

A Review of Art and Design at Key Stage 2 in
Primary and Special Schools in Northern Ireland

November 2024

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Introduction

In February 2024 the ETI extended an invitation, via a social media campaign, to primary and special schools to participate in a review of art and design at key stage 2 (KS 2). The purpose of the review was to highlight the importance of art and design within the area of learning of 'The Arts' in the Northern Ireland Curriculum. It encouraged schools to share aspects of their practice and its impact on the children's learning experiences and outcomes. Schools were also invited to share their views on the successes and challenges they experience in the delivery of art and design.

The ETI is grateful to the 19 schools that participated: 14 mainstream primary schools and five special schools; and to the children who presented their work and talked about their experiences and learning insights.

This report examines the value placed on art and design in the schools and includes examples of effective practice. It provides some insight into the nature of art and design education in Northern Ireland and highlights considerations for schools going forward to deliver effectively art and design within the curriculum for the benefit of the children.

Context and background

The Northern Ireland Curriculum

All schools are required to meet the statutory curriculum requirements within [The Northern Ireland Curriculum](#) (NIC). Art and design is a statutory subject until the end of KS 3 and it sits within the area of learning known as 'The Arts' in the primary curriculum. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) outlines the requirements at each phase of learning and provides lines of progression to aid teachers in their planning. The purpose and expectations for The Arts are articulated clearly by CCEA.

“[The Arts](#) develops children's creativity and encourages them to express their ideas, feelings and interpretations of the world through pictures, sound, music and dance.”

“A high-quality [Art and Design curriculum](#) should engage, inspire and challenge children to develop their understanding and abilities, equipping them with the knowledge, skills and confidence to experiment, explore and create their own pieces of art.” Northern Ireland Curriculum (2007)

The flexibility within the NIC provides schools with the opportunity to: develop a vision for art and design; be innovative and imaginative in how they interpret and deliver it; and present stimulating and bespoke opportunities for children to progress from year to year, deepening their experience of creative and expressive learning.

A refresh of the NIC led by CCEA was initiated in January 2024 and is underway at the time of publication of this report. A review of the curriculum provides an opportunity for all in education to refocus on the NIC requirements, including The Arts.

Wider context

While there are regional differences in art and design curricula across the UK, there is notable research relating to arts education which is relevant and important to all regions. The work by foundations and other bodies, including the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation who published the seminal [The Arts in Schools: Principles, Practice and Provision \(1982\)](#), helped secure the place of The Arts in curricula in all the regions. The foundation's latest publication in association with A New Direction [The Arts in Schools, Foundations for the Future \(2023\)](#) reflects on the forty years since that report. Through discussions with educators, arts professionals and policy makers, it re-evaluates the role of the arts in education with recommendations to promote an arts-rich education and to highlight the need for more equitable access to the arts for all.

In February 2023, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) published a research review report for art and design as part of its [Research Review Series](#). The report is intended to support and inform those leading the development of art and design education (in England). It provides a realistic perspective on the challenges facing the subject, that are shared by all the regions.

'The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Art, Craft and Design in Education Research Group' published [Art Now: An Inquiry into the State of Art and Design teaching in Early Years Foundation Stage, Primary and Secondary Education](#) for the period 2020-2023. It highlights the importance of continuing professional development to ensure high quality teaching, learning and progression in art and design.

In addition, research by the Arts Council England and Durham University entitled [Durham Commission on Creativity in Education \(2019\)](#) reminds us of the role creativity and creative thinking should play in the education of young people, while highlighting creativity as the driver of economic growth and innovation. The report recommends that young people have opportunities to experience and develop skills in art, drama, music, design, craft and digital awareness as these are the foundations of the creative industries.

The creative industries are important for Northern Ireland. Creative and digital media are described on the NI direct government website as being areas that are ‘extremely important for the Northern Ireland economy.’ The most recent [Northern Ireland skills barometer](#) (2021) identified creative arts and design, and arts, media and publishing, as having the third and fourth highest labour market supply gap for 2020-2030.

It is important to take cognisance of the fundamental role of primary education in providing the foundation for children’s career choices. It is timely to focus attention on the arts, ensuring children receive a quality arts education, to equip them to progress in their learning and fulfil their potential; enable children to access and experience the arts for mental health and wellbeing; and to develop skills for the creative industries.

Executive summary

Scope and methodology of the evaluation

The purpose of the review was to highlight the importance of art and design within the area of learning of ‘The Arts’ in the Northern Ireland Curriculum. It encouraged schools to share aspects of their practice and its impact on the children’s learning experiences and outcomes. Nineteen schools participated in the review visits: 14 mainstream primary schools and five special schools. Discussions were held with the leaders and those with responsibility for art and design and the children had an opportunity to present their work and talk about their experiences and learning.

Summary of key findings

Going well

- Children in the participating schools are benefitting both emotionally and intellectually from engagement in art and design. They are enthusiastic in articulating their knowledge, experience and enjoyment of art and view creating art and design as important and valuable to their overall wellbeing.
- When art and design is valued in the school, the leaders have a clear vision for its development and the children have rich opportunities to explore and develop their own ideas and skills through a wide range of meaningful learning experiences. The creativity and resourcefulness of the teachers contributes significantly to the quality of the children’s learning experiences and their outcomes.

- In most of the schools, the children benefit from learning about the work of famous artists; they talk confidently about what they can see in the work and the techniques used. Where schools build on this interest, through the well-planned use of the education services of museums and galleries, it deepens significantly the learning for the children.
- The children display confidence in two-dimensional work, using drawing and painting media for mark-making, blending colours, adding tone. Leaders should review regularly the breadth of the art and design curriculum in their school, including the opportunities for children to work in three dimensions and the progression of skills from year to year, to ensure children can confidently progress to KS 3.
- In the best practice the children recognise and can reflect upon their own progression and know how to improve their work. Some children spoke of how they are encouraged to critically evaluate their own work and that of others, which provides them with the opportunity to analyse, interpret and reflect upon artistic concepts.
- It is important that children have opportunities to learn about contemporary art and design in their own locality and their cultural heritage.
- Design lessons are engaging and of most value to children's learning when they are embedded within a meaningful project, which mirrors the design process in working life. These projects incorporate organically other areas of learning and develop the children's thinking skills and personal capabilities.

