

## Art and design is *still* a gendered school subject

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### Abstract

**G**ender 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 offers few career prospects, and to the notion that boys dislike drawing and painting. This paper derives from a case study of a London secondary school art department during 2010/11. One aspect of the research examines the way art remains a feminine, marginalised subject despite its relevance to the increasingly successful creative industries. A central finding is that good attainment at GCSE still relies heavily on a demanding homework load and copious preparatory studies, both off-putting to students, particularly boys.

**Keywords:** secondary art education; art and design education; art-based careers; gender; ethnicity.

### Introduction

The New Secondary Curriculum for art and design (hereafter abbreviated to 'art'), implemented from 2008 in England, was intended to encourage greater participation in post-compulsory art by students of both sexes, but particularly boys. Criteria for GCSE, the public examination taken at age 16, reflected the new flexibility by, for example, removing the necessity to paint or draw. Yet 2013 GCSE results attest to a consistent female domination of Key Stage 4 art at over one percentage point higher than in 2012 (67% and 65.7% respectively). At A-level, typically completed at age 18, girls constitute marginally over three-quarters (75.3%) of candidates (Joint Council for Qualifications 2013.) 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 ought to be able to contradict this misconception. 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 based on one aspect of a case study which investigates the status of art within a comprehensive school department, the research question being: *How does the organisation of the post-compulsory art curriculum still contribute towards the gender imbalance in participation and attainment in one particular school?* My earlier 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.

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.

### 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 (eg Murphy & 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 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 three to four 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. 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.

Ofsted (2009) states that 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; their 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 evidenced. 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.

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, namely the creative industries. 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.

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 & 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, wittingly 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 & 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.

The current government's proposals for art curriculum reform (DfE 2013) appear to do little to encourage boys' continuing participation. They embrace a fine art 'appreciation' stance that implies a backward-looking leisure pursuit, arguably more suited to girls. However, the compelling response to the government paper from NSEAD (2013) insists that a revised curriculum should establish links to the creative industries and emphasise computing and making, which are more reflective of boys' interests and strengths.

## 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 with regard to its esteem among male students.

The research took place in an east London comprehensive school within an area of high deprivation. I had existing links with some of the teachers through my professional role, and an opportunity arose for me to form a small accelerated learning group from the art GCSE cohort. Case study, an interpretive methodology, was considered the most suitable means of answering the research question as it enabled an in-depth study of the art department's organisation, the school context, and a relatively small

number of students, over one year. Explanations for the phenomena observed were derived through informal classroom conversations, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires designed to elicit qualitative responses. I was an outside researcher in the sense that I was not on the school payroll, but the close working relationship I formed with the students and one of the art teachers afforded me access to an appreciable degree of insider knowledge.

There are no claims as to the generalisability of findings, although where they reflect aspects of the substantive literature or public examination statistics, there may be points for other 'average' art departments to consider.

## Findings

### 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 raise 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% 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.

Although the art department did not have ready access to ICT or 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 socio-economic 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 engaging, inspiring topics.

It appeared that the enhanced curriculum and heightened academic expectations associated with belonging to the ALG accounted for the group's success at GCSE compared to their peers in two Year 11 art classes where no one was awarded a grade above C. Three ALG members, Uzma, Nilofar and Rabia, attained the top grade of A\* for art, and the other two, Calum (the only boy) and Taura (from Lithuania), achieved B grades. It is these lower grades that are of particular significance because, although the two students' individual art outcomes were graded highly at A or A\*, syllabus requirements generally found to be of less interest to students (see literature review) were not as well developed by Calum and Taura. Their preparatory studies were mediocre in quality, and they were unable to generate the quantity produced by the higher-attaining group members; 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. Thus despite the considerable artistic ability exhibited in their 'final pieces', their motivation and enthusiasm, the grades of these students were adversely affected by the external organisation of their art curriculum.

### Views on school art's applicability to adult careers

Although Mr P, the art teacher I interviewed, claimed that information on art careers was communicated to pupils by the department when GCSE options choices were made, this was refuted by students. 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 might be mentioned by the subject teachers, but inconsistently:

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.'*

Mr P had 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 had more to do with improving league table statistics than preparing students for careers. BTEC extended art and design was provided for the less able – 24 boys and 4 girls in Year 10 – because its pass mark, ostensibly the equivalent of two C grades at GCSE, was found by Mr P to be 'much more achievable'. His stated view was that BTEC is a 'dumbed down' version of GCSE art, which seems unlikely to raise its subject esteem especially with regard to vocational opportunity.

Further indications of art's perceived unimportance, not least among minority ethnic parents, were reported by Mr P who observed a lack of interest among parents in the progress of their children who opted for GCSE art. Out of twenty-four 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.'*

### Students' attitudes towards school art

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. Between Years 7 and 9, the school's decision to allocate non-specialists as art teachers if they had gaps in their timetables arguably undermined art as a credible subject, especially among boys.

Calum: *'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.'*

### Discussion

The lacklustre art provision at the focus school did little to encourage its subject esteem or take-up during the post-compulsory phase. 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 tended 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 was 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.

The case study findings point to the nature of the fine art syllabus, which is taught widely (Downing & 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.

### 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.

This study has demonstrated that attitudes toward school art in a multicultural area are strongly linked to ethnic backgrounds as well as gender. Where family expectations are that boys will pursue one of a narrow range of career paths, art could well continue to be overlooked as a vocational prospect, the expanding creative sector notwithstanding.

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