

AccessArt Response to the Ofsted Curriculum Review for Art & Design 2023

On the 22nd February 2023 Ofsted launched the [Curriculum Review for Art & Design](#). AccessArt was at the launch, and the following is our response to the document.

Our aim is not to summarise the document (pls see the end for a link to a summary) and we do not cover all aspects. Instead, our aim is to comment and signpost:

- To draw teachers' attention to certain key messages.
- Suggest different ways of thinking which we feel add rigour and richness to the conversations between Ofsted, the National Curriculum, and schools, and which may help inform future Curriculum content.
- Signpost key articles and resources which we think teachers will find useful.

We will try to keep our comments short to avoid overload.

The Aims of the Ofsted Curriculum Review

It was stressed at the launch:

- That teachers should remember that the Reviews are not a checklist. Schools do not have to read the contents with a checklist mentality.
- For schools or inspectors – the research reviews “share guiding principles”
- “There is no single way to provide a high-quality education in the subject.”
- The Reviews share ideas (based upon research) “about what high quality education might* look like, to allow a school to “move step by step towards expertise.”

*Pls note use of the word “might.”

In addition, AccessArt would like to remind Primary teachers in particular that the Review speaks to all key stages – which means that many of the examples within the Review are aimed at contexts other than primary.

The “Freedoms”

The Review has several sections which art educators should take reassurance from, so let’s start with these areas. We are calling them the “freedoms” to help teachers (and SLT) understand

the positive choices available to you which the review highlights. If, as a school, you feel constricted or concerned about what you “should” be doing, then read these points to understand just how much freedom you really have.

What to Teach

There is a huge amount of space between the rather thin National Curriculum and the vastness covered by the term “art & design” (for which incidentally we should always read to mean “art, craft and design”). The report states:

“A school art curriculum is unlikely to be able to cover all the areas of making in sufficient depth for pupils to engage meaningfully with them.

Therefore, subject leaders and curriculum designers need to choose which areas to include.”

It goes on to outline the twelve “areas of making”:

“drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, ceramics, creative craft, collage, textiles, photography and lens-based media, installation and site-specific work, digital and new media, design and graphic design

Of these areas of making, 3 (drawing, painting and sculpture) are specified in the national curriculum. The national curriculum also refers to ‘other art, craft and design techniques’.”

Schools should be mindful that Ofsted understands that schools cannot cover all areas in a meaningful way. The report gives examples of how and why a school may make choices which work for them:

“Subject leaders and curriculum designers should have a sound rationale for why the combination of areas of making they include in the curriculum is cumulatively sufficient (together these areas provide pupils with a coherent understanding of art). They will need to have a rationale for which areas of making they teach and revisit over time, and which areas they will not teach. This prevents the art curriculum from collapsing into a superficial tour of different areas of making. Once subject leaders and curriculum designers have made these choices, they can broaden the curriculum by exploring in detail the various ways that artists, craft-makers and designers have expressed these areas of making.”

And we are pleased to see Ofsted embrace:

“Divergent and convergent end points in the curriculum.”

AccessArt advises:

- Make use of this autonomy. Be proud of the things which make your school community unique and explore them in your art curriculum.

Know why you are making your curriculum choices, and be excited by how you can then deliver a rich offering.

- Seek advice from experts in the field to help you plan a curriculum which is relevant to, and appropriate for, your school, and meets the needs of the National Curriculum.

The “Dangers”

There are a few sections in the report which are of concern. We explain which and why below.

Inexperienced Teachers Might See Non-Negotiables In Negotiables

It was stated at the launch that teachers should not treat the review as a “tick list”, however there are paragraphs in the review which we feel inexperienced or non-specialist teachers (in the absence of other training or knowledge) *may* read as being a list of elements which they should be addressing:

“In drawing: concepts such as line, shape and form; the use of different media such as pencil, ink or pastels; technical terms and phrases, such as ‘observational drawing,’ ‘outer edges’ and ‘where lines intersect’, which help pupils to draw what they are seeing, rather than what they imagine they see; and drawing media other than pencils, brushes and pens, such as wire or string”

This is not necessarily the case, and we would urge teachers *not* to read these lists looking for clues as to what they should be covering. Instead focus upon delivering a [rich, broad, balanced curriculum](#) which suits your school.

Misplaced Value Judgements

The [National Curriculum](#) states that children should be taught to:

“become proficient in drawing, painting, sculpture and other art, craft and design techniques”

AccessArt would argue that the word “proficient” in this context carries a debateable value judgement – what do we mean by “proficient” and how far is our subject understanding of the word influenced by our Western perspective as to what makes art “good”. We assert that this is one of the many areas which needs to be revisited in any future National Curriculum.