Challenges

- A number of the co-ordinators report that design is underdeveloped in their schools, and the children have limited opportunities to develop their design capabilities.
- In the participating schools, digital art and design is largely led by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) co-ordinator. It would be beneficial for school leaders to facilitate the co-ordinators of art and design and ICT to work together closely to maximise creative learning and progression in this important area of art and design, which has growing career opportunities.

- School leaders report increasing challenges in recruiting teachers with specialist knowledge of art and design, gained either as part of their initial teacher education degree or other third level education programme. A shortage of specialists in the school system has implications for developing the curriculum, levels of teacher expertise, planning for progression and leading the subject in schools, including monitoring and evaluating.
- Monitoring, evaluation and review of the planning for art and design has not been a recent priority in most of the schools.
- It is vital that time is provided in the weekly timetable for children to have access to well-planned learning experiences in art and design that have meaning, value and facilitate progression in their learning.

Main findings

Setting the vision – the leadership of art and design

Where a school's senior leadership values art and design there is a vision that can be articulated. The children have rich opportunities for learning and their learning is celebrated in and beyond the school walls. One co-ordinator reported: 'Art and design is recognised as an important area of life.'

In a small number of the schools, the leaders have identified staff professional learning as a priority for art and design. The key aspects are building teachers' confidence in teaching art and design and developing their skills and expertise in using a wider range of media. In one example, the school is taking forward this development through collaboration within the area learning partnership, and professional learning for art and design has been added to the new School Development Plan (SDP).

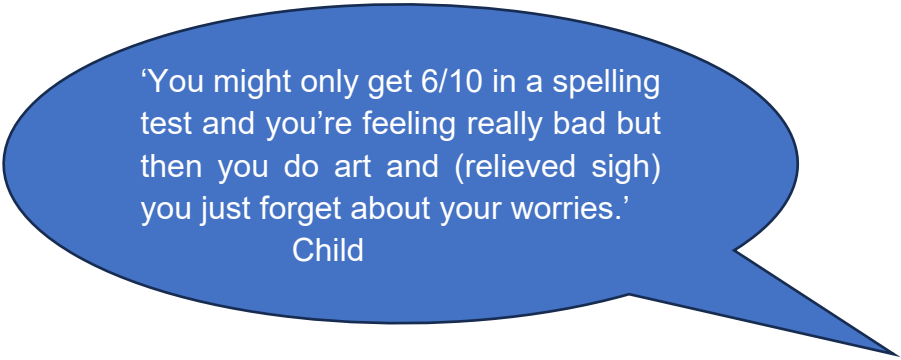
Some leaders report that there is a scarcity of art and design specialists in primary schools. Available pathways for teacher education have reduced. Just over one-quarter (26%) of co-ordinators in the participating schools are art and design specialists. If this is reflected across system, then it is a significant drop from the 49.4% reported in the [DE Omnibus Survey](#) in 2016. This may have implications for development of art and design curricula in the system going forward.

A majority of the participating teachers with responsibility for co-ordinating the subject have an interest or a passion for art and design rather than a specialism. They relish the opportunity to be creative and to nurture creativity in children. They recognise the value of children participating in art and design activities. They are open to learning and applying new techniques to enhance the children's learning experiences. They are important advocates for the subject in their schools.

Co-ordinators with a specialism in art and design bring additional attributes including the knowledge and experience to progress further the children's learning. They may have a deeper knowledge of pedagogy and best practice, and a wider range of expertise. Their knowledge and expertise are particularly important for leading and developing art and design curricula in Northern Ireland going forward. [The Learning Leaders Teaching professional learners' strategy](#) framework includes the aspiration to provide: 'teachers with a tool to guide, motivate, recognise and share outstanding practice'.

In a minority of the schools, there is no-one designated to lead art and design. Without curriculum leadership, there is no one with a specific responsibility for monitoring and evaluating the quality and breadth of the art and design provision across the school, and ensuring there is appropriate progression for learners. Curriculum responsibility will ultimately rest with the board of governors.

Embedding success and building equity – valuing art and design education



'You might only get 6/10 in a spelling test and you're feeling really bad but then you do art and (relieved sigh) you just forget about your worries.'

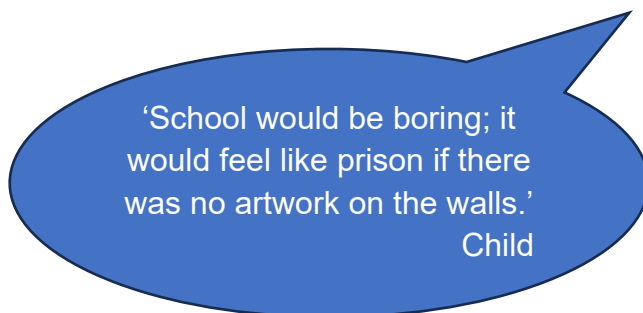
Child

Where leaders value and support art and design, it makes a positive difference to school life for children. In the words of a school principal, art and design: 'brings meaning and value to children's learning and impacts positively on their academic work. It is accessible to all children, at their own level. It is inclusive for children with special educational needs and the most able. There are no barriers to accessing it'.

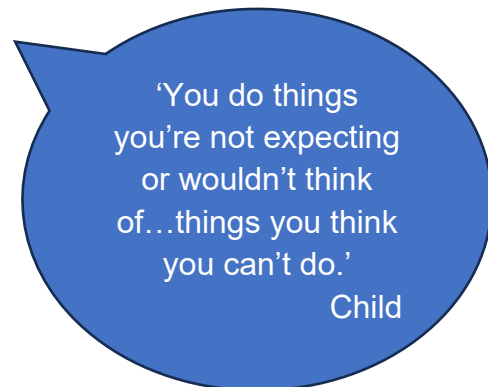
In a large inner-city school in Belfast, the teachers access the school's own arts programme devised collaboratively by the art and design and music co-ordinators, for years 1 to 7. The programme consists of famous artworks paired with famous pieces of classical music. The focus is on one picture and one piece of classical music per term for children to explore and respond to. For example: year 5 children in term 2 under the topic 'energy' explore abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock's [Silver over Black, White, Yellow and Red](#) (1948) in association with Carl Orff's [O Fortuna](#) from the cantata Carmina Burana (1935). Both compositions are full of energy and the programme states: 'The voices and booming music give a frantic feeling to the listener, especially during the crescendos. This reflects the mood of

the painting and the energy within.’ The co-ordinator reports how very special it is to see a child encompassed and totally focused by art and music, especially a child who has difficulty with reading, writing and has behavioural needs. During discussions with an inspector, a year 5 child proudly stated: ‘Jackson Pollock’s work is in the Tate; it’s an art gallery in London’. When asked how he knew this, he said ‘Jackson Pollock was in our (English) comprehension’. Careful planning by the school enabled the child to make a connection across areas of his learning, to experience success doing so and to extend his learning.

