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PLEASE CITE THIS REPORT AS FOLLOWS:

As we transform and reshape the manner in which schools enable teachers to continue to learn, practitioner research occupies an increasingly central place in the culture of the school. By engaging with the theories and ideas of academics, schools can better understand the effectiveness of all that they do and feel a greater sense of empowerment as they reform pedagogy and grasp the mantle of professional knowledge creation.

The Royal Greenwich Teaching School Alliance is committed to sponsoring practitioner research across the authority so that our collective professional capital is enhanced through the investigation and exploration of genuine questions that are centred on effective pedagogy and learning. The Alliance is focused on bringing the very best national and international speakers into Greenwich to facilitate debate and engagement of highest standard whilst, at the same time, nurturing home-grown researchers who contribute to the growing body of knowledge that enables the profession to sustain itself.

Every teacher is a researcher. We are committed to supporting them in sharing their understanding with the wider professional community for the benefit of all learners.

John Camp
Executive Headteacher
RGTSA

At a time when many in education are keen to emphasise that which divides us, there is in many contexts a perceived and growing distance between classroom teaching and academia. Research and development within the RGTSA, by contrast, is built on our rich collaboration with the University of Greenwich, which provides expert challenge for teacher-researchers as they strive to improve their practice.

This process of collaborative enquiry and structured peer support allows teachers in Greenwich to analyse and reflect on educational theory and research evidence in order to explore and challenge their own beliefs and assumptions, to explicitly discuss how to translate new ideas within their practice, and to implement what they have learned by experimenting in the classroom.

This opportunity to explore why things do and don’t ‘work’, informed by specialist advisers and external expertise, is without doubt a most powerful form of teacher development.

Jon Curtis-Brignell
Research & Development Lead
RGTSA
This year, with my colleague, Dr Ana Cabral from the University of Greenwich I have had the privilege of working with a group of talented teachers and a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) from schools within the Alliance who were all interested to study their own practice in order to enrich the learning of the children they teach.

Ana and I wanted to introduce the group to action research. The classic work by Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe action research as being about:

- the improvement of practice;
- the improvement of the understanding of practice;
- the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place.

It was important to us that the teachers and LSAs were as systematic as possible about the way they undertook their investigations. Teachers and LSAs are busy people and the degree to which they applied the methodology varied. The group consisted of those from a range of academic backgrounds and experiences. We discussed their aims – constructing research questions or identifying the problem they wished to solve. We introduced literature that was relevant to the focus of their study. We worked on the best ways of collecting data to inform their actions and we talked about the ethical issues of being an ‘insider-researcher’ and how to address them.

We met with the group at least three times during a term and on a number of occasions we went to schools or had telephones conversations when teachers were too busy to attend. The meetings with the teachers and LSAs were fascinating. The combination of staff from secondary and primary led to exciting and fruitful professional conversations. Everyone recognised how pedagogy associated with each phase challenged and enriched the other. In some cases, the teachers invited each other into their classes and team teaching took place as a result, bringing forth further rich professional discussions. Research has informed us that the most effective forms of continuing professional development (CPD) (BERA/RSA 2014) involve:

- the use of specialist advisors and external experts
- collaborative enquiry and structured peer support
- the opportunity to explore why things do and don’t ‘work’
- the exploration and challenging of teachers own beliefs and assumptions (p. 25 – 27).

‘All the research indicates that enquiry-orientated learning is not a quick-fix, but needs to be a sustained over time to ensure that learning (for both teachers and pupils) actually takes place’. (BERA/RCA 2014: 26)

The RGTSA wants to make this form of teacher-led inquiry part of the practice in their schools. We hope to continue with these powerful projects in the coming years.

In this document we provide the reports from the group that describe their work. They document the processes with which they were engaged. In most cases they collected information from their own surveys or interviews and/or from reading literature in the area. They then describe the action they felt to be appropriate and conclude with a brief evaluation of the success of their projects. They all demonstrate their hard work and determination. We would like to extend our thanks to all the teachers and LSAs and the children involved and especially to Jon Curtis-Brignell who helped facilitate the projects.
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1 | WHAT COULD A STRUCTURED PEDAGOGY FOR DRAWING LOOK LIKE?

Deborah Gamble
Eglinton Primary School

1 | INTRODUCTION

I currently work in a two form entry Primary School and Early Years Centre. The school geographic involves two large estates where many children enter the Early Years Centre with an attainment which is below average. The school is based in a pocket of social deprivation and it experiences a high mobility, due to two contributory factors: army families being relocated every few years and other families being rehoused off of the estates, due to various reasons.

I am a Reception class teacher who has worked at the school for over ten years, in two main capacities: a Children’s Centre Coordinator and an Early Years Teacher. I have over 20 years’ experience of working in the Early Years field and I am fortunate to have gained valuable experience of working with and knowledge of caring and educating children aged 0 – 5 years.

My piece of action research took place within my Reception Class and focussed on motivating a small group of six boys, aged four/five years old, to engage in mark making, actively write more independently and develop a more positive approach to the subject, as a whole. Every day the boys would encounter writing opportunities within their daily routine and provision, however it was evident from observations that the boys were much more reluctant to mark make/write, than their peers and two of the boys in particular had adopted a negative ‘I cannot do it!’ attitude and at every encounter would refuse to write or mark make. Therefore, it was my aim to attempt to motivate the boys and promote mark make/writing to be fun and purposeful, with the ambition to tackle the reluctance and overhaul the ‘cannot do it’ attitude.

For the purpose of this piece of work the two data collection techniques I used were observations and sampling. These tools would allow me to interrelate with the participants and gain the relevant information I required. I carried out observations over a period of six weeks as part of reviewing my current practice and provision, from October – December 2016. Following this, I implemented changes to the environment and my practice over a period of another six weeks, January – February 2017. During this stage I took notes and monitored the impact the changes had on all those involved. In addition to this, I took writing samples from each child who was involved. The sampling enabled me to have visual representation of the boys progress, as most of them went from making some type of marks to forming all individual letters and/or words and simple sentences. Ultimately, as the changes took place within the Reception class provision and involved new equipment being introduced, the practice of all practitioners including myself had opportunities to continuously evolve and develop the children’s interests in mark making/writing beyond when I had completed the piece of research. This was due to the equipment remaining and the children’s confidence and interest continuing to grow.
2 | METHODOLOGY

My piece of work adopted the action research approach. Carr and Kemmis (1986) define action research as the improvement of practice, where practitioners develop a better understanding of practice and ultimately improve the situation where the practice takes place. However, McNiff (2010) simplifies action research to be about two things; “action (what you do) and research (how you learn about and explain what you do)” (McNiff 2010, p.12). As all action research take on different stages, I implemented the cyclical stages approach, as illustrated in figure 1:

![The action research cycle](image)

Figure 1 - The action research cycle (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011)

My work followed and reflected this cycle, Wicks et al (2008) states that pieces of action research that follow an action research cycle can be perceived as a ‘living enquiry’ due to the fact of how real life experiences underpin each completed piece. As my piece of action research focussed on motivating reception aged boys to engage in writing it fell into Wicks (2008) perception as the enquiry was very much ‘live’ and involved all things that were ‘living’.

As a researcher you are aware that it involves asking questions and searching for information and answers to questions that arise. Depending on the questions that occur and the research approach we adopt, ultimately may influence the research paradigm that we use (Mukherji and Albon 2010). There are various paradigms, some of which take a scientific approach, however as my research is small scale and involve how people interrelate; it falls into the interpretative paradigm (Thomas 2009).

Ethics

Before beginning my piece of action research, I met with my head of school and line manager to explain my project proposal and obtain consent to carry out a small piece of research. To ensure the confidentiality of the setting and children involved, I have chosen not to name these within my project. As children were the main participants within my research, I gained consent from each child’s parent. Even though I gained consent from the children’s parents, the children voluntarily took part in the research, by participating in the activities or not – nothing was compulsory (BERA 2011). Although my colleagues did not actively take part in my piece of action research, I still regularly updated them with my progress and share my actions with them.
3. **Area of Interest**

Since joining the teaching profession I have always known there to be a concern around boys’ achievement in literacy. As illustrated in the UKLA research project (2004) historically government test results have exemplified a continuing gap between boys’ and girls’ achievement in literacy. Although the teaching profession and practice is ever evolving for the better, this gap, even-though narrowing, is still present and as a teacher, I am aware of within my every day practice. This was where my concern arose from. On a daily basis the boys in my reception class were experiencing daily phonics sessions, where they had opportunities to write sounds, words and sentences. As well as experiencing a rich environment where they had ample opportunity to mark make and/or write, the boys where very reluctant and became disengaged quickly. As stated by Primary National Strategy (2007, p.5) “The qualities and skills that are most valued by schools, the ability to...represent ideas on paper, are often the very aspects of learning that boys find the most difficult.” Therefore I felt that it would be beneficial to reflect on my practice and implement a small change in anticipation that it would motivate the boys to write more independently.

4. **Collecting Information to Inform the Action**

By carrying out observations sporadically over a six week period, it enabled me to build a picture of what writing/mark making the boys where engaging in, if at all any. By carrying out observations, it was less intrusive, as the boys perceived it as every day practice, as all practitioners were expected to do this as part of tracking the children’s progress. Understandably the disadvantages of carrying out the observations were that I might not have obtained any, if the boys did not participate in any writing / mark making. In addition to this, the boys’ behaviour could have quickly changed if they became aware or uncomfortable that I was observing them.

In addition to the observations, I took samples of the boys writing when I began the piece of research during and at the end of the project. This enabled me to visually see a natural progression in the boys writing whilst the research was executed. However in one situation where one participant did not mark/make or write, I could not measure whether the changes I put in place had a positive impact on him at all because I had no evidence at all to measure this.

5. **Action**

Whilst carrying out my observations, I monitored during specific times of the day, how often and who used the writing area, whether it be a boy or a girl. On this occasion the writing area looked like this, see figure 2:

![Figure 2 - Writing Area in the Reception Class before the action research was executed.](image_url)
Although the writing area appeared to be inviting and catered for every opportunity of mark making / writing from chalks and chalkboards, to designing a card and writing a letter, my observations clearly demonstrated that the area was used more by girls throughout the day than boys. Therefore with this in mind, I discussed my concerns with my colleagues and we all agreed that I could develop the writing area to incorporate a subject and/or focus that would interest and hopefully engage the boys to use it more and eventually mark make and write more voluntarily and in their everyday play.

As I was fortunate enough to have good relations with all of the boys involved in the action research, over a period of several months I had gained valuable knowledge about the subjects and objects that excited them and ultimately motivated them. Based on this fact, I chose to focus on the subject of superheroes, and introduce and use this as the main motivational tool. By taking this approach, Arthur (2000) illustrates that many educational settings ensure that young children's literacy experiences and texts are predominately paper based and exclude popular media culture such as comics, advertising texts and magazines. However on this occasion, I embraced popular culture and set about introducing it in to the setting in a fun and exciting manner, in the anticipation that it would engage and motivate the boys in a positive way.

Thankfully after explaining my ideas to my colleagues, they happily accepted this approach and supported the implementation of using the popular culture of images of comic characters; Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, Hulk, Batman, Spiderman and Superman, within the provision and as a part of implementing the small change to motivate the boys to mark make and write more spontaneously.

Following these discussions, in the first instance I decided to change the main board in the writing area and incorporate superheroes on a grand scale. So I purchased some ‘Marvel 5’ wallpaper and backed the board with this. Once this had been completed, I provided different methods to mark make / write such as a large flip chart, chalk boards, magnetic boards and white boards (See figure 3).