Whilst it is not the job of the Curriculum Review to challenge National Curriculum content, we are concerned that this value judgement is potentially reinforced through the use of language in the review which implies there is a right or wrong way to approach an area:

“In sculpture, pupils learn the meaning of shape and form”

(Implying there is a specific “meaning of shape”

which children learn towards...)

“In drawing, pupils learn drawing-specific meanings for line, colour, form and shape (receptive expertise), and how to create lines using pencils, brushes, pens, wires or string.”

(Implying there are specific meanings for form, and there is a right or wrong way to create lines...)

The emphasis is subtle and would be missed by many teachers. Again, for specialist or more experienced teachers this will not be an issue; but for less experienced teachers we believe the language used in the Review does not help build understanding of when and where we are making value judgements based upon our own (often very limited) understanding. Ofsted's grip on needing to ensure teachers “teach” something which is “measurable” potentially restricts understanding of what makes great art teaching and learning.

AccessArt advises teachers to:

- Think carefully about the value judgements you might be bringing to the classroom.
- Widen your own perception of how broad the definition of “skills” might be.
- Try replacing the word “learn” for the word “explore” in the “Practical Knowledge” section of the Review and see how it might

change the way we perceive the opportunities we can give to pupils.

The Emphasis on Sequencing

The emphasis on sequencing remains. Whilst this can be interpreted in many different ways, AccessArt is concerned that the language used around sequencing can be interpreted by teachers as to imply there is a wrong and right way to sequence delivery of elements, according to age or development. Examples include:

“Once pupils have learned the components of drawing, they can gain further knowledge and explore creative possibilities.”

“To build their control and confidence, they may practise adding and removing washes and glaze with one type of tool (such as a brush) until that technique is secure. They then try a range of tools (such as adding or removing water with a sponge, or tissue). Next, they may practise mixing primary colours by overlaying washes.”

AccessArt does not agree with the notion of set sequencing – the idea that a child can't progress to x until y is secure. Art is too rich, broad and complex and working in this way often means that pupils are prevented from discovering their strengths and skills. An approach too fixated on learning endpoints, where a child progresses along a linear journey, are most often not conducive to

enabling a child to fulfil their potential, and are often governed by misplaced value judgements. An ongoing point for discussion and debate... Not all art is a craft or made up of technical skills.

The “Missed Opportunities”

Remembering the aim of the Review is to share ideas *“about what high quality education might look like, to allow a school to “move step by step towards expertise”,*” then we feel there are some key aspects of an excellent art education missing from the content:

Diversity

The Review makes only brief mention of diversity. It would have been nice to see the importance of the accepted definition of diversity highlighted and applied in its totality.

In addition, the Review states:

“The national curriculum states that pupils should know about great artists, craft-makers and designers.”

Ofsted could have helped bring this statement in line with more current thinking about the kinds of artists it is valuable for pupils to study – including artists, craftspeople and designers who are perhaps local to a school or who might be otherwise relevant to pupils (again there is an outdated value judgement being implied by the word

“great”).

Disciplines

Ofsted shares the “12 areas of making” defined by NSEAD (see above).

AccessArt thinks it might be useful to see a remapping of these areas to help teachers see the potential breadth of activity covered by art, craft and design, and the Review would have been a great opportunity for Ofsted to help teachers expand upon their knowledge in this area.

In particular AccessArt would like to see:

- Sketchbooks to be acknowledged as an entity which helps underpin development in all other creative areas.
- “Design and graphic design” remapped, with disciplines like architecture, set design and fashion overtly stated.
- Illustration added, as a useful discipline to connect understanding in literature, drama and art.

Forms of Knowledge & Reasons for Learning

The National Curriculum for Art & Design, and the Curriculum Review focus on *learning about art*.

“Our review considers the nature of an art curriculum that achieves the aims of the national

curriculum. We do not explore wider ideas about the indirect uses or benefits of art education, such as the idea of art as a 'playground for experimentation' or as a way of promoting self-esteem and well-being. These areas of research may be valuable, but they are beyond the scope of this discussion about what pupils learn in art."

In prior conversations with Ofsted, whilst they recognise the learning which takes place *through art*, we do not feel they place value on this (within the Curriculum). Perhaps this was because this was harder to map, and therefore harder to make sure the same opportunities were offered to all pupils, and therefore harder to assess. (For example through making sculpture, one child may build greater oracy skills, whilst another may improve dexterity skills and yet another may be ignited by the idea that they can create objects which might change the world).

However AccessArt feels this is an oversight, and that any new curriculum should embrace learning through art, as well as learning about art (the two are linked).