In nearly all of the schools, the children’s art and design is celebrated and displayed throughout the learning environment. One leader reported: ‘Every child has a piece of work on display in some capacity, building their self-esteem’. In a special school, the children’s work was celebrated in a range of ways with individual pupils’ work framed and displayed prominently alongside large pieces of art created in collaboration with a visiting artist.

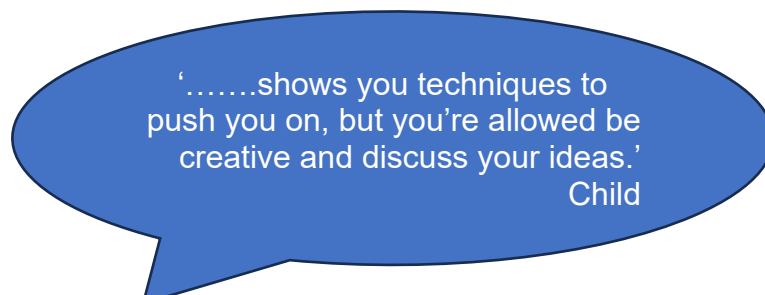


‘School would be boring; it would feel like prison if there was no artwork on the walls.’
Child



‘You do things you’re not expecting or wouldn’t think of...things you think you can’t do.’
Child

One of the participating primary schools has been employing an artist on the staff for two decades. The value of having the artist is recognised as beneficial for children’s creative expression, development of art and design skills, holistic learning and mental health and wellbeing. As the principal reports: ‘The children are communicating thoughts and feelings that they can’t express verbally. They are developing confidence, independence and an important sense of satisfaction’. For similar reasons, one of the special schools has an artist in residence.



‘.....shows you techniques to push you on, but you’re allowed be creative and discuss your ideas.’
Child

Where art and design is valued, children have opportunities to engage in large scale projects (occasionally across subject areas), to work with artists and to enter competitions. In one school all KS 2 children participated in a project using textiles to celebrate a national and historic event. The children created a wearable coronation gown ‘fit for a king’, heavily embellished in rich and colourful motifs. The resulting creation has pride of place on display in the school entrance for everyone to see.

Where senior leaders value and facilitate children’s visits to museums and galleries, the children’s general knowledge of art and culture is increased, and their confidence in accessing and discussing contemporary art is broadened considerably. For example, in one school where gallery visits are embedded in school culture, the children had the opportunity to explore contemporary Irish artist Colin Davidson’s painting and sculpture and it greatly informed the children’s own work on portraiture.

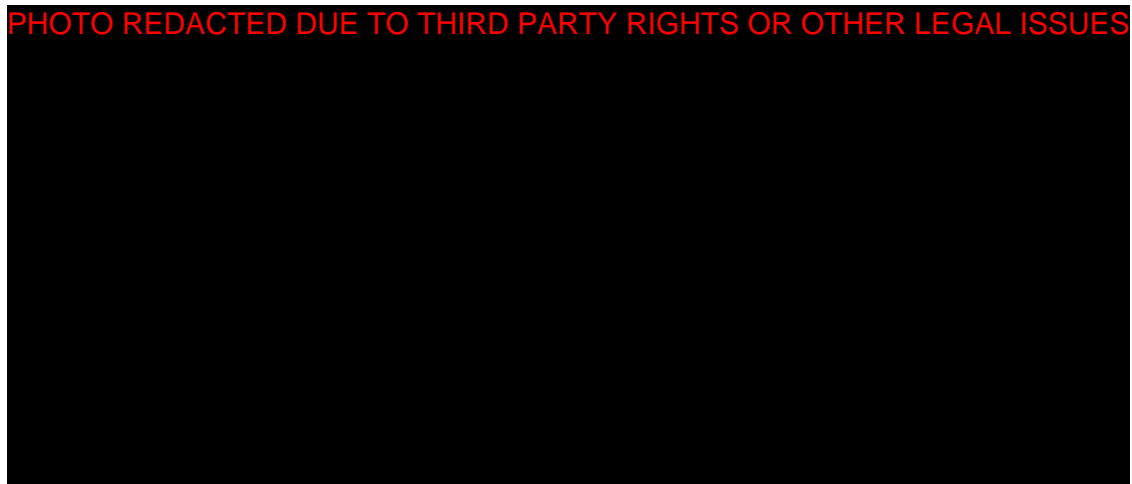


Figure 1: Children’s work inspired and informed by a visit to see contemporary Irish artist Colin Davidson’s work on exhibition in a gallery.

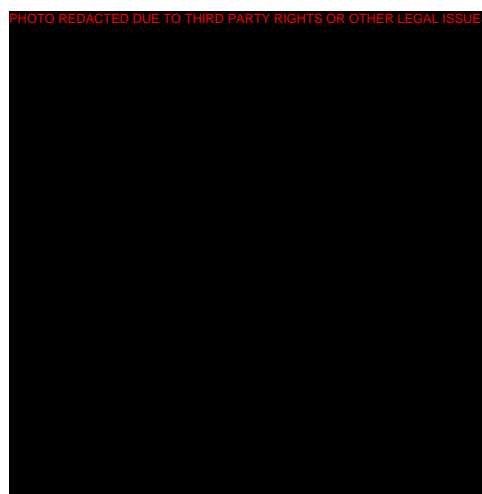


Figure 2: Contemporary Irish artist Colin Davidson with self-portrait in FE McWilliam Gallery and Studio, Banbridge.