![Figure 3 - Large interactive writing board incorporating ‘Marvel 5’ wallpaper. Titled “Are you a super writer?”](image)

To ensure that the boys remained immersed in superheroes, I also incorporated another display to reflect the ‘Incredible Hulk’ which enabled the practitioners to display and celebrate children’s work on a regular basis. The ‘Incredible Hulk’ display was illustrated like this, see figure 4.
As I executed this action over the weekend, on the following Monday morning, to ensure I delivered the change with an ‘wow’ factor and hopefully with the encouragement that the boys required to want to access the writing area straight away, I also included four superhero capes and masks (see figure 5).

By incorporating the masks and capes, I planned to execute a focus activity in the writing area where the child involved had to engage in the activity to become a ‘super writer’ therefore enabling me to display their work on the ‘Incredible Hulk’ display over the coming weeks.

Once the area had been set up, the children arrived on Monday morning to see the writing area reflect the superhero theme. Within the first ten minutes of arriving, several children had commented on the area and appeared very keen in wanting to explore and investigate the zone urgently and with eager anticipation.

Fortunately when beginning the writing activity, due to their natural curiosity I was instantly surrounded by a number of children, which included five of the six boys, I had identified to be a part of action research. Again, the sixth boy just stood just beyond the writing area, observing what was occurring. Due to number of chairs available I chose six children to ‘have a go’ at the
activity, whilst asking the remaining children to come back shortly. Once the first six children had completed their piece of work, they had the opportunity to sport a superhero cape and masks, in which they did immediately. Within the first hour of the activity being launched inside the writing area, five of the six boys from my action group had produced some form of writing and were excited by the fact that they had all become ‘super writers’. It was rewarding to see all the boys relaxed and positively involved in a writing activity.

Upon executing this activity I thought I might have encountered issues with only having a limited number of masks and capes and with the children wanting to wear them being very popular. However, it encouraged children to wait their turn, turn take and ultimately, share. I continued with this approach for a whole week and from observations it was noticeable that the five of the six boys’ attitudes to writing changed and appeared to be more receptive.

It was easy to fulfill this action however I found that I always had to lead on and execute on the availability of the capes and masks myself. Due to the daily expectations of setting up the class for the day, I could not always rely on my colleagues to put out the capes and masks as they perceived the availability of them being my responsibility.

From using this data collection technique, observations, I found it invaluable for carrying out this action research as it was less intrusive and the boys’ behaviour did not change, they remained happy and content throughout. Furthermore, the observations demonstrated that five of the six boys were applying their phonic knowledge more in their writing and that they were writing more spontaneously throughout their play. Here Arthurs (2000) agrees that implementing the popular culture has had a positive impact on developing the boys to write;

“Children who may not be interested in reading school texts are often highly engaged and avid readers and writers when the texts are connected to popular culture and include comics, magazines and advertising texts” ‘Arthur (2000, p.6)

Upon encountering towards the end of the second week and beginning of the third week, I began to withdraw from the writing area, in anticipation that the children would continue to use the area well and independently. I changed the approach to using the capes and masks, and informed the children that they by wearing the cape and masks made them a ‘super writer’. Therefore this approach was the opposite of what I had implemented in the first place, where the children were encourage to produce some written work. After two days of executing this approach, although still popular, this tactic appeared to lack lustre and children lost interest more easily.

To remain ethical whilst executing this activity, each child who participated in the activity did so on a voluntarily basis, therefore they consented to whether they wanted to participate or not. Throughout the whole period of executing this piece of action research, I only encountered one minor issue, where one of the six boys did not engage or embrace any of the changes at all. He was curious about the changes and showed an interest in the capes and masks however did not engage and chose to stand outside the writing area and observe. Again, I respected his decision by choosing to withdraw, so my research remained ethical.

6| EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

From carrying out these actions, my concerns of ‘how to motivate reception boys to engage in writing’ were addressed. Over the period of time that the action research was carried out, the negative ‘I cannot do it’ attitude dissipated. In addition to this, five out of six boys showed a vast improvement in letter formation (see figure three) and adopted a more positive approach to
writing, again this was noted from being within the provision every day, observations and the boys writing books/learning journeys.

After my part of action research was finished, I witnessed a piece of equipment which would be a beneficial investment for encouraging writing outdoors. Now embracing the positive outcomes of my action research, my line manager was keen to purchase the item and introduce it to the children in the Reception Class to use outdoors, whilst playing (See figure 8). Although it was a simple container on wheels, whose bowls where filled with various writing materials; pens, paintbrushes, pencils, chalks, diaries, noteboooks, whiteboards etc. it had a positive effect. When introduced to it, the children became heavily interested in mark making and writing outdoors. Observations included children lying on the floor, deep in conversation whilst writing in diaries to children recording football goal scores on whiteboards. Surprising five of the six boys from my study used it successfully over a short period of time, based on observations and conservations had between colleagues.

Figure 6 - Wheeled writing tools and materials container

7 | CONCLUSION: CHANGES IN IDEAS AND PRACTICES

This action research cycle has enabled me to reflect on my practice and deepen my understanding of how important it is to remain open to developing your teaching practice further. My study confirms that the literature from the Primary National Strategy (2007) where it eludes that boys find the aspect of representing their ideas on paper difficult, was clearly evident in this study. The six boys that were chosen for this study fell into this group, so it was my responsibility to challenge this and break the mould, by carrying out this action research and implementing a minor change for the better. In addition to this, Arthur (2000) who explores that it is acceptable to include popular culture in educational settings, supports the change I implemented. Reading around the topic of literacy, boys engaging in writing and popular culture has been interesting, invaluable and I will share my knowledge with colleagues, where appropriate.

Over time it did become apparent to me that being a teacher I have not always given myself sufficient time to reflect on my day, let alone my practice. This experience gently forced this issue of how important, beneficial and valuable reflection can be when working in the teaching profession. By carrying out this work, I have learnt that I need to ensure frequently that I have
some time to reflect upon my practice and discuss any issues with my colleagues. Understandably not all changes I consider and implement require the level of work this piece of action research has required, however in the future, I could make subtle changes to my practice and approach, and it could have positive impact in various ways, not only myself, but also the children I teach and the colleagues I work with.

As my sample was so small, in future it may be beneficial to carry out research on a larger scale. Although my work conformed to the interpretative paradigm where it small scale and focussed on how people interrelate (Thomas 2009), again it may be beneficial to develop my knowledge further and explore other paradigms. I enjoyed executing this piece of work as not only did I develop my practice further, but it also enabled me to be creative and use my artistic skills by allowing me to develop the writing area to incorporate various elements of creativity from organisation of the ‘super writer’ board to drawing and making the ‘Incredible Hulk’ model on the ‘Our work is incredible!’ display.

Ultimately to witness the implementation of a change to have a positive impact on your research group is the most satisfying element of carrying out this small scale piece of work. To witness five young boys to become encapsulated by the whole superhero theme and to produce pieces of mark making or writing, whereas otherwise they would not have done, is the best reward you could wait for!

8| BIBLIOGRAPHY
2 | ACTION RESEARCH AS A TOOL FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – HOW DOES IT COMPARE?

David Horsburgh
Shooters Hill College

1 | INTRODUCTION

The project was aimed at assessing the extent to which Action Research could be used as a form of CPD and the impact that such an approach would have. Traditional “top down” approaches to CPD are often used by schools to demonstrate compliance to accountability stakeholders such as Ofsted. A neatly prepared schedule of weekly PD may show in part that particular priorities are being covered through CPD activities. An unanswered question remains though regarding the particular impact these approaches have on individual teachers’ professional learning. In evaluations completed at Shooters Hill College in the past we have discovered that “top down whole staff” approaches to PD more often delivered in twilight sessions can be inappropriate and lacking in effectiveness. Comments have indicated that such training is too “one size fits all” thus failing to meet individual professional needs. Hence the question arises: would an individualised approach through Action Research have more relevance and impact on teachers and learners? Would it be able to meet the compliance nature of CPD inevitably required? And to what extent would our collective learning, if that is what we achieve, both meet this required breadth but also provide a deeper more meaningful approach to PD. The following discourse will attempt to shed some light on these questions and draw some tentative conclusions based on our experience at SHC.

2 | AREA OF INTEREST AND METHODOLOGY

Action research was launched in the autumn term 2016. The process of action research was explained in a whole staff session. Colleagues were then asked to complete proposals for their research within a range of suggested areas. However they were allowed to come up with their own ideas as well. Areas of focus included

- Employability,
- Use of ICT, Assessment,
- Verification and Feedback,
- Current areas of educational development e.g. Dwek’s Growth Mind Sets,
- Behaviour for Learning.

Groups also focused on topics such as engaging less motivated students and building resilience. A progress review was held on January the 18th and a summary of the findings of this were disseminated and also reiterated at the final review of the projects on the 12th July.

3 | ACTION

On checking upon progress of the projects after the Easter break a mixed picture appeared to emerge. There were some staff who had grasped the opportunity to undertake their own research with great alacrity. Others could clearly see the benefits of sharing good practice and professional reflection about the nature of their research. It was communicated by staff to an HMI undertaking a monitoring visit on May the 5th that they had enjoyed sharing good practice through this year’s PD activities. This was well received by the same indicating it may be a favoured approach that
supersedes the vague notion of compliance. However, I also drew the tentative conclusion that for some this was seen as an unnecessary distraction from the main task that they were charged with which was the teaching and assessment of their students and ultimately good exam results. It is not hysterical to say that a febrile atmosphere exists in many schools coming up to exam time. There is a real need for constant interventions and catch up sessions designed to try to get students through their exams. This is particularly true at Shooters Hill College where many of our students come from a low academic starting point. For example, many of our A level students are coming to SHC having “dropped out” of other post 16 provision. In addition the average entry grade is at D minus which is the lowest in the borough. Staff give their time willingly but often struggle to concentrate on additional requirements, one such example might have been Action Research. Furthermore as an organisation with the Ofsted Rating “Requires Improvement” for the last two inspections there are real worries with respect to meeting Ofsted requirements real or perceived. None of this is conducive to spending time on what may be seen as extraneous tasks.

4| Evaluation of the action

Final dissemination 12th July

This session show-cased some particularly successful and innovative projects but also gave everyone the opportunity to feedback on their work and on any good practice they had identified during the year. The good news was that the significant majority of colleagues had taken their projects seriously and some very pleasing outcomes had been achieved. Due to high teacher workload it was decided not to demand formal write ups of the projects undertaken and this is an obvious weakness of this whole staff project and hampers the most thorough analysis. However we chose to disseminate, discuss and jointly reflect upon the wide range of outcomes that had been achieved. The three hour session was very well received by the colleagues present. They were open and honest in their evaluations but also constructive and professional. This has not always been in evidence in the evaluations of a minority of teachers of whole school twilight CPD sessions!

Notable comments:

“Excellent productive way of sharing good practice across the college. Some very good ideas which can be used to support others in the department”

“Action research is more interactive and allows for a greater quality (of CPD) while exchanging ideas and good practice”

“I hate whole school end of day sessions. Typically they are not relevant to me or my CPD “

An evaluation questionnaire was issued at the dissemination session of colleagues’ Action Research on 12th July. The questions below were asked. 52 replies were received. The average response scores are contained within the tables below which relate to specific questions asked.

How effective has action research been in:

- Bringing you up to date with relevant educational developments?

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If the educational developments were relevant to the area of Action Research chosen then there was a very positive response since it was able to be approached in a collaborative and flexible way. However the very specific area of focus of the research often precluded other areas of development to be examined. Therefore in itself Action Research cannot meet all the demands of Professional Updating. It enables depth of investigation rather than breadth.

- Meeting your own personal professional needs?
Again where these needs coincided completely with the area to be researched, there was feedback evidence that Action Research was a very useful way of updating staff. However the scope of peoples’ individual training needs was often wider than that of the project. So additional forms of PD are required to ensure that all their personal professional needs are met. In addition some feedback indicated that a more personalised approach to professional development was still required. The “one size fits all” approach offered by conventional twilight sessions does not meet this need. Action Research allows a greater deal of personalisation which is praised by many, however others felt that on its own it was not enough to deal with all their requirements

• Sharing good practice with others?

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Collaboration was planned into this project. Teachers met on two occasions to share progress and outcomes. The last session on July the 12th was positively received by most of the participants who valued sharing the findings of their work with other colleagues. Presentations of colleagues’ work in short sessions ranging from 2 to 10 minutes were enthusiastically received. Colleagues enjoyed the reflection and discussion of the work presented and this was instrumental in providing them with ideas for their own practice in the following year. A small minority found the project not very useful for sharing good practice. This was more likely to occur where the result of their Action Research was inconclusive or if they perceived their project to have been a failure e.g. an intervention having a negative impact on students’ progress.

“I need to refocus my Action Research project. It didn’t go well because the students wanted to do something else”

Although it was emphasised from the start of this work that finding out what does not work is as important as finding out what does, this was not accepted by all. Perhaps one cannot rule out colleagues’ possible wish that what they had pursued would lead to real gains for learners and even recognition from peers and managers. Failure to have “success” meant for some that they felt they had little to offer as a result of their efforts. In a national educational culture that looks for “fast gains and rapid improvement” some colleagues may have been disappointed and frankly a little embarrassed despite reassurance that success was neither compulsory nor expected in all cases.

• Impacting on the progress of students?

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Where projects had shown that their research had led to little positive impact for students satisfaction scores appeared to be low. However there were some exceptionally high ratings where their research had “hit the nail on the head” and really positively impacted upon students’ learning and progress

• How does Action Research compare with traditional whole school end of day sessions in developing your professional learning?

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5 | CONCLUSION: CHANGES IN IDEAS AND PRACTICES

Action research is in general more positively received than traditional whole school PD sessions according to comments collected through the questionnaires. This is because it can focus on areas the teacher wants to pursue and that they feel will lead to positive impact.

For the majority the sharing, reflection on and discussion of their practice were seen to be beneficial.

A minority of participants mentioned that there had not been enough time to undertake the research and I feel this may have been a significant pressure for many others where preparation for exams and external accountability had put great pressure on them.

“Very constructive and interesting however more directed time needed”

One participant commented that there was a need to define objectives of the project more clearly at the start. Two others would have valued more than just two sessions to share their progress. Both these points will be considered with respect to the design of future activity.

Senior management has identified this work as having been a very valuable Professional Development vehicle which had resulted in some very positive impacts on students’ progress and will be using it again next year within training activities.

There were different responses from colleagues to the project ranging from enthusiastic acceptance to barely perceptible recognition that it was underway! This was a very small minority. This situation is not unusual in any form of professional development activity where it is very difficult to meet each and every person’s needs. However the high quality of feedback from 8 project presentations in our final session on the 12th July clearly showed that many were impressed, even some of those who had been less enthusiastic at the start.

So in conclusion it is clear Action Research can for many provide a more personalised, interactive and useful way of developing practice. It can, but not always lead to some very positive impacts. I have observed that it does encourage teachers to be more evaluative and collaborative through the disciplines involved in planning, implementing and analysing their work. It provides a very useful and productive form of professional development, however it cannot meet the full range of need of everyone and is not particularly useful for keeping up to date with all current educational developments. It offers opportunities for depth in Professional Learning but not necessarily breadth even if this is to some extent mitigated by the sharing of project outcomes from many colleagues.

Planning the effective targeting and use of Action Research in the future is essential. It does beat conventional PD in many ways as evidenced in the quotes above but scores obtained are comparable and not better than more conventional twilight CPD sessions we have conducted. In fact some higher scores have been obtained through conventional PD this year. However since the evaluation questions asked were not identical in both situations it is important not to overplay this comparison and it simply poses an interesting question for perhaps future research.

It is also important that Action Research is not exploited because of its current popularity in education but rather because of its utility to meet need in particular circumstances. In that way Shooters Hill College will gain the maximum benefit of using Action Research again next year.
and has now established the beginnings of a research/evidence based culture in the minds of many teachers.

“I think it is a useful additional dimension to CPD as it is teacher driven and personalised”

There is some evidence of a “marmite love it or hate it effect” in the range of average scores relating to the research questions. Many staff were really engaged and supportive of Action Research, a small minority much less so. For the latter, as previously discussed, this is possibly because the perceived lack of success of the research that they undertook or just choosing the “wrong project”. It will therefore be necessary to use the positive outcomes of this round of research to encourage the less enthusiastic staff that this is a worthwhile activity. A database of impacts is to be prepared and disseminated at the start of the next round to this effect.

Those most willing to engage in this Action Research initiative were those that could see the intrinsic value of this research as a means to experiment with their practice, reflect and develop further approaches and share experiences with other professional who actually had similar roles. Therefore it is also essential to reinforce the message that the process of Action Research as a professional evaluative and planning tool is just as important as the outcome.

Clearly the way Action Research has been used in this piece of work borrows from accepted methodology without applying it rigorously to each and every project. Hence it has been referred to as “Action Research light”! So the question arises: does the need for formality of approach stifle progress or ensure that research uses robust and reliable protocols which lend more authority to the findings? Or does investigation in any form result in better more refined approaches to Teaching and Learning or simply pay lip service to the notion of Action Research without properly engaging in it?

I suspect views will vary on this depending on standpoint but my tentative conclusion is that the process of peer review and reflection of the outcomes of our Action Research projects (be they fairly light in nature) was on balance impactful in its own respect. It developed some impressive outcomes and created a dynamic within the organisation to begin to continue to use Action Research. However it would have undoubtedly have been more effective if colleagues had all adhered strictly to the protocols engaged in this process. However in schools time is a precious resource especially when shared on a collective basis and sometimes compromises need to be made. Next year we will try to tighten up this process.

It does appear though that this approach is valued by external stakeholders such as Ofsted and therefore as such will be enthusiastically pursued in future!
1| INTRODUCTION

I have been a secondary art and design teacher for 19 years and an Advanced Skills Teacher since 2005, working predominately in inner London secondary schools. During that time I have been a second in charge, head of faculty for art design & technology and had whole school responsibility for more able and talented students. I am currently a class teacher for KS3, KS4 and KS5 of art and photography, at a large mixed comprehensive school for 11-18 year olds. I have been a tutor for all key stages and am currently a year 13 tutor.

As a department we have been engaged with whole school development of subject specific “Threshold Concepts”. According to Land et al (2005) these are cornerstones of knowledge that “bind a subject [and are] fundamental to ways of thinking and practising...” They challenge students to make a shift in their perception of a subject such as to permit progression in learning. They are characterised as areas of knowledge that are “transformative”, and often “troublesome” (p. 54) occurring at points in the curriculum where students can experience difficulty.

My department identified drawing as a fundamental threshold concept and needing a renewed curriculum focus. We decided that students needed to be taught a broader view of drawing to gain an understanding of it as a mode of thinking and communicating.

In my experience, drawing is an area where students can struggle, as they view ‘being able to draw’ as an innate talent and a key determinant of artistic ability. This is a paradigm example of a Threshold Concept.

Drawing is a fundamental element in the art curriculum and yet I have seen students experience feelings of inadequacy and frustration when drawing. In seeking to address this, I have been examining the basis for students’ attitudes against current educational perspectives. My intention is to increase my own understanding of drawing and begin to develop a drawing pedagogy that could create a shift in student perception – to help them over this particular threshold.

2| METHODOLOGY

This enquiry into drawing took the form of action research: a purposeful, rigorous and reflexive process that aims to improve pedagogy and therefore the learning experience of students. McNiff et al (2010) position action research as intrinsically practice based and therefore distinct from other forms of research as it enables the practitioner to move beyond the theoretical. They summarise it

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as “Praxis ... informed, committed action that gives rise to knowledge as well as successful action” (p. 20). My school has adopted this principle and values creativity in learning as an essential element of the curriculum. In keeping with the McNiff\(^2\) ethos, my aim throughout this enquiry is to develop a clearer educational perspective on drawing as creative learning.

According to Cohen et al (1994, p. 192) action research “relies chiefly on observation and behavioural data” and requires a recurrent cycle of planning, collecting information, monitoring and reflection. It is a collaborative process as it positions students as co-inquirers and is supported through the collection of qualitative data that Pine (2009, p.49) notes, “emphasizes group dialogue, reflection, and action”. The work and thought processes of students was observed, discussed and used to inform teaching. Views were collected through questionnaires and an online survey of year 9 students.

**Ethical considerations**

Action research is considered to be effective when it is viewed as a reciprocal relationship between teacher and students. Boog et al (2008, p.3) highlight this process of exchanges as “cooperative, since they are embedded in the ethical concept of a fully democratic society acting for social justice”.

My participants were fully informed\(^3\) about the nature of the research and their role as co-inquirers. It was made clear that their opinions were valuable and there has been no penalty for opting out of any survey. Photographic evidence of work is anonymous and names have been omitted. The head teacher of the school was informed about the aims and expected outcomes of the project and permission was obtained. Parents and carers are aware of the school’s inclusion of action research in its performance management structure and so give permission for this and any photography on entry to the school (BERA 2011).

### 3 | Area of Interest

In the first stages of learning, drawing is uninhibited and a tool for communication that leads to writing. During adolescence this appears to change as drawing is increasingly seen as a skill or talent.

Most secondary art teachers have experienced the performance anxiety that many students demonstrate when drawing. I cannot count the occasions that I have heard students say, “I can’t draw” or time spent trying to persuade a student to resist the temptation to start again. Edwards (1979) identifies that this typically begins at around 12 years of age, and describes this as “the crisis period.” Lowenfeld (1949) had previously suggested that a shift from drawing as a spontaneous activity had already manifested between the ages of 8 to 10 years. He called this “The gang stage: The dawning realism”. He suggested that at this stage students become more critical as they compare their work to their peers\(^4\).

Edwards believes that students can be taught to draw but focuses on the skills needed for observational drawing. I feel that this view is constraining and I would defer to the work of Eileen Adams\(^5\) (2013) who believes the idea of drawing solely as a mode of self-expression and a practical

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\(^5\) Adams is a staunch advocate of drawing as a powerful tool for learning. Through her work with ‘The National Campaign for Drawing’ and ‘Power Drawing’ (2001 to 2006).
skill is a myth. She insists that this offers only a limited understanding of drawing. Furthermore she believes that this has contributed to an, ‘I can’t draw culture’. Agreeing that you can learn to draw, she argues that you can also “draw to learn”, claiming that it not only “makes you think”, it makes you think in different ways (p. 17).

The TEA report⁶ (Adams 2013) found that many students viewed “drawing in school [as] boring, worked only in pencil, lacked confidence in drawing and were afraid of making mistakes” (p. 10). It found that students’ learning experiences of drawing are often constrained by teachers’ limited views and proposed a wider range of opportunities for more imaginative and speculative drawing, which would help students to tolerate uncertainty, take risks and deal with frustration and perceived failure. This proposition resonates with the Tallis Habits⁷, a set of learning dispositions that the school associates with successful and creative learners. The TEA report reflects my experience as a teacher and underpins my view of drawing.

Adams’ research is reflected in government policy as evident in the 2012 Ofsted subject report for art⁸. It agrees that students’ perception of their drawing abilities affected their relationship to art and therefore their performance⁹. The report notes that students’ measure of effective learning in drawing is frequently limited to the accurate rendering of subjects. It is observed that secondary schools are failing to encourage students to believe that everyone can draw. A focus on observational drawing has meant that students’ “confidence in drawing diminished incrementally as they got older”. The recommendation is that teachers should explore opportunities for drawing and should think of drawing as “a learning strategy and not a performance skill” (p. 4).

The AQA Art and Design exam specification¹⁰ makes an explicit expectation for drawing as a mode of communication and that students employ a range of drawing skills. Reference is also made to the acquisition of visual language skills. There is, however, no reference to visual literacy in either the Ofsted subject report or exam specification.

Visual literacy is the ability to interpret and create images. Raney¹¹ notes that the phrase first appeared in the National Curriculum for art in the early 1990s but with no clear working definition. She notes that discourse around the term has focused on the competency of reading and interpretation of images. She argues that definitions should “accommodate making objects and images” (p. 24) and that drawing should be explored as an active and reflective tool that enhances life skills. Taylor¹² agrees that drawing is a pivotal activity in developing visual literacy and suggests that this is more important than ever as “images transcend the barriers of language, and enhance communications in an increasingly globalised world”. Adams (2016) agrees that our approach to visual literacy has tended to be too narrow and that “literacy has a social value...it is also about shaping and sharing experience, ideas, meanings, values and prompting action” (p. 220).

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⁷Tallis habits: http://www.thomastallisschool.com/tallis-habits.html  
⁹Referring to the previous art subject report Ofsted (2009) www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080245 . (p. 4)  
4 Collecting information to inform the action

I attended the iJADE 2016 ‘Drawing Conference’\(^{13}\) and heard the perspective of art colleges. They also appeared concerned with art and design students’ attitudes to drawing. Koning et al.\(^{14}\) presented action research on design students’ attitudes to drawing. They noted that students had a narrow view of drawing and did not recognise the expectation of drawing skills from employers. They suggested that this was particularly the case with undergraduate students when not confident in their drawing skills. It also perpetuated inhibitions and created a lack of self-esteem when drawing. In fact a wider view of drawing practice is expected at degree level. Also presenting, Simon Betts\(^{15}\) agreed that students’ low confidence in their drawing ability has resulted in a limited use and range of drawings. He advised that collages expected more speculative drawings in portfolios and illustrated that drawing has a number of purposes, methodologies and audiences. He demonstrated how drawing is used across disciplines through examples from surgeons, choreographers and Olympic planners. The sketches from the surgeon Francis Wells, completed during surgery, were particularly fascinating and led me to Jenny Wright\(^{16}\) whose PhD research explores the haptic nature of drawing in relation to medical practice. She has observed how surgeons use drawings as a rehearsal i.e. in order to develop muscle memory before surgery, as well as a way of explaining surgery and for planning surgical interventions.

Intrigued by this wider view of drawing, I decided to investigate other disciplines’ use of drawing. Architect Chris Wilkinson\(^{17}\) says that even in a technological age “communication through drawing is still important”, explaining, “I often sketch what I am thinking to generate ideas”. The concept of thinking through drawing seems to be a recurrent theme. The Kettles Yard exhibition titled Lines of Enquiry: Thinking through drawing (2006)\(^{18}\) illustrated the function of drawing across disciplines (incl. architecture, zoology, medicine, engineering and astronomy). Curator Barry Phipps notes that work was selected to reflect drawing as thinking as opposed to the aesthetic qualities.

I also attended The Prince’s Teaching Institutes 2017\(^{19}\) subject residential, where I heard artist Michael Chance, who noted that observational drawing as not simply a matter of ‘copying’ what is in front of you. He describes it as “a complex search for visual equivalents to experience” in which decision-making and thinking might include selection, reduction, altering and combining.

In this project, I have sought to bring together these various perspectives and my own observations and exercises in my school. My experiences in education strongly bear out the research findings above as to when and how attitudes to drawing develop. I decided therefore that my enquiry should encompass Key Stage 3 as, by Year 9, Tallis students have already opted for GCSE art and have a vested interest in developing their drawing skills.

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\(^{13}\) The conference discussed drawing as a fundamental aspect of art education. iJADE Conference 2016: DRAWING, University of Chester

\(^{14}\) Koning, C. & Leimanis, I. (2016) Central Saint Martins, RAS (Retain, Achieve, Succeed) UAL research programme. Their action research was motivated by concerns with student attitudes to drawing during their ‘Thinking Through Drawing’ workshops.

\(^{15}\) Betts, S. Dean of Wimbledon College of Arts. For more information on his advocacy of drawing see http://centrefordrawing.org.uk/portfolios/simon-betts/

\(^{16}\) Wright, J (2017) Extending the field of drawing the body: fine art anatomical drawing and its relationship to developing medical technologies and procedures. Available at http://blogs.arts.ac.uk/pgcommunity/2017/05/17/draw-drawing-systems-in-surgery/


\(^{19}\) The Prince’s Teaching Institute aims to facilitate discussion and develop practice through subject days and residential.
5 | Action

As well as engaging with the student group in this piece of research, I have undertaken activities with staff at my school and, at The Prince’s Teaching Institutes 2017 residential, with colleagues from other settings.

The Prince’s Teaching Institute conference

I took this opportunity to share my action research with other art teachers and gathered their thoughts through a questionnaire. The results confirmed much of my observations and research so far, as 60% of respondents identified drawing as a form of visual representation of feelings and thoughts. 40% identified it as mark making. Only 11% identified it as a form of communication. No one mentioned it as a mode of thinking. 60% did feel that it could develop creativity but the questionnaire offered limited scope for expanding upon this.

This limited view of drawing was even more pronounced as 70% felt that the main purpose of drawing was as a mode of expression. I felt that it was significant that everyone said that they used some form of drawing in the work place, 70% saying that they used visual representations to make sense of or explain ideas and concepts. Diagrams, modelling and mind maps were some of the examples given. This suggests drawing as a mode of thinking but appears to be at odds with their predominant focus on drawing as a form of expression in earlier answers.

Exercises with colleagues at my school

The messages that students receive from adults evidently have a powerful influence on attitudes to drawing, and I was interested in exploring this with staff attitudes outside the art department. I decided to engage staff through a number of simple drawing exercises so that I could observe their behavior and thinking during the activities.

‘Pause before the paws - or what your dog doodle says about you’. 

This activity took place during a 5-minute staff-briefing slot. I asked staff to write the word ‘dog’ on a post-it\textsuperscript{20}. This was done without reaction. I then asked them to draw a dog on another post-it. There was a palpable change in atmosphere during the drawing activity. Reactions ranged from nervous giggling to concentration and frowning. There was audible narration of thinking, remembering and problem solving. Some participants voiced concern that they could not remember what a dog looks like. Participants were also asked to draw a bike in 1 minute\textsuperscript{21}.

\textsuperscript{20} Image and activity adapted from Francis, C. http://stpeters.bournemouth.sch.uk/photo/2015/10/12/the_pause_before_the_paws/
\textsuperscript{21} Adapted from Gimini, G. Velocipedia https://www.behance.net/gallery/35437979/
Again, there was an audible reaction. The narrating process was even more pronounced as people struggled to remember how a bike works and to depict a working bike. Concerns were voiced, “It doesn’t look like a bike... I can’t remember how a bike works ... what does a bike look like... what have other people drawn ... can I start again?” One art teacher threw the first version away only to return to it reassured when she had seen what other people had done.

I have since repeated these drawing games with different audiences. I am particularly struck by how predictable the drawings of both dogs and bikes turned out to be, regardless of age or experience. The majority of the participants struggled with the activity and demonstrated some degree of anxiety.

**My student research group**

I have seen my own students become frustrated at ‘getting things right’ and focusing heavily on the final outcome. The explanations for this in the year 9 student survey responses similarly bear out the research I have undertaken. A typical response to what makes them feel unconfident about drawing was: “Sometimes I compare my work to others and feel bad about my own.” Along with the perception that other students are better at drawing, there was also a clear frustration with drawings not being successful representations e.g. “When it goes wrong and doesn’t look like the object, it can be quite discouraging and I want to give up or start again”.

I also asked students to select what they felt were the main purposes of drawing. 57% identified drawing for communication. The responses demonstrated a shared understanding of drawing for communication (incl. show, explain, express etc.) “You can draw to communicate things that you may not know how to put into words”. When asked about the importance of drawing one student said: “Drawing is important in general because it can act like a language for communication. It also makes you have a new kind of perception”.

Figure 1 - Selection of staff dogs and bikes
I. Thinking about Drawing

I began by explaining my action research to my Key Stage 3 classes and explained that their thoughts were integral to my investigation. The first question posed to open up discussion was “What is drawing?”

![Figure 2 - Selection of students' answers](image)

I then showed a radio interview with Adams in which she explains the four purposes of drawing as Perception, Communication, Invention and Action.

This was followed with a card sorting activity that was also an opportunity to include a range of drawings from other disciplines. Students were asked to match examples of drawings to the four purposes of drawing. They were also asked to respond to the questions:

- Is it possible to think visually?
- In what ways can drawings communicate?

The intention was to prompt students to make connections between thinking and drawing. This elicited responses such as “you can picture images in your mind and also when you have an idea you can visualise it in to use it for the future” and “you can draw or explain what you are thinking”. This showed that students were able to engage in the discussion and were beginning to articulate a wider view of drawing. Significantly, there was no mention of observational drawing; there still appeared to be a focus on visual representation of feelings and emotions.

II. Drawing Workshop

This was followed by a day of drawing activities that I called ‘Drawing Conclusions’. The intention was to generate an excitement and inquisitiveness about drawing and to begin challenging perceptions. I worked with Year 9 to facilitate a number of fun, interactive, low risk (i.e. no formal drawing) and experimental activities in the art corridor. The art walls, which can be written on, featured a series of questions that sought to challenge perceptions of drawing. The setting was also designed to challenge how and where drawing usually happens hence drawing on walls, floor, in the air, using a variety of materials.

22 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e6nuFp7ISU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1e6nuFp7ISU)
I encouraged participants to make as many connections as possible between the four purposes of drawing to the ‘Tallis Habits’ and ‘Tallis Characters’.

Although, responses to questions were often predictable, mainly referring to drawing as a means of expression, relaxation and communication, the exercise succeeded in engaging a wide range of people and it got people thinking and talking about drawing, and of course doing drawing. The corridor was a hive of activity and nobody said, “I can’t draw”.
III. Visual Thinking

I wanted to continue this meta-cognitive discussion on drawing to facilitate students’ perception of drawing as a mode of visual thinking and communication. I shared Adams’ definition of drawing i.e. ‘marks that have meaning’ as well as a range of quotes from artists. I invited students to find their own quotes to articulate their individual relationships to and understanding of drawing. This launched an ongoing discussion about drawing as ‘an intellectual activity that makes you think’.

Sketchbooks are used for collecting visual information to develop ideas. In my experience students can become anxious and inhibited about presentation, often at the expense of exploration and risk taking. I decided to make A5 fold out visual notebooks with my year 7 and 8 classes, introducing them as an exploration of the concept of drawing and possible purposes and forms.

The activities combined drawing exercises to develop observation, imagination and memory, with sketch noting, diagrams, reflection, planning and collage.

Figure 5 - Texture exercises, journey to school, upside down drawing, blind drawing etc.

This approach became the ideal vehicle for translating thinking and visual information into an articulation of what drawing can be and do. The visual notebooks also functioned as posters when pulled out and became knowledge organisers of the experiences that the students encountered.

My intention was to develop an inquisitiveness about drawing through this self consciously analytical and reflective activity, which seemed to begin to internalise a wider view of drawing; focusing on process and the visual experience served to reinforce the idea of drawing as thinking.

Figure 6 – Students’ work - Year 7
IV. Making a mark

I had found the ‘thinking out loud’ phenomenon, during the dog and bike exercises, particularly interesting. This narration appeared to offer self-assurance, help with problem solving and to act as an aide memoire. It was intuitive and illustrated drawing as thinking. I considered how to draw this out’ to model a self-conscious exploratory and investigative approach through:

- Articulation of my thinking when modelling tasks.
- Encouraging students to think out loud when looking, problem solving and refining their drawings.
- Developing plenary questioning to shift focus from outcomes to process and purpose.

