on the subject and social and racial inequities.
- Despite the challenges, subject leads have an opportunity to make a significant difference in schools, promoting art and design to allow all pupils to discover the rich cultural and creative opportunities which it provides.

Questions for reflection

- What is the profile of art in my school?
- How much art is there in the timetable?
- What is the level of teacher confidence in teaching art?
- Do the pupils both *make* art and *learn about* art?
- How are they being given the opportunity to develop their creative and expressive capabilities?

Explore further

- 'Art Now: An Inquiry into the State of Art and Design teaching in Early Years Foundation Stage, Primary and Secondary Education' (2023), by APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Art, Craft and Design in Education): www.nsead.org/files/13a555d0c7a3c66da64bfb8049a4dae1.pdf

- 'Research review series: art and design' (2023) by Ofsted: www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-art-and-design
- Cultural Learning Alliance who are a source of arts education news and lead a cross-arts agenda for arts/cultural learning policy change: www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk
- NSEAD (National Society for Education in Art and Design) which issues resources and various publications containing recent research: www.nsead.org