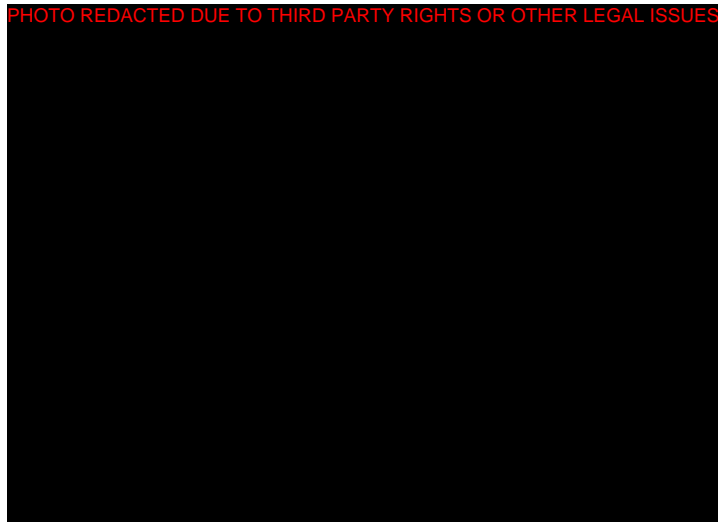


Figure 3: Portrait in pencil and oil pastel from a special school.

Several mainstream and special schools host children’s art and design exhibitions to celebrate the children’s achievements and allow them to share their successes with their parents/carers and other invited guests. In one school the children were visibly delighted that their creativity was recognised and celebrated publicly by the holding of an art exhibition attended by the Lord Mayor, parents, carers and governors. The art exhibition showed progression of the children’s work from year 1 to year 7 across a wide range of mediums. A number of the exhibition prize winners are children with special educational needs who are excelling at art and design. The teacher highlighted that this is often in response to the calming aspect of art and design lessons and use of sensory materials with a less structured approach.

Implementing and improving to achieve the vision

How schools are using the work of artists, designers and craftspeople

The statutory requirements for art and design in the [NIC](#) tell us that children should be enabled to:

“look at and talk about the work of artists, designers and craft workers from their own and other cultures; and appreciate methods used in the resource materials and use their appreciation to stimulate personal ideas and engage with informed art making.’ (The Northern Ireland Curriculum - Page 78)

The NIC provides detailed examples to help teachers visualise how the statutory requirements may be interpreted.

Children in almost all of the participating schools have opportunities to learn about paintings by famous artists. Van Gogh's [Sunflowers](#) (1888) or [The Starry Night](#) (1889) paintings are by far, the most popular. Picasso's abstract portraits (1930s) are commonly used to introduce the children to abstract and expressive work at KS 2. The abstract portraits of Picasso's own children (1930s) can be especially engaging, and through the examination of a range of Picasso's portraits, children can learn and better understand how his painting style became abstract. Copying individual artworks is a common approach when introducing children to famous artworks; however, it is the more focused learning about the art works to inform the children's own work which aligns more closely with the NIC. Some of the children report that they enjoy bringing their own creative interpretation to famous artists' work and using it as a stimulus in other areas of their learning.

Leaders report that introducing children to works of art generates discussion. It broadens children's vocabulary, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of art. A small number of the teachers used famous artists and designers from fields other than painting. For example: the architect Antoni Gaudí who created the organic inspired buildings such as [Casa Batlló](#) (1877) in Barcelona and William Morris who designed printed textiles including [The Strawberry Thief](#) (1883). These examples expose the children to commercial design that has become part of cultural heritage. Used as a stimulus for class activities, the children have creative opportunities to engage in a design process and print their own patterns or build with clay, to realise their ideas.

Children by studying a range of still life images of domestic scenes from work by French artists, such as Renoir and Matisse, have a good understanding of the term 'still life.' One school took inspiration from still life artist Phillippe Rousseau's painting [Apples and a Glass of Water](#) (c.1850). The children collected a variety of visually interesting objects to set up their own still life and were developing skills, techniques and 'thinking like an artist'. They could explain how they put the large objects towards the back to create interesting overlaps between the objects. They selected a background cloth that they felt contrasted and blended with the objects and when they were drawing, they considered the shapes made by the objects and groups of objects.

One senior leader spoke of how artists' work is not only used as a stimulus for art and design, but also in other areas of the curriculum, in particular literacy. For example, [The Ambassadors](#) (1533) by Hans Holbein the Younger, has been used as a visual stimulus for creative writing. The skull, which can only be understood when the picture is viewed from a certain angle, fascinated the P7 children. 'I actually changed my focus for story writing to a much better one that a pupil in the class had suggested! Initially I had wanted the pupils to write about a day in the life of one of the characters using their detective skills and all the visual clues within the picture to encourage their ideas. When the pupils noticed the perspective trick, we

began to discuss the different uses of the word perspective, i.e. from an artistic point and a (an opinion) point of view. One of the pupils then thought that it would be good to write from the point of view or 'perspective' of the skull and I thought that this was such a clever and unique idea. We entitled it 'What the skull saw'. The writing was so energetic and full of original ideas, and they researched the time period and key events in order to make the story more realistic and in keeping with the period'.

Art works are being used in the school to extend the children's thinking, develop language and to help them to write more creatively. The leader reports that "When a story comes from a stimulus, you get a better story". Artworks can provide challenging stimuli.

A small number of schools are successfully linking the work of various artists to thematic work, for example: the work of contemporary sculptor, photographer and environmentalist Andy Goldsworthy is popular in mainstream and special schools. His work is set in nature and artistically crafted from environmental materials, such as sheep's wool, stones, tree branches, snow and ice. His art is created in the outdoor environment and a key part of his work is using photography to document the changes to the artwork that take place over time. It is thought-provoking and relevant to the children's discussions about the changing environment when they can use natural materials available within the school grounds to create their own art.

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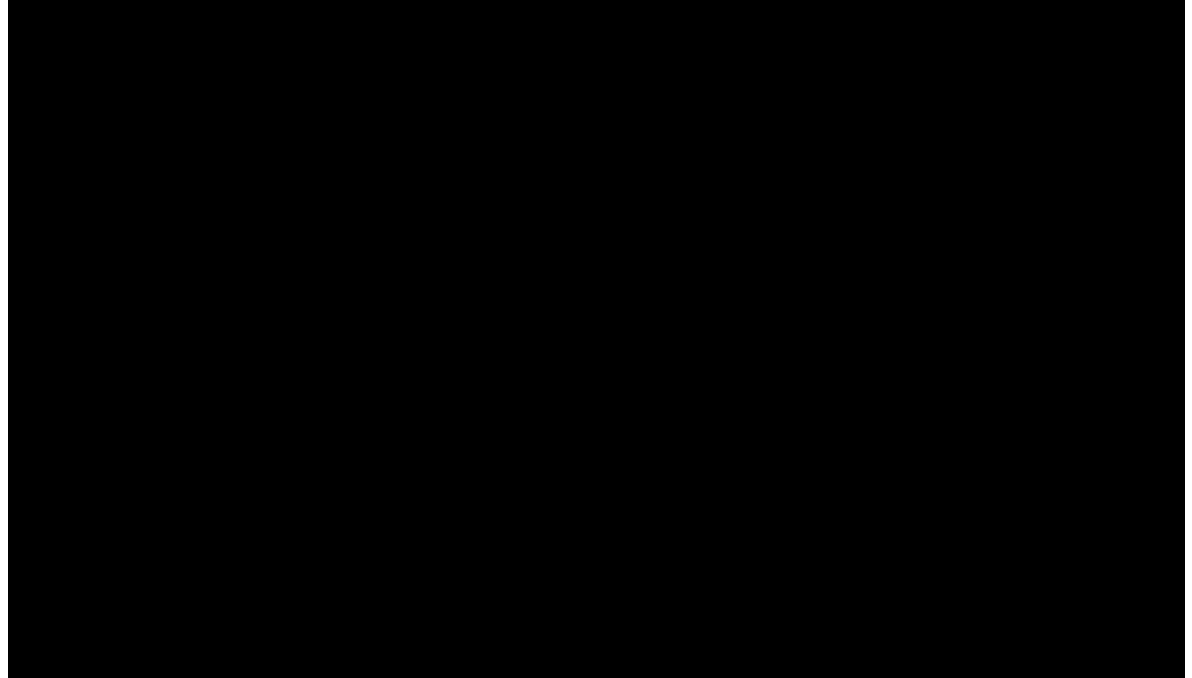


Figure 4: The art creations of children in a special school who were working with a local artist over a three-week period. These examples of work are from the theme of the environment and are inspired by the artist Andy Goldsworthy.

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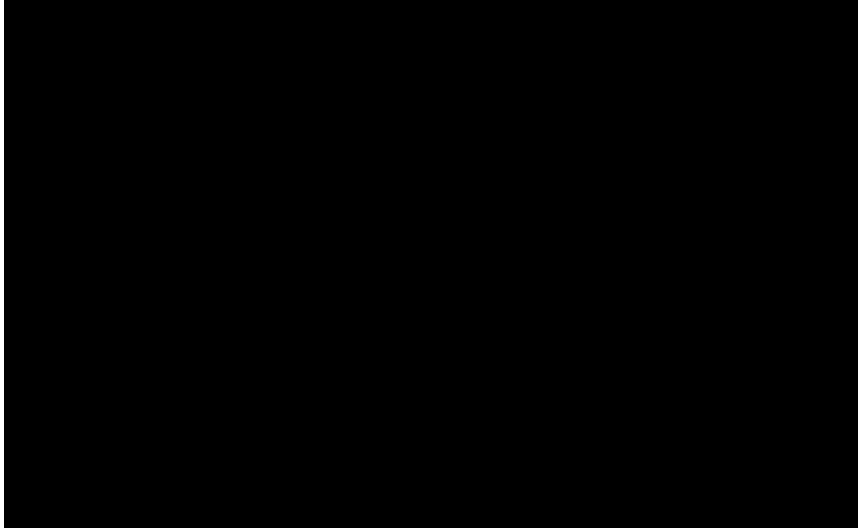


Figure 5: Artist Nicola Birnie working with children in a special school which culminated in a whole school end of year exhibition of work open to family and community.

A few schools are incorporating famous Irish artists, such as Belfast-born [Paul Henry](#), and using his atmospheric depictions of the west of Ireland within the theme of the Irish Famine. Irish art, as an important cultural reference, provides rich opportunities for children to learn about its importance and about the artists who created it.

Brazilian contemporary artist [Beatriz Milhazes](#), who combines cultural references with collage and paint, has been used to inspire children to apply her style in cultural depictions of Northern Ireland, such as the Titanic and Harland and Wolff.

[Giuseppe Arcimboldo's](#) (1573) astonishing fruit and flower portraits have been used to inspire creative portraits informed by the children's learning around healthy eating.

Late 20th and early 21st century artists are being used to a lesser extent. Teachers who use more contemporary artists' work report that they find the children are enthused by the work. It provides scope for the children to engage in discussion, particularly around social issues which are of interest to the children; the graffiti artist [Banksy](#) being a current example.

Other examples of 20th - 21st century artists being used by the schools include graffiti artist, [Keith Haring](#) (d 1990 age 30) and the children completing a pop art project using felt-tips to emulate his technique. [David Hockney's](#) paintings are used as a reference to inform self-portraits and sculptor Anthony Gormley, who created [Angel of the North](#) is used to inspire children to create clay sculptures.

A leader in one of the special schools commented that art develops children's concentration skills and their ability to work independently. Gallery time in the class where the teacher is also an art specialist is where famous paintings are used for discussion with children. Part of the rationale is that it is important for children to have knowledge of the wider world to broaden their experience and understanding.

While children's exposure to famous artists is heavily weighted towards painters, the range of painters the children are being exposed to within the contributing schools is wide and varied and the children expressed interest and enjoyment in learning about them. Some schools are appropriately aiming to share more examples of design and craftwork with the children.

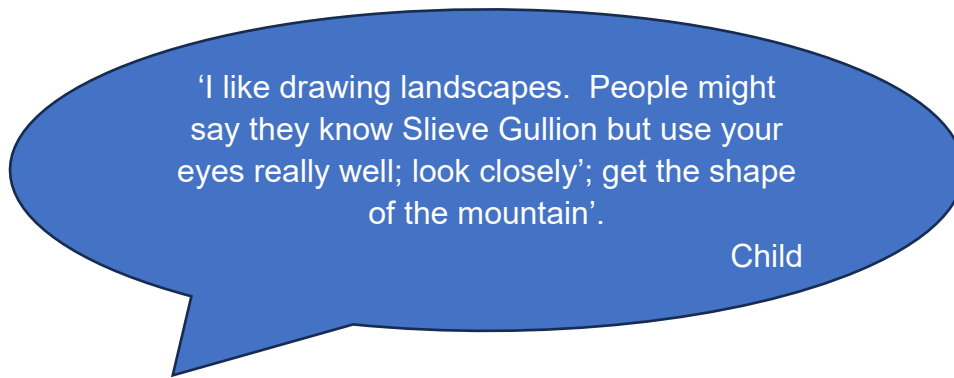
In a majority of the participating schools the children are familiar with the visual language of line, shape, colour, tone, pattern and form and can draw upon it when explaining their intentions in their own work or talking about artists' work.

Children look mostly at the work of painters and display confidence in their own two-dimensional work, using drawing and painting media for mark-making, blending colours, adding tone. Leaders should review regularly the breadth of the art and design curriculum in their school, including the opportunities for children to work in three dimensions and the progression of skills from year to year, to ensure children can confidently progress to KS 3.

In best practice, children recognise and can reflect upon their own progression and know how to improve their work. Some children spoke of how they are encouraged to critically evaluate their own work and that of others which provides them with the opportunity to analyse, interpret and reflect upon artistic concepts.

The locality as a context for learning

A majority of the schools provide children with experiences to explore their locality and record local landmarks in sketchbooks or photographs, such as: the 'Samson and Goliath' cranes at Harland and Wolff, Carrickfergus Castle, Armagh city church spires, the Giants' Causeway, and the Belfast and Derry murals. Sketchbooks and portable digital devices allow children free choice to gather information and provide space for independent thinking and development of ideas. A majority of the teachers recognise the importance of children appreciating their local environment and community and exploring it first-hand lends itself well to the art and design curriculum. Engaging children in these activities emulates the way artists work in real life: researching first, developing their own ideas and then creating.



Several of the participating schools are collaborating with local artists. Some of the schools had well-established connections prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, but leaders report that unfortunately they have been slow to resume.

Artist Alice Rohdich worked with one school near the north coast, to show children how she created illustrations for Dr Martin O’Kane’s book ‘Dee the Little Lifeboat’. The children then used this as inspiration to create their own paintings.

Visits to the ‘Void Gallery’ and ‘Culturlann’ for Celtic art in Derry are providing opportunities for children to review artists’ work. Children visited the Islamic Centre and were inspired by the henna hand art to create their own designs. Such visits inform understanding and appreciation of different cultures and raise awareness of the value of diversity. One leader spoke of the children visiting the ‘Centre for Contemporary Art’ in Derry to experience weaving and film making, and visits to the art and craft village to see Celtic inspired jewellery. These visits help to inform children’s own art making.

Encouraging children to take pride in the art and design within their local community is important. These experiences enable children to see that artists and designers do not belong to the past but are alive and living in their own communities and contributing to it.



Figure 6: Children carrying out research in a gallery as part of their project work.

Learning about design

There is a diverse picture for design across the participating schools. A number of the leaders report that design is underdeveloped in their schools, and children have limited opportunities to develop their design capabilities. One co-ordinator commented that it is challenging for teachers to teach design. The most common experiences children have are designing posters or leaflets. While these are sometimes hand drawn, digital design techniques are becoming more prevalent.

In a small number of the participating schools, design is quite well developed, and children are provided with interesting, planned opportunities to design for a specific purpose. For example: children living at the north coast designed postcards for Tourism NI, which allowed them to consider and then express their preferences for activities to engage in at their locality. Another school has a well-established tradition of the children designing sets and costumes for school performances. Other examples from the schools visited include designing wallpaper, gift bags, crisp packets, shoes and vehicles such as cars and spaceships.

A design project can provide an excellent opportunity for a deeper learning experience for the children. Where children can research, think creatively and problem solve in an independent and sustained manner making their own connections. In one school, a project was inspired by the international [Junk Kouture](#) sustainable fashion competition. The project raised the children's awareness of fashion designing and environmental issues, promoted their creativity, and boosted children's self-esteem. The children across years 1 to 7 worked along with their parents/guardians to design and make highly individual costumes and documented their work with photos. They modelled their designs in a fashion show which was staged on a runway in a public venue to raise funds for the school's eco club. The children had the opportunity to develop a wide range of thinking skills and personal capabilities (TSPC), while deriving immense joy and satisfaction from the project. As a result, the children could consider and discuss confidently important environmental issues. The project involved the whole school community.

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Figure 7: Children developing a wide range of skills through involvement in a whole school creative costume design and performance event. (More on cover of report)

In another example, year 7 children had the opportunity to pitch, during a 'Dragon's Den' type scenario, to the chief executive of an international company about a pop-up toy product they made. The children designed their product, wrote their speech for the pitch and created their own advertisements including the accompanying music. This particular project and approach demonstrate the multidisciplinary nature of design and advertising and the TSPC required. The children's excitement, enthusiasm and satisfaction were palpable.

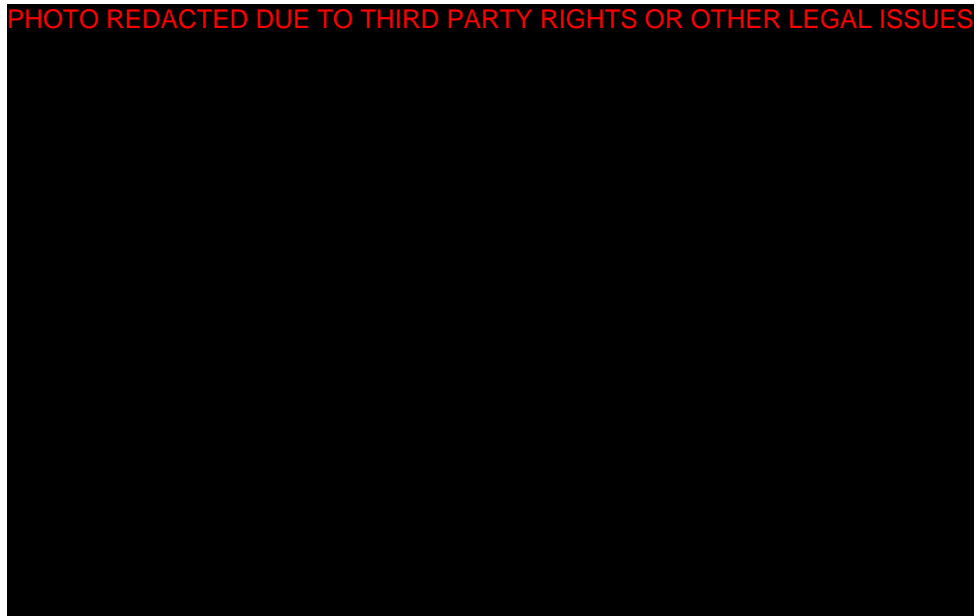


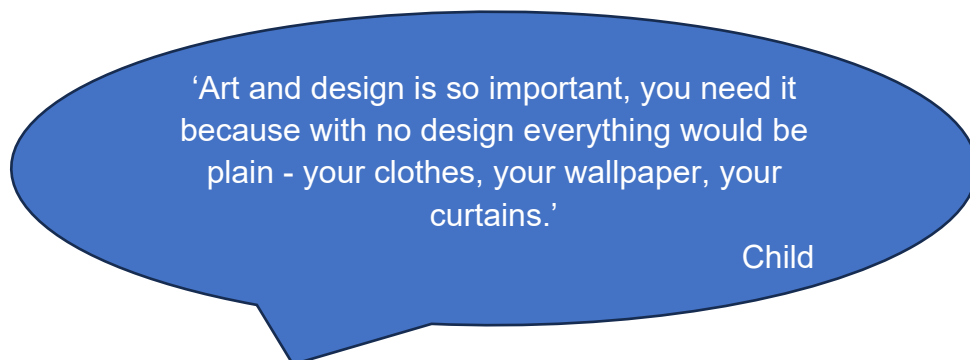
Figure 8: Children creating the music for their advertisements using iPads.



Figure 9: Child creating the storyboard for an advertisement and children presenting their pitch at the Dragon's Den event.

In a small number of the schools, the children enthusiastically discussed the opportunities they have to widen their experiences of design by participating in awards and competitions, such as [Young Enterprise NI](#) business masterclass, developing creativity and innovation. In all of these examples, the children value deeper learning opportunities to be creative and develop their own ideas over a period of time, taking them to a conclusion of which they can be proud. Through the design and business process they were developing the skills of communication, using mathematics (particularly developing financial capability) and using ICT, skills that are integral to working in a design field.

It is beneficial for learners when school leaders are aware of the importance of teaching design and where feasible, make connections with the creative industries. For example, through establishing links with local industries and setting design tasks that have connections to the real world. In discussions with inspectors, children in some of the schools can articulate clearly examples of design within architecture, gardens, clothes, henna tattoos and haircuts. Children report that, 'Design is needed because not everything we use is perfect.' They were able to demonstrate some awareness of employment opportunities involving design.



Digital art and design

Despite digital being the fastest growing medium in art and design, most of the art and design co-ordinators who participated, assume it is the remit of the ICT co-ordinator. Only a few schools recognise the specific digital dimension to art and design.

Digital skills are integral to design processes, particularly in industry, while digital art is a genre in its own right, on a par with painting or photography. Upon reflection almost all leaders acknowledge that they have further work to do in this area.

One principal reported that while digital art is represented in every year group, it is not referenced in the school scheme for art and design, as it hasn't been recently reviewed. The leader has already identified the need to embed digital art and design in the school's schemes and has allocated time for staff to take this forward.

Children have the advantage of already being familiar with the use of digital equipment. Some schools are exploring different digital resources during art lessons, for example: editing photographs, making i Movies, incorporating music, using a green screen and creating art on the interactive whiteboard.

One group of year 7 children have experience of using Artificial Intelligence (AI) with Adobe to create pictures and posters. As a result, they have a greater understanding of and talk confidently about the positives and negatives of using AI.



Figure 10: Children experience independent working and a deep connection to their learning, while developing a wide range of skills though working in film and animation.

Progress has been made in some schools to develop film and animation through working with a range of external learning centres. In one example, year 5 children engaged in a programme with an arts-based organisation to develop film, animation and digital art and create props and models in clay using 'Whitehead Train Museum' as the context.

In the schools visited the responsibility for digital art and design is largely falling within the remit of the ICT co-ordinator. Given the overlap that exists between digital art and design and ICT, it would be appropriate for leadership to encourage art and design and ICT co-ordinators to work closely together to develop children's creative expertise in this field.

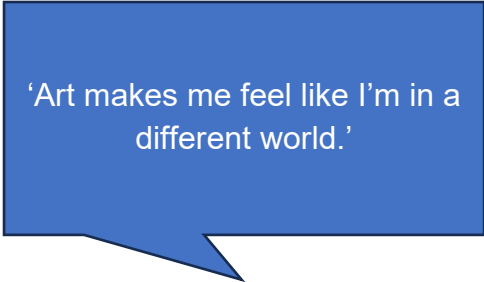
Children's wellbeing

The benefits for children's mental health and wellbeing from engaging with the arts, whilst always recognised, have become very apparent since the Covid-19 pandemic. Art therapy provided using the Emotional Health and Wellbeing funding and Engage 1 and 2 funding from the Department of Education was highly valued and some schools are continuing to use art therapy approaches despite the funding coming to an end. Leaders report that some children in their schools who were not able to access support through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and who were really struggling with issues such as bereavement, have been helped by art therapy.


One of the special schools has developed its own creative arts programme using art therapy techniques to build relationships, develop attention skills and help support behaviour management. The leader reports the positive impact of the programme on children's ability to return to class, manage their emotions, engage in activities and express their needs.

Examples in the participating schools illustrated that engaging in art and design activities has relevance to the development of the emotion-based or affective domain. The affective domain, outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives is associated with developing values, feelings, emotions and attitudes that influence learning and behaviour.

During all the school visits, the children spoke very positively about how participating in art and design activities helps to enhance and improve their emotional wellbeing. They articulate, with enthusiasm, the valuable role creative expression plays in their lives, personal development and growth. Below are some of the comments that children made during visits to their school.



'Art makes me feel like I'm in a different world.'



'I enjoy expressing myself through art; I feel free to be creative.'



Most of the children consider art and design to be important to their overall emotional health and wellbeing. The children report that doing art 'makes you feel less stressed and happy'.

Leaders report that there are clear benefits of art and design helping to improve the children's wellbeing, for example: building confidence, self-esteem, and reducing anxiety and stress levels. In addition, some leaders report that art and design is an excellent medium for children with verbal difficulties to convey without words their knowledge and understanding, emotions, experiences, and perspectives. For example: 'Giving them another tool to deal with their emotions.' Art and design can help children to express their thoughts and feelings at difficult times, such as bereavement. One child spoke very proudly of the portrait she painted of her much-loved grandfather who passed away, and it has been displayed by her teacher in the school.

In some schools, teachers are using famous paintings as a stimulus to help the children explore emotions through discussions, for example, using one of Picasso's [Weeping Woman](#) paintings (1937). Art activities featured strongly during mental health week including wall displays featuring the children's artwork. A visit to the beach by one school led to children creating their own watercolour paintings to express their emotions. In another school, children created mindfulness portraits, painting half of their face realistically and the other half expressing their thoughts and feelings.

In a small number of schools, the children expressed their enjoyment of listening to music, when participating in art lessons, which helped them to relax and enhanced their creativity. 'I'm always happy and relaxed doing art and sometimes the teacher plays music and I just zone out.'

On occasions some children do find art and design difficult, ‘Sometimes I feel frustrated if my art isn’t going well.’ However, others persevere and recognise that, ‘Not everything will be perfect, failure is the first step to success’.

Building a community of learning

Through working with local artists, galleries, craft centres, parents, and business, schools are developing authentic communities of learning. Leaders have demonstrated initiative and imagination to provide opportunities that infuse art and design meaningfully throughout the curriculum. When co-ordinators are empowered by senior leaders to develop progression and skills in art and design, staff and children greatly benefit.

Building teacher confidence and expertise is something leaders are very aware of through audits of staff needs. Several of the participating leaders suggested that it would be beneficial for schools to work together in clusters to build communities of learning for art and design, for the benefit of all the children. This would be a very important step forward. It would be helpful if DE and the EA gave support to facilitating this. It would align well with the [Learning Leaders – Teacher Professional Learning Strategy](#) which advocates building professional learning communities which support and encourage closer collaboration between practitioners, schools, school clusters and area learning communities in order to drive improvement.

With limited opportunities for professional development in art and design, some teachers are using internet videos of step-by-step lessons with children, and/or downloadable lesson plans. While it is positive to see teachers seeking their own professional development in art and design, due diligence needs to be applied to pedagogy, to ensure these are not at variance with the NIC. Schools should facilitate children’s own research and development of ideas, and provide lessons that are part of a wider curriculum in the school to fulfil the NIC requirements.

Key challenges going forward

Leaders reported challenges that were common across the participating schools.

Planning for progression and achieving curricular breadth are the key challenges for the majority of schools. For most of the leaders, long-term planning has not been reviewed or updated in a long time. In a small number of the schools, the co-ordinators were not sure if all the teachers were teaching art and design. Industrial action within schools and the Covid-19 pandemic were cited as challenges to monitoring and evaluation of and development within the area of art and design.

Most of the schools cite insufficient funds for art and design as a challenge. Leaders are inventive in recycling or sourcing basic materials such as paper and card cheaply, but other consumables such as clay or pastels can be in short supply. Some of the schools are unable to replenish equipment such as printing rollers or clay tools. A very small number of schools report they are adequately resourced for art and design.

Only a few of the schools recognise the value of children's books about artists' lives and the different genres of art and design. There is an abundance of children's books about art and design now available which also relate well to learning in other areas of the curriculum. Such resources importantly also enable children with a passion for art to identify with others like themselves.

Children's access to natural clay is very limited. Self-hardening clay is expensive and the clay of choice for schools, but school-quality buff clay which is entirely natural is inexpensive, more malleable to work with and can be easily sourced in Northern Ireland. One of the senior leaders reported that only one class per year has the opportunity to use clay, which impacts on progression of skills. Many of the children said that clay was something they would really like to use more often. 'When you touch clay, you feel like you're in heaven.' One of the special school leaders reported that clay provides a 'tactile, sensory experience that a lot of the children crave, and is a great medium for the visually impaired'.

Several of the leaders report that it is a challenge to ensure that there is time for art and design within the curriculum. This is a serious barrier to learning and impacts on delivering the full curriculum statutory requirements. One leader commented that lack of time provided for well-planned, quality art and design impacts negatively on children developing their own individual creativity and artistic potential. Given the benefits of art and design to children's education and personal development, it is vital that time is provided for children to have access to well-planned learning experiences. Embedding authentic art and design experiences in meaningful projects for children, may be a way to find the time needed. Challenging children to think and express themselves can only be positive for their education.

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Figure 12: Children enjoy using clay along with leaves, seeds and plants to make nature-inspired art.

Conclusion

The leaders, teachers and children in the primary and special schools who participated in this review have provided many useful insights for educators to reflect on, from digital art and design to children’s wellbeing. Where leaders and teachers are innovative and creative in facilitating interesting learning opportunities, it contributes significantly to promoting children’s creativity and enjoyment of learning.

All of the school leaders have two striking features in common. They know and understand that art and design is an essential component of their children’s education and, they have the vision and determination to optimise the value of the learning experiences in art and design for their learners.

Appendix A: Resources

[The Arts Council of Northern Ireland](#) operates a free art lending scheme for schools. Participating schools can choose and exhibit works from [the Arts Council of NI Contemporary Art Collection](#). A selection of the works can be viewed on [artuk.org](#)

'Association for Art and Design Education NI' (AADE) is a NI charity that promotes art and design in primary and post-primary schools. It organises art and design teacher workshops and provides a platform for teachers of art and design to communicate and share practice in schools.

[Progression Pathways – The Arts](#) The CCEA 'Progression Pathways – The Arts' is an integral resource to support teachers in their planning for an authentic curriculum that has breadth, depth and enables children to progress into post primary with the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding. Pages 1-15 Art and Design


[The National Society for Education in Art and Design](#) (NSEAD), provides: an online platform for teachers to share practice, access resources and research, and professional development opportunities.

[The SEND Research Report](#) (2016) explores arts and cultural provision for Special Educational Needs Learners in London's special schools.

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