Drawing exercises are generally introduced at the start of a project. This time I began by explaining that musicians and sports people always do warming up exercises, and that quick drawing tasks had the same intention. We talked about muscle memory, and the connections between the brain and the hand, as in the case of surgeons. I talked about exploratory drawing as a record of looking. I encouraged collaboration in an effort to avoid inhibition. They were asked to stand and used a range of media to facilitate more gestural mark making. I modelled each exercise, whilst narrating the visual elements that my eye was noticing (e.g. haptic values, scale, shape etc.). Each exercise was under 2 minutes and included:

- Blind drawing with graphite sticks using only touch.
- Overlapping drawings using coloured marker pens.
- Double line using two black fine liners.
- Continuous line with black marker pen to map eye movement.

Plenary questions were designed to focus reflection on the process of looking and thinking - what they thought each exercise had made them notice or think about and why this was useful. Skills such as observing, analysing, recording and composing were drawn out through questioning. Students were also encouraged to think about what they had found difficult and what they had learned including their own process of looking and thinking about drawing.
I also asked them to choose which drawings were the most successful and was heartened to see the focus shift from appreciating the most ‘real life’ representations to those that demonstrated a more gestural approach. It seemed that the discussion had begun to change perceptions of what makes a good drawing.

![Figure 8 – Students’ work - Years 7, 8 and 9](image)

A taster session with prospective year 12 students included wire, clay and string drawings, which were developed into collograph prints. It resulted in a very useful discussion about the experience of looking and what we mean by a true representation of things.
Continuing the theme of drawing as mark making, I decided to explore drawing as perception more explicitly. I wanted students to develop their confidence with experimentation and value the role of intuition. With year 7 and 8 we explored mark making to communicate ideas, thoughts and feelings. Year 7 were asked to respond to music and were introduced to Kandinsky with a useful discussion about synesthesia\textsuperscript{23}. Year 8 had already undertaken a number of exercises to explore surface, form and composition. They were asked to experiment on line drawings that they had developed using viewfinders.

Both groups were reminded of ‘Bouba’ and ‘Kiki’\textsuperscript{24} and provided with a range of media and mark making tools. The activities were fast paced to emphasise intuition and were followed by a group plenary. Skills such as interpretation, codifying and imagining were drawn out.

\textsuperscript{23} The artist Wassily Kandinsky is believed to have had Synaesthesia
\textsuperscript{24} The ‘Bouba’ ‘Kiki’ effect was used to illustrate mark making as visual language and is based on the work of psychologist Wolfgang Köhler (1929) mapping between speech sounds and the visual shape of objects.
Figure 11 – Marks collaged into final pieces

Figure 12 – Students’ work - Year 8

Figure 13 – Students’ work - Observation of shape, form and surface

Figure 14 – Students’ work - Marks making. Final pieces below
IV. Drawing Diaries

I introduced drawing diaries for a six-week homework task to facilitate students’ interpretation of Adams’ four purposes of drawing. It was framed as a low risk activity as it would not be formally assessed. Students made their own sketchbooks and were asked to include examples of each purpose through regular entries. I was delighted that students produced a wide range of drawings that included invention and observation and combined pencil with collage and other ways of making marks.

When year 9 students were asked to select which activities had helped them to improve their drawing 64% of students identified the Drawing Diary, “I got to experiment with different styles of drawing and got a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses”. 50% identified the quick drawing exercises “You were allowed to be bad and more carefree as the outcome is never wrong or right”.

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25 https://www.pinterest.co.uk/doillie/year-8-art-design/
V. Knowledge Organisers

The final year 9 lesson was designed to synthesise our exploration of drawing as visual thinking, and provided scope to assess students’ thinking and understanding. As well as learning objectives, they were provided with materials for collage and could choose from their own loose drawings made throughout the year. They could organise materials as they wished but were given an A5 format as a constraint.

We will continue this activity at the start of the new academic year so that students begin year 10 with a clear understanding of drawing as a mode of creative thinking and communication.
6 | EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

This action research has challenged me to deliberate and articulate the what, why and how of teaching drawing to the students. They in turn have demonstrated that they can engage with this level of discussion and by bringing rigour to thinking and talking about drawing, I believe that they have developed a wider view of drawing as an intellectual activity.

My intention was to shift student thinking about drawing, but emphasising process, introducing more opportunities for drawing in different contexts and encouraging thinking out loud when drawing, has also developed students’ skills and confidence. Students’ final pieces were highly effective and demonstrate less inhibited mark making, whether experimental or more formal. It is as if the change in focus has allowed them the freedom to improve their drawing skills and be more persistent when developing their final pieces.

7 | CONCLUSION: CHANGES IN IDEAS AND PRACTICES

Drawing is recognised as a primary mode of visual thinking and communication by the art establishment and educationalists. This is evident in the proliferation of museum exhibitions, arts organisations and educational policy that promote a wider approach to drawing. As subject teachers we must develop clarity in our own understanding about the value of pedagogy for drawing.

My research concludes therefore that, firstly, a purposeful approach to drawing could be instrumental in developing students’ visual literacy.

Secondly, a drawing pedagogy should communicate drawing as a form of thinking as well as of communication. Adams’ four purposes of drawing can engage students with this approach.

Finally, it is important that students are encouraged to be co-enquirers, as part of testing the effectiveness of teaching. Building on students’ prior knowledge and experience of thinking and learning through the Tallis Habits and Tallis Characters would be a useful way of facilitating this.

Students need to be taught that drawing is a pivotal element of visual literacy. That its value lies in the potential to develop their ability to visualise and communicate ideas that other forms of literacy are unable to articulate. The key to shifting perceptions is in the ways tasks are framed with a focus on questioning and an emphasis on process rather than final outcomes. This can draw out student thinking about how, what and why during drawing activity. I propose to continue developing this approach by:

- Referring to the Tallis Visual Literacy policy
- Continuing an exploration of drawing through drawing diaries
- Linking the purposes of drawing to assessment criteria and art threshold concepts
- Launching an experimental drawing club after school
- Referring to drawing across disciplines and other curriculum areas.

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26 In 2016 the Tallis school community agreed on five core character traits Tallis Characters
27 Thomas Tallis School Visual Literacy Policy 2017
28 Tallis Threshold Concepts for Art
8 | Bibliography


1| INTRODUCTION

I work in a large well established nursery school. I have been a teacher here for about 17 years and have specific responsibility for the curriculum area: Understanding the world. Our philosophy which has not changed, is that the children are central to all we do; that they learn best through active play; our role as adults is to extend and develop their thinking and learning by our interactions and by creating an environment and atmosphere that supports this learning and allows children to take the lead by following their interests. We feel strongly that children whose emotional well-being is high are more likely to become deeply involved in their play. We draw on the work of Laevers (2005) who showed how important it is to observe children in group settings to ensure that they feel comfortable, show vitality and self-esteem. It is only then that a child can concentrate, become fully immersed in their play and show the dispositions necessary to learn effectively.

I have always been fascinated by the different approaches children have to learning; how some children are methodical when faced with a new activity or experience, whilst others may add an unexpected element of their own creation. In these early years it is very difficult and not very useful to separate learning into different curriculum areas. As Moylett referred by (Stewart, 2011) says: “What children learn is important but how children learn is even more important if they are to become learners for life in today’s society.”

As a school we have been focusing on how children learn, especially through: The characteristics of effective learning, still part of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years. (Department for Education, 2017) This is a compulsory framework for all registered early years providers in England including maintained nursery schools. It covers both learning and development, as well as safeguarding requirements. We wanted to know if we could improve our practice in this area. If by better understanding children’s different approaches to learning we could make an impact upon this. To support this we used a reliable audit tool, called “Sustained shared thinking and emotional well-being scale for 2-5 year old provision” (Siraj, 2015). This came about from the EPPe project (Sylva, 2004) Each team looked specifically at critical thinking and measured their practice against a scale. They then created an action plan to help improve practice.

As discussed earlier, Laevers (2005) stresses the importance of “deep level learning.” He explains that this does not occur through a building block attitude towards learning, adding one step at a time. For it to occur, however a person must be able to transfer this knowledge and understanding to different experiences and situations, they must show self-motivation to learn and curiosity to discover. I have noticed children showing high levels of involvement in an activity of their own choice or creation, displaying particular dispositions -persistence, creativity, motivation and a willingness to try things in different ways. I wanted to deepen my knowledge of these different
approaches and particularly look at how individual children’s approach their learning, especially those that show high levels of involvement.

I set up an area in the classroom that I could control by opening at specific times and only allowing two children at a time into the area. This would help me observe and compare approaches more easily. I would also introduce open ended items to the area one at a time. I decided to focus on eight children and the study took place roughly two times a week for about six weeks.

2| METHODOLOGY
This research seemed to fit well into an action research model. Action research was seen by Kurt Lewin who is widely regarded as having developed the idea, as a tool, that enabled everyday practitioners to take the lead in decision making that would affect new ideas and strategies (Albon, 2011). A practitioner in education can be defined as a teacher working with colleagues to bring about a change in policy or practice (Albon, 2011). It is different from other forms of research, such as those carried out by academia because it is not imposed by others not part of the institution. It is seen as democratic because those involved in the daily life of the organisation can take part in decision making. They have an ongoing relationship with the participants in the research project (Boog, 2008). Recent changes to school improvement have tended to come from a “Top down approach” (Middlewood, 2008), that is from government departments and from outside agencies. Using practitioner research to bring about change can be tailored to meet the individual needs and culture of a specific school. Thus, as an experienced practitioner, I am in a very good position to use the findings to bring about a change in practice that will best support the children at my school and take into consideration the training needs of staff. However it is important to be aware of the limitations of this type of research. Practitioner research can only be limited to the practitioner and those that they are researching because you can only study your own practice, though groups of practitioners can come together to collaborate. It must be clear that interpretations of results are therefore limited and partial.

Action research is cyclical. I have planned and carried out the research, I have then reflected on what I have discovered and the next stage will involve working with the school to consider how or indeed do we need to improve practice to better support children’s learning (Albon, 2011).

Ethics
There were obviously ethical considerations to be taken into account. First it was necessary to consult with the main care givers and to ensure their permission (BERA, 2011). As a school we take photographs of the children and video their play so that we can share important learning moments with our parents through ‘Tapestry’ – an online learning journal. Parents already give permission for this. However a letter outlining my research was also given to parents to ensure they agreed to the study and a further letter for permission to use particular photographs.

Ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011) state that participants must be treated with respect, at any time they may withdraw their consent. When working with young children the relationship is not equal. The adult is in a powerful position and children may want to please by behaving in a way they think the adult wants to see. (Albon, 2011) I therefore waited for children to initiate visiting the Investigation area. They could leave whenever they wanted to. I tried not to intervene in their play but did on a couple of occasions when I felt one child was not being given a fair amount of time with an object and another became upset. These are very young children who are not always able to express their feelings clearly. Giving consent must be seen as fluid and when a child shows
through their behaviour or body language that they are not happy or comfortable, it is important to support them.

I used our class IPAD to video the children. They are used to this, as we regularly photo and video the children to record important moments of learning. We have consent forms from all the parents. The videos that I recorded have only been shared with myself and school professional colleagues at school and are kept on the class laptop which is password protected. Any pictures taken of the children were taken in such a way as to avoid recognition. The children have all been given a pseudonym.

3 | Area of interest

As pressure increases for children to show progress in all curriculum areas, even from a young age, practitioners can be drawn away from the important considerations of how children approach their learning. The early years are the time when foundations are created for children to become lifelong learners. There is a growing body of evidence that how children approach learning can make a huge difference to how successful they are in later life (Bronson, 2000). Children from the beginning can have different dispositions towards learning; they vary in how confident, motivated and curious they are. Children may develop their own set of strategies when investigating something new. Some think first and then act, some try different approaches until one works and others learn more through imitation (Fisher, 2002).

I wanted, through my action research project to increase my knowledge of how children approached learning in my class and if knowing this can improve the way I support children. Finally I wanted to support colleagues to develop their approach.

Play

Play is central to how we teach children at our nursery and it is only through this medium that I would want to develop my understanding of how children learn. It is important therefore to consider play and why it is so important to children and their development. How do we define play? Frobel saw play as the highest form of learning. (Bruce, 2012). Children engage in play for its own sake, however through this play children are taken from the here and now to a world of abstraction, imagination, innovation. They learn to create and change, to understand and use symbols in different forms. Fisher, concludes that play is how children learn (Fisher, 2002). However it is not the only means by which children learn. They learn by first hand experiences such as shopping, having stories read to them, through imitation and being told and shown how to do new things (Stewart, 2011)

The word play still confuses early year’s practitioners. Adult led, pre-planned activities may not be seen as play in its purest form. According to Jerome Bruner (1986), play is more about an approach to action, not the action itself. It is the mind-set of the person who is playing rather than what they are doing that is important. They have a desire, a need to explore, to find out more about something for their own satisfaction, not an extrinsic reward (Stewart, 2011).

4 | Collecting information to inform the action

In choosing how to carry out my research, I had to be aware of all the above. I wanted to set up an Investigation area in my classroom for children to access. There was obviously some pre planning to this activity. However the children would be free to explore the objects in any way they chose. My role was not to teach but to act as an observer. In this way I hoped to maintain the essential characteristics of play. Observation was going to be the central method by which I collected my
data. By setting up a designated area, these observations would be controlled in some ways, leaning slightly more towards laboratory type observations rather than Naturalistic (Albon, 2011). I would only allow two children into the area at a time and would only open the area when I was free to observe it. By creating a particular area to observe the children, I would be able to reduce the number of variables; all the children would experience the same environment and equipment. This would be harder to observe closely in the normal nursery where I knew many children would be attracted to a new piece of equipment and a lot of my time would be taken in supervising and organising turns. However I was aware that I was influencing the children’s play in some ways, as I was controlling the number of children in the area and the type of equipment I provided. I had to be aware that the participants’ behaviour might be slightly different to how they would normally play (Hayes, 2001). To counteract this, the children would still be in their familiar classroom with the same peers and adults.

I tried to provide quite different objects, to those already in the classroom. I wanted to encourage exploration with objects that had no obvious purpose to a child. This would motivate the children to “find meaning” as they played. The concept “meaning making” as defined by Jerome Bruner (1990) is shown to have many similarities with the concept of “learning” but the importance of the environment is recognised. Bruner (1990) emphasises the role of social interactions. However it must not be forgotten that meaning can be constructed internally (Fredriksen, 2010). Thus, how a child responds, finds meaning from a carefully chosen object without necessarily interacting with others. I began with a set of 3 gel timers; then added a rubix cube, a light in the shape of an egg; a flowery hat - an object that was familiar to them; some gems and finally a set of screws and bolts.

To study the children in the area, I decided to video them. I would then be able to watch the videos closely. chose a narrative method of observation, writing up the videos at a later day and then use a thematic approach, noting the recurrent types of play that I was seeing.

First, I wanted to note children’s individual responses to new objects, did they immediately explore with enthusiasm, or did they watch others first to see if there was a wrong or right way of doing something? In other words what was their initial emotional response? From then I could observe how their thinking developed. I wanted to learn more about their dispositions for learning. Katz and Chard 1989 referred by (Edgington, 1998) define dispositions as ‘habits of mind, or tendencies to respond to situations in characteristic ways.’ Were they motivated to learn? Did they persist with a task? I wanted to find out if they could link their ideas, look at things in different ways and plan and alter these plans (Stewart, 2011).

5 | Action

I set up the investigation area in a contained area of the classroom. I kept colours in the area to a minimum to avoid distractions. I placed a ribbon across the area with a closed and open sign. The area was only to be opened when I was free to observe the children. Each object was to be introduced to the children one at a time. I chose objects that were open ended and would encourage exploration.

I decided to observe all the children who used the area first and then begin to pick a cross section of children who showed a particular interest. Nursery life is busy and I could not guarantee a set amount of time in the area, at a set time. I could also not stop children coming into the area who were not part of the study, this would have been different for them as they are used to having all areas open to them. I decided to carry out the observations over a period of six weeks.
6 | EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

From the beginning, I was intrigued by how differently the children approached the equipment, how creative and innovative they were; how much language was used, either through their own talk, conversing with peers and how much they wanted to share their findings with myself. I began to notice themes emerging in the type of play that the children engaged with the equipment. There were two dominant themes:

**Investigating**

For this study I am referring to the children’s exploration of the object, using their senses, to find out more about it and possibly its function. Then how their thinking became increasing creative as they wanted to give meaning to the objects and to find answers to their questions.

**Symbolic**

This refers to all the observations when the children gave a different meaning to the objects they were playing with, they turned them into something of their own creation or into a more familiar object.

When I analysed the transcripts I found that there was a huge amount of interesting information. I decided to focus on a few of these observations.

**Investigating**

All of the 8 children investigated the objects to a lesser or greater degree, either on their own or with a peer. They mainly used sight and feel to explore and to a lesser degree sound. At first they all explored the objects, turning, placing them, dropping them, naming the colours, putting them on top of each other or shaking them. It was only after this initial investigation that their level of thinking began to deepen, they carried on investigating but they began to have their own ideas, they began to think creatively. Craft, identifies the moment change occurs in play, from ‘What can it do?’ to ‘What can I do with it?’ (Craft, 2001) Sarah had been rolling the egg light, tapping it and dropping it. The light was on all the time.

![Figure 1 - A child participating in the activity.](image)

She then turned to her peer and said something I couldn’t hear and then: “Do you want to? She turned to me and said: “I want to turn the light off and see what happens... I want to see how much glowing there is.” I feel that this captures the exact moment when Sarah begins to think creatively. What though does it mean to think creatively? According to Stewart (2011), it is the
ability to think flexibly, to come up with original ideas, though these do not have to be original to the world as a whole but only to that person. It is important when defining creativity to consider all aspects of it, the person’s role, the process, the product or the outcome and the place it occurred (Fumoto, 2012). They go on to include persuasion; the idea needs to have some influence on others. When considering these definitions, Sarah was indeed being creative. She had an original idea, she considers a different use for the equipment, therefore being flexible, she requires a change in the environment so that she can try out her idea and finally she is able to influence her peer to try this idea.

Simon investigated the egg in a similar way to Sarah. He pushed, tapped and rolled it first but then verbalised his thoughts and questions to both myself and his peer. Simon wanted to give meaning to the object, he needed to find out its purpose and give it a name. “What is it?” he said. He discovered it was a light when he found the switch and it lit up. He then noticed that it changed colour. This caused confusion. He searched for a label: “Huuh! ...It’s a change colour thing.” Simon’s talk seems to concur with Vygotsky’s (1962) theories that young children use speech to help organise their thinking (Vygotsky, 1962). He has labelled an object but is then confused because his understanding of what a light is has changed. He is puzzling over the similarities and differences of that label (Stewart, 2011). Simon continued to explore further, moving to other objects but he returned to the egg and communicated his findings: “When I switch it off, it goes white.” He conveys these findings to myself and his peer. Piaget (1967) would argue that his thinking is becoming socialised, that it is encouraging him to share his thoughts, which may lead him to change his ideas and alter his plans (Wood, 1998). However, unlike Vygotsky (1962) he believed that a child’s language reflected their stage of development and was not a tool to aid their thinking processes. At the end of the observation, Simon gave the light a label: “Now I know what this is called, it is a change colour light….because its changes colour.” Simon’s verbalisations appear to aid his thinking processes and enable him to plan and work through what he wants to find out.

**Symbolic**

Six out of the eight children at some point during their play engaged in symbolic play, an object turned into something else of their creation. They were all making links between different life experiences and searching for meaning in an object that they perhaps had no reference for (Stewart, 2011). Thus for Ben the gel timers first became castles and then Segways – he had seen his brothers ride these and their shape seemed to connect for him.

Sid and Ed made mathematical connections and linked this to singing. Sid used the timers as a prop for his number rhyme. He used the tune and rhythm of one familiar song, plus some of the words of another but further adapted it by altering some of the words. Here again, we see according to Laevers (2005) “deep level learning.” Sid is using his logical – mathematical understanding, to count and take away the timers as he removes them. At the same time he shows flexibility in his thought, he is able to alter what he has learnt in one situation to create something unique, in this case altering the words to a song. (Laevers, 2005) He labels the timers as: “little watery things” for the purpose of the song. He uses his mathematical knowledge to change the words from “big and fat” to “tall and thin” to describe them more accurately. This type of imaginative play enables children not just to reproduce an experience but use their creative skills to adapt the experience using their own ideas (Fumoto, 2012).

Eddie also investigated the timers, seeing if he could make them stand on top of each other in various combinations. He began to sing softly to himself: “All together in (option?)” He repeated this getting louder. He noticed the noise they made as they fell and began to sing: “bang, a bang, a
bang a bang” rhythmically. He continued this placing the timers in a pyramid but then gradually moved them towards the edge so they fell.

Figure 2 - A child participating in the activity.

The game became more sophisticated and began to have rules. Eddie said: “It’s a game if you’ve got this and this and this you’ve got 8 bangs; if you have got this and this you have got 2 bangs.” Again we can see the same pattern emerging; Eddie explored the properties of the objects first: “What can I do with this object?” He grew more confident and his ideas became more divergent and original.

Play has also been classified into two broad aspects: Epistemic and Ludic behavior (Hutt, 1989). Epistemic is broadly concerned with gaining knowledge and skills, whilst Ludic is about symbolic and imaginary play. It could be said that the former is about critical thinking and the latter creative thinking (Fumoto, 2012). However, these behaviours can be used together to solve problems and come to a conclusion. I think the observations above demonstrate this, with Sid using Epistemic behaviour to practice his counting skills but combining this with Ludic behaviour to create his own song to give the counting a framework.

The most fascinating observation was my last and longest and involved Isabelle exploring the nuts and bolts. This observation appears to bring all the elements I have spoken about together, showing high levels of creativity and critical thinking. It also demonstrates the importance of language and social relationships and their role in developing a child’s thinking.

Isabelle immersed herself for longer periods in the area. On her final observation, she explored the set of nuts and bolts. She spent some time sorting them into separate groups, as she sorted she talked to herself and another child. She talked about their properties, their length and then counted them. The other child in the area then called out “Hotdog!” Isabelle was intrigued by this and asked: “What hot dog?” They then took turns to repeat “hotdog” and then Isabelle said: “Hot pizza” with delight. The screws became candles, she lined the short ones up and counted them: “1 candle, 2 candles, that’s 3 candles”. She collected more short screws saying she had 7. She then added the washers to the screws: “These many hotdogs are sharp.” She explained to the other child: “These are lights and these are candles… these hoops (washers) are the lights”. She then expressed her intention: “I’m going to make a birthday cake for grandma.

She continued lining up 10 in a row. All the short screws had been used up. She counted the candles accurately.
Then said: “My grandma, my grandma is 13... I have not got enough candles.” She tried to solve the problem and picked up a long screw but it would not stand up. She tried again thinking out loud: “To be 13.” She took it away and laid it with the other long screws. “Ok I just need...this candle!” she picked up a treasury tag on the floor, looped it through a washer. She added it to the line saying: “Candle!” She stood up and said loudly “Now its 13!” She walked away satisfied saying: “My grandma is always 13!”

It is these monologues that are of particular interest. Piaget (1967) saw a child’s language as a reflection of their intellectual stage. Vygotsky (1962) however felt that a child’s language, particularly their monologues are a means of aiding a child’s thinking skills, it is supporting their ability to regulate and plan their own activities before they are able to internalise this thinking later in their development. (Wood, 1998) Babies need help to meet their needs, they begin to realise that they can have an influence on others; initially adults need to express verbally what a baby needs and then as they learn language they learn to use it to get what they need and in turn language is used on them to regulate their actions. (Wood, 1998) When a child such as Isabelle is talking to themselves, they are taking on both roles, of the regulator and the regulated: - “My grandma is 13...I have not got enough candles” – she states the problem and then answers herself.

How is this play supporting these children’s learning

Finally, we need to be clear about how this type of play supports children’s learning and what it is that they are learning. These children have all been at the nursery for a year or even longer. As their teacher I know them extremely well. The nursery prides itself on the importance of the adult child relationship and the effect that this has on their learning. Fumoto stresses how essential these relationships are to promoting children’s creative thinking (Fumoto, 2012). Children whose interests are encouraged tend to be highly motivated, they become more independent and their feelings of competence grow as a result. (Stewart, 2011) I feel that all the children in the research project showed confidence to explore, to take risks; they wanted to test out their ideas and showed great flexibility of thought. They were not afraid to fail and sometimes got things wrong. Isabelle is wrong in her mathematical calculations. She successfully counts to 10 but then adds one more and makes 13. She finishes thinking that she has 13 candles when she only has 11. As an adult should I have corrected her? Am I taking a risk with her mathematical development?
On the other hand is she wrong? Could the 10 screws represent 10 candles and the treasury tag represent the numbers to 13? Is she being creative in her problem solving? Pound and Lee (Henceforth referenced as Pound, 2011) speak of mathematicians using their imagination, that this is now being recognised as an essential strand of mathematics. Maths after all involves a lot of abstraction, the use of symbols and the recognition of pattern (Pound, 2011). Were Isabelle and in other ways Ed and Sid exploring ways of using symbols and creating their own patterns? (Pound, 2011) Pound et al go onto stress that when teaching children we should be encouraging the development of divergent thinking, the importance of the journey to discovery and not focus so much on the right or wrong of the finished answer (Pound, 2011).

Allowing the children the space and freedom to explore these objects as they chose, encouraged them to initiate activities to think for themselves, they were self- regulated learners. As I stated at the beginning there is a growing body of evidence to show that this serves children well into adulthood (Stewart, 2011).

As the familiar adult, although I was observing the children, I found I was drawn into conversations. On reflection, this seems to highlight the “Zone of Proximal Development” as identified by Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1962). This he saw was the bridge that supported children to unassisted learning. This “bridge” could be another child or an adult who by demonstrating or breaking down a task into stages can help a child to fully understand a concept or skill. Wood (1998) explains further an adult who praises a child or reassures them as they attempt something new is also providing that bridge to learning (Wood, 1998). As I studied the videos, I could see that this was indeed happening with all of the children. Thus Stephen wanted to address his thoughts to me, he needed me to reassure him, acknowledge his confusion about naming the egg light but he did not expect me to give him the answer. I was there to support him on his journey.

7| CONCLUSION: CHANGES IN IDEAS AND PRACTICES

This research project has enabled me to watch a group of children very closely and then carefully analyse how and what they have been learning. My understanding of critical and creative thinking has deepened and I am now more aware of how different they are but how they run alongside and work together to enable learning to occur. I was able to spot the moment when a child’s thoughts moved from finding out what something could do, to what they could do to the object, their thinking moved to a higher level that required both flexibility of thinking and originality.

I recognised that it is the journey that a child may take that is important and not always the outcome that shows the depth of learning. I was truly amazed at how motivated and creative they were in their thinking. They showed confidence in their own ideas and a willingness to take risks. This confirms to me that a rich, stimulating environment, together with a focus on deep meaningful adult/child relationships are essential to enable children to grow and develop and succeed in education and moreover in adult life.

However, improvement should always be sought and I feel that this research project has empowered me with further skills and knowledge to share with colleagues, indeed the video with Isabelle and the birthday cake has already been used by our leadership team to help some of our Early Years assistants understand better how children learn. There are also future plans to use this project for training all staff at a future INSET and I have been asked to speak particularly about the importance of allowing risk in children’s learning at the next Early Years conference in Greenwich. I want to continue to observe the children closely in my class and develop further skills in knowing how best to support their learning.
8 | Bibliography


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1| Introduction

In Baumfield et al (2012) one description of action research is ‘research that will help the practitioner’. Carr and Kemmis (1986) write that it concerns improvement – of practice, of the understanding of it and of the situation in which the practice takes place.

I am a secondary school teacher in a comprehensive secondary school in South East London who specializes in foreign language (FL) learning. I began teaching with a different style of lesson as my teaching career started abroad teaching English as a foreign language. Teaching a FL in the English state system later was quite different and often shocking because the content was much more limited and focused on exams. One of the elements of the lessons which I feel suffered with the change was their cultural content. As time passed, with changes to curriculums the subsequent requirement to create new resources, the pressure of exam preparation, larger classes and reduced curriculum time, only essential content was given attention in my foreign language lessons. As a result, cultural awareness was often left to one side particularly in KS4 and KS5 (exam) classes. What is more, including culture in a lesson is a requirement of the National Curriculum: students should be enabled to ..... ‘develop awareness and understanding of the culture and identity of the countries and communities where the language is spoken’, (Department of Education, 2016)

Given that there is more to learning a language than the language itself (Durocher, 2007), I hope by doing this project I will gain new insights into how to make pupils more aware and understanding of at least some elements of the culture in France and by extension that of other countries. The way in which I have chosen to do this is film. Media has a strong presence in our world today therefore pupils enter the classroom with higher levels of visual literacy than in the past. Herrero (2010, p.11) states that, ‘Visual literacy (the ability to interpret and create visual, digital and audio media) is a fundamental form of literacy in the 21st Century. Many (including the pupils) may consider watching a film to be an easier option than the usual lesson. However when employing visual literacy skills, Herrero (2010) argues that critical thinking takes place via questioning, analysing and evaluating information.

This report looks at the reaction to the introduction of cultural segments in my Year 8 French class during the second half of the summer term. The research follows a week when the whole department dedicates class time in lesson to cultural activities and research based tasks to which this action research links reasonably well.

Firstly we will look at the reasons behind this essay choice and my teaching concern. This will then be followed by a description of possible data collection methods. Next will be the findings of action taken. Supported by the work of academic researchers, lastly there will be a conclusion where I will share information on the impact on my teaching and future questions.
Methodology

Classroom action research (CAR) usually begins with a question or a concern for which an answer or solution may be sought. Solutions are tested and later refined if necessary. I wanted to improve and seek a better method of including and increasing cultural awareness in my lessons. The content of classes in my current department relies largely upon a text book. Text books regularly offer segments of cultural awareness which typically appear at the beginning or end of a unit or module. When placed at the end they are easily passed over due to time restrictions and exam pressures. Another reason for these omissions is that the information in the text book is either no longer relevant, out of date or too lengthy. Text books are expensive. MFL departments generally cannot afford to frequently replace text books, or update their software package instead. It follows that there is the potential for a lack of consistency with which cultural awareness is taught (Simpson, 1997). He writes that cultural input is often unplanned ‘unsystematic and incidental’. I enquired into teaching culture within my department. Of the 5 teachers approached, only one said they consciously, regularly and frequently included cultural knowledge in lessons. There are typical periods in a year during which our teachers focus on culture in their classrooms. These would generally be lessons before the end of the term or the year. An easy option for teachers is to show a film from the target language country as they are a good source of cultural information. The issue here is that one lesson is usually not enough to watch a film then complete activities on it. Moreover, cultural learning is likely to be passive and minimal in such situations. Simpson (1997) confirms that many of our students want to learn more of the culture of the country where the target language is spoken as they are naturally curious about it. I was not able to find a short film suitable for and relevant to my class at the time. I therefore exploited a 20-minute segment of a French film based on the life of a teenager. The film is called 'La Famille Belier'. My concern extended also to data collection. This will be discussed later in the essay. Now we shall move on to ethics.

Ethics

Ethics is to do with what is morally right and wrong as well as how we ought to live and act. When carrying out research the question of ethics is raised. Ethics is particularly important when dealing with children under 16. Being ethical ensures our practice is professional and systematically carried out so as to minimise risk to others. When carrying out research consideration to vulnerability, harm, risk, respect, power and control is necessary (Owens, 2015). In order to avoid potential ethical problems arising, it was necessary to obtain consent of participants. It was explained that we were seeking permission to carry out research, that it was voluntary participation and that all information collected would be used anonymously. I explained why we were doing the research and how it was going to be done and that no personal information would be passed on to the university or be included in the work. The consent form included names of people to contact in case of concerns. Incentives were not offered (BERA 2011). A proposal was sent to the supervisory panel for approval. Having written about the background for this essay, the next stage section in this essay will be a description of how the research was carried out and how data was collected.

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29 Kaiser (2011) promotes the use of clips over an entire film in the foreign language (FL) classroom.
**3 | DATA TO INFORM THE ACTION**

The precursor to the data collection was a proposal. The proposal included several forms seeking consent from teacher and pupil participants to the project with assurances of confidentiality and clearly stating that there is the option to withdraw at any time. The contact details were provided for a named person at the university and in the school.

To ensure data is valid we aim to triangulate our research. In order to achieve triangulation at least three methods of data collection are required. For the purpose of this study I chose to use teacher records, surveys, questionnaires and a group interview. First to be used was an in-class survey to try to discover the general opinions on and attitudes towards French or francophone culture, thus allowing pupils to see that they are involved in the project and to give their opinions. To this end you could argue that they equally serve as a motivational tool. Pegrum (2005) speaks of learner centred teaching and mentions the importance of giving pupils a say in their choice of title or film. He stresses that the teacher has the final word in this instance. Surveys and questionnaires allow you to obtain qualitative (or hard data) from a large group, on a wide range of topics and in a quick and easy way. Furthermore, surveys can be presented in a variety of ways, in that there are a several question formats open to the researcher/author. For example, you can choose between open, closed and multiple choice questions. All of which are appropriate for the younger participant. Surveys and questionnaires commonly serve as a relatively quick and simple precursor to interviews - the information gathered then informs the interview questions. Hopkins (2008) ‘cautioned that the method employed should not be too demanding on the teacher’s time’. When writing the questionnaires and surveys we it is better to be considerate of who the participants are. In the case of younger people and teenagers (as in this case) we might bear in mind the following:

- Keep questions simple - Multiple choice questions are limited to for example 3 and not the usual 5 options. Simple language is used and questions are short;
- Make questions age appropriate (Expansive Education Network, 2015). If necessary, replace phrases with images. For instance, a smiley face could represent a positive opinion.
- Lastly, it is advisable to trial the survey on a small group of similar participants first.

Surveys are not perfect. There are disadvantages. It is true that data can be collected relatively quickly however their analysis might often take longer than expected. Children/pupils may not be fully honest with their answers particularly where the issue of power is concerned. Baumfield (2008) in Expansive Education Network, 2015 writes ‘….Children become highly accomplished at guessing what the teacher is thinking’. Another disadvantage is that questions do not always allow for an in-depth response - space can be an issue. Be sure that the questions are relevant and clear, extensive preparation is might be necessary (including the trial group mentioned above). Time could be saved by turning to existing surveys where you will have the comfort of knowing that questions are applicable to your situation and well considered (Expansive Education Network, 2015). Checking that the questions are all suitable for your study and age would be a good precautionary measure. Sometimes they are to be adapted slightly.

The next form of data collection mentioned above was an interview to the class. Interviews are generally divided into structured and semi-structured interviews. Structured interviews often strictly follow a set of prepared questions. Gibbs (2013) likens this style to a questionnaire however it is done face to face. Semi-structured interviews allow for some or more flexibility in terms of the order of their questioning and more importantly, allowing the interviewee to develop ideas more.

The Expansive Education Network describes survey as a questionnaire which aims to gain their opinion on a matter or rate their behaviour in particular situation.
A common form of semi-structured interview is a group interview. They normally entail four to six people (Cohen and Manion, 1994). Cohen & al. (2000)) list the advantages of group interviews. They are quicker than individual interviews, responses can be richer, consensus views are often revealed in these settings, and they are useful in verifying research questions you may have developed thus they can serve to enhance reliability of data. In Denscombe (2010) we find the disadvantages of group interviews: there may be those who are more vocal and who tend to dominate the conversation at times. Aware of this, interviewers consequently make an effort to include all participants; A gender issue may come into play also, males tend to lead discussion in this kind of setting; Commonly seen in group interviews is that views may be modified to suit consensus view. A one to one interview would avoid this issue; As we read earlier, when dealing with children, there is the question of power as pupils are intuitive and may be inclined to say what they think the teacher wants to hear. Cohen et al. (2000) give the disadvantages of conducting interviews with children. Included in that list are the challenge of keeping the pupils’ answers to the point, and avoiding the situation where children prefer to say anything rather than not have an answer.

Many may believe that the success of an interview depends to an extent on the interviewer. A successful interview might include being prepared by writing out the questions, then displaying the same questions during the interview (on the board for instance) and being a neutral and an attentive listener. It is also good to be ready to rephrase a question if necessary. Preparing rephrased questions may prove to be helpful here. Finally, questions are better understood and therefore replied to if they are clear to the audience and asked one at a time. With regards to interview ethics, Kvale (1996) in Cohen et al. (2000, p.292) identify that three main areas of ethical issues —‘informed consent, confidentiality, and the consequences of the interviews; each, ...... is problematic’

It is often the case that those conducting CAR doubt the validity of logs and diaries. On the contrary, this third method of (commonly known as ‘soft’) data collection allows you to record information whilst it may be happening or shortly afterwards and, at regular intervals. Field notes reveal emerging trends and are easy to keep. The notes are simple, can include personal thoughts, observations and essentially are useful for recording ‘critical events’. Expansive Education describe critical incidents as events that have ‘particular significance for the research topic under investigation.’ (p16, summer, 2015) However it is hard to be specific with logs and diaries so teachers might want to refer back to other information such as previous recordings or their transcripts. Those new to this form of recording data in particular, may at first find it time-consuming. What is more, if you are researching a large class, it is difficult to immediately make notes mid-lesson. Teacher objectivity is difficult as their notes can be subjective. The combination of a survey, questionnaire, interview and field notes were sufficient to allow analysis (See below). In the next section we will look at some of the relevant literature on this subject whilst relating it to my findings in the final part of this paper.

4| Action

Kaikkonen (1997) defines culture as ‘..... a common agreement between the members of a community on the values, norms, rules, role expectations and meanings which guide the behaviour and communication of the members.’ (Kaikkonen et al. 1991 in Kaikkonen, 1997).

The aim of this research is to expose my Year 8 French class to differences in and similarities in their own culture (Kaikkonen, 1997 and Broady, 2004). In so doing pupils may be more encouraged to experience new cultures and over time begin to ask questions about culture in general. An initial
survey was carried out asking two questions: What comes to mind when you think of France and what is the best way to teach French culture in your opinion? The survey and following questionnaire involved the whole class. The interview was made of 4 people.

The culture of a country or language is vast in terms of teaching content. Byram et al. (1995) categorized cultural content into 4 groups. Firstly and by far the most common group is that of culture related to the traditions of a country. The second category refers to the history and institutions of that society. Thirdly, there are the norms or morals of that society and lastly there is the category concerning the country’s literature, art or high culture. (Byram et al. (1995, p.5) conclude that the awareness of culture is lacking in language classrooms and advise that there be ‘more discussion and clarity on what cultural awareness entails’. Broadly speaking the bulk of the cultural awareness from the film falls into the first and third category. Tips are offered by Kaiser (2011), The British Film Institute (2010) and Herrero (2010) on watching FL films.

The film ‘La Famille Belier’ tells the story of teenage girl at secondary school in France who finds her voice, and love, thanks to a national singing competition. She is the only person in her family who is hearing; the rest are deaf. Our children are accustomed to studying with children with hearing difficulties and sign language as it is a school specialism. For this reason the film had particular attraction and relevance. The original French audio was played with English subtitles. Some children had actually seen the film already and therefore inadvertently endorsed it!

Pupils were asked to describe similarities and differences in French life that they saw. They were also asked to give their opinion. They were allowed to discuss their findings in groups then shared them with the class. The film begins with a country girl’s journey to school. Relating to Byram’s third category, pupils quickly commenting on the location of the school noticing that rural schools serve large communities, therefore pupils have to travel great distances for their education in France. One girl, who is normally quite shy and rarely raises her hand in class felt strongly enough to speak in front of the class saying she felt ‘grateful’ (because her school was easily accessible to her) whereas the girl in the film had to cycle quite a distance to the local village in order to then catch a school bus which then took her some distance to school. One boy wondered what would happen in bad weather. The setting of a secondary school (category 2) facilitated the making of comparisons.

Kaiser (2011) tells us that the use of film in classrooms can represent values and behaviours of the foreign language community. One particular scene around the dining table in the film immediately triggered a memory for one boy who wanted to share his experience of visiting his mother’s friend. She offered him food that did not look appealing to him. His mother quietly and firmly let him know that he had to try the food. He found that the meal was pleasantly surprising. To the class he pointed out the need for polite behaviour, being respectful in people’s homes and being open to trying new things.

In the same article by Kaiser (2011), it is written that films in France are often a reflection of the burning social economic and political issues of the day. Such is their importance that presidents in France watch films as a way to keep abreast of contemporary issues in society. At the beginning of the film they show the birth of a calf which is black and they named it Obama. The class had quite a strong and instant reaction to this – some openly spoke out and felt it was racist. 55% of the participants made mention of the scene in their feedback notes. During discussions some children were quite vocal leading several of them to speak at once thus significantly raising the volume of the class. The conversation then turned to political issues in the news about Marie Le Pen of the far right in France who is currently gaining political ground and popularity. UKIP was mentioned briefly by one child. It was encouraging that they could see similarities and differences between cultures, show maturity of thinking and balance viewpoints. This eruption was unexpected and unplanned
and therefore I improvised. Baumfield et al (2012) indicate that improvisation and risk-taking play a valuable role in learning. The downside of such an incident is that the class reverted to English in this instance. Connected to the last point, one boy who rarely contributes to lessons, and is often off-task, eagerly raised his hand and added with confidence that the school in the film was very different because there was a ‘lack of diversity’. (Byram et al. (2005), category 2).

Both Kaiser (2011) and Pegrum (2005) remind us of the importance of foreign language films with regards to not only their cultural content but also their linguistic benefits. Pegrum (2005, p. 56) writes that 94% of students in his study believe that FL (Foreign Language) ‘feature films are useful for language learning’. Whilst watching the film, an incidental question arose in the use of ‘Tu ‘and ‘Vous’ (which both mean ‘You’). French customs (category 3, Byram, 2005)) in education are changing. Traditionally, pupils used the term ‘Vous’ to address teachers (which is a form of respect and shows a polite and professional distance between teacher and pupil). In class I usually encourage the use of ‘Vous’ to address teachers because it is an opportunity to learn and practise this form of the language. The reality now however is that many pupils use the more familiar term ‘Tu’ when speaking to teachers. One pupil questioned the use of ‘Tu’ for teachers in the film. An explanation of my choice of teaching I felt respectful to make. An ability to question is encouraging to see. It indicates the connection to and transfer of classroom learning to the film. I took the opportunity to allow pupils to speak about their own background (improvisation again, Baumfield et al., 2012). I subsequently asked how many pupils spoke different languages where different registers were used - 5 pupils raised their hands. Dornyei (2008) informs us that one way of increasing interest and motivation in learning is to personalize tasks and relate them to content in the learners’ own lives.

Culture and language often overlap in FL classes. Authentic language is an asset in the FL classroom – ‘the language of film often incorporates a wide variety of sociolects of the target language...[including] the speech of children and non-native speakers, slang and jargon’ (Kaiser, 2011, p. 233). The class heard a swear word, remembered it and recalled it later in class. Similarly, the pupils notice that in France people tend to swear more. The bulk of the class (60%) were surprised to see the difference in the levels of swearing not only out of class amongst peers but also in class by teachers. This was the second most surprising fact – ‘Teachers are rude’, ‘Teachers swear at pupils.’ It was unexpected that 2 children would say that they agreed with this behaviour as it was strong classroom management and ‘people will know to stop arguing’.

In contrast, the class seemed surprised by the number of similarities seen in the film despite the fact that approximately 62% of them had visited France before. Other similarities included the way the pupils dressed, transport, an attachment to mobile phones, and the school building. Most noted of similarities was the music. It also came as a surprise to 70% of the class to see that French pupils enjoy the same music as they do.

On the whole, the class seems to have moved on from their initial thoughts on France as revealed in the different data. A description of the interview will follow.

Much of the aforementioned originated from whole class feedback and a questionnaire. When interviewed as a small group other more detailed information came to light. The group interview was made up of volunteers from the same class. The group interview was held in the familiar surroundings of our classroom. The pupils were all known to have a good rapport with each other. The questions were open-ended. In the talk before the interview they had the opportunity to ask and read (my) questions. They knew that they would be read out in the order in which they appeared on the sheet and that the sheet would remain in front of them throughout the interview. They were also informed of the estimated length of time it would take and that all opinions were valuable. They were told that it would be recorded and that all information would be anonymous
and no personal information would be included in this research. That morning I asked to see the interviewees and checked that they were still willing to participate in the interview. Five children offered to help and were informed of the interview time. Only four attended – three boys and one girl.

During the interview they were supporting each other with words of encouragement, agreeing with each other and following up on each other’s comments. Being respectful and waiting for your turn to speak is positive however it gave rise to a situation whereby the last person to speak at one point simply paraphrased what the others had said. This may have been in line with the studies of Cohen et al. (2000, p. 287) where some children prefer to say ‘anything’ rather than say nothing. At one point, the question had to be tactfully rephrased when the first person misunderstood it, because the rest followed suit. Gender dominance did not appear to be an issue - the girl contributed equally. She made a valuable contribution when she said that learning about other cultures ‘helps you learn about your own’ and thus indicated that, for her, the comparative process discussed in Kaikkonen (1997) and Broady (2004) had already begun.  

The interview equally suggested that the class generally like to include cultural learning in lessons and appreciate its importance, “grammar is not needed to communicate”, one pupil said. The latter also suggests that some pupils may feel less inhibited when speaking French by not seeking perfection. They commented on the use of and preference to cultural segments in lessons as it serves to “break things up” in a target language lesson because (or when) you are ‘concentrating hard’. It was my second consecutive year of teaching that class and one interviewee recognized a routine in my teaching practice – that cultural knowledge would typically occur after an exam period and before a holiday. It was revealed that 3 of the 4 pupils identified with another culture outside school. They were aware that a large proportion of the school population had origins which were not White British. They later shared information on their home cultures. One of which came as a surprise to me as it was not in the school data. Finally, some children study British Sign Language at the school. They were intrigued by the French sign language and asked whether the signs, like the like language would also be different.

The next section concerns the teaching of culture from the perspective of teachers particularly those in my department.

**Feedback from teachers**

We have seen that culture is a vast topic and teaching it poses a challenge to teachers. Simpson (1997) confirms that educators appear unclear on which parts of the country’s culture would benefit children the most. Lambert (1974) in Simpson (1997) also points out that the problem can arise out of insufficient knowledge on the part of the FL teacher. His solution is improved teacher training as well as the careful planning of lessons. He continues by suggesting that teachers include culture in assessments also. The government stipulates in the National Curriculum that culture be included in lessons however it is illogical that it is not truly tested in national exams. For this reason, culture is easily not prioritised in planning and teaching lessons. A call is therefore made by Simpson (1997) for culture to feature