Whilst the current National Curriculum does not talk about learning through art, AccessArt does feel there was an opportunity in the review for Ofsted to be brave, and look to the benefits of learning through art, for individuals, the society and the economy and what kind of teaching needs to take place to enable this kind of learning to be

valued. AccessArt does not feel it is enough to mention this instead in any kind of Personal Development agenda, when it is so central to the understanding, making and appreciation of art.

We would also make a plea for Ofsted to embrace softer kinds of knowledge (such as the tacit knowledge mentioned briefly in the report, and self-knowledge) and even acknowledge that there is huge value in creating an arena for pupils to operate sometimes in an area where knowledge is only to be discovered through a process (i.e. feeling comfortable working in the area of “unknowledge”, as artists often do). All of which would give teachers permission to embrace and celebrate all that is exciting, brave and empowering when teaching art.

Let’s Acknowledge the Debate about Knowledge...

In this review Ofsted has chosen to define knowledge as being Practical, Theoretical or Disciplinary*. Many schools are wrestling with knowledge that might be “Substantive or Disciplinary”, or figuring out how they can separate skills from knowledge.

AccessArt has tried to widen the debate about knowledge in previous [posts](#), and we think it is fair to say that how we think about knowledge in art (and in many subjects) is a hotly debated area.

It is not our intention here to debate this further, but we would like to acknowledge to teachers:

- That if you are struggling with these terms, and in deciding what types of knowledge lies where, you are not alone. Academics and experts are arguing over best approaches and meanings, so it is a big ask to expect non-specialists to have this sorted.
- It is a fluid area. Language, definitions, meanings and applications change often.

That said, we do think the definitions and examples provided in the Curriculum Review for the three kinds of knowledge are helpful. What isn't so helpful is expecting teachers to be able to devise a curriculum which meets the needs described, given lack of training, specialism, resources and time etc. We hope the [AccessArt Primary Art Curriculum](#) gives schools both a basis for exploration plus helps build staff experience and confidence so schools can grow towards this.

**Please note that Ofsted write: "We do not expect schools to use this terminology."*

The "Icky Bits"

"Getting Better"

The Review cites that pupils should *"get better"*

at art. AccessArt doesn't think this choice of phrase is helpful, and feeds into misconceptions about why we study art and how we make value judgements (above).

AccessArt advises:

- A more considered phrase *might* be “to deepen their experience, understanding and execution of...” We are certain there is an interesting debate to be had about this.

The “Sit-Up SLT” Bits

Many pressures on teachers and on the subject area come not from Ofsted but from Senior Leadership Teams often due to time, money, resourcing, experience etc). The Review offers key advice which AccessArt welcomes and which should encourage schools to see the importance of finding time and resources for art in school (including training for teachers):

“A report has highlighted a decline in both the quality and quantity of art education in primary schools. There may be a range of reasons for this, including:

- *a decline in real-terms funding, so pupils have less access to specialist resources and support*
- *schools focus more on core subjects and less on foundation subjects*
- *primary teachers lack the skills, training and*

experience to teach a high-quality art curriculum”

“An art curriculum that significantly limits the amount of time given to the subject is unlikely to benefit pupils.”

“However, it is important for subject leaders and curriculum planners to recognise that practice needs to be ‘built in’ to the curriculum.”

“Do leaders’ actions support art and design through subject-specificity?”

“Do leaders prioritise art and design sufficiently?”

“Second, they can promote or hinder high-quality art and design through the extent to which they develop teachers’ professional knowledge about the subject. This is important, especially given the extent to which choices about the content of the art curriculum depend on teachers’ discretion and expertise.”

Summary and Further Information

The Art & Design Curriculum Report is due later this year (2023).

You can find the [Curriculum Review in Art & Design here](#) and a [useful summary documents here](#).

You can find a transcript of the [speech given by Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman](#), at the

launch of the art and design research review at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, February 2023 [here](#).

You can find the [AccessArt Primary Art Curriculum here](#) – designed to help schools deliver a flexible, relevant, rich and broad curriculum for all pupils.

We would like to thank the thousands of teachers who have chosen to allow AccessArt to help guide their practice. The evidence coming back from schools is impressive and we hope there will be an opportunity for us to share this body of evidence with Ofsted, Curriculum advisors, and other Subject Associations and experts in the field, to help inform future curriculum development.

The Review probably does little to alleviate many teachers fear about what they should or shouldn't be doing. The guidance it gives is welcome but there is a great need for subject associations (of which AccessArt is one) and other organisations to help schools and teachers feel better equipped (and therefore less scared) through [training and advice](#).

Paula Briggs

CEO & Creative Director AccessArt 2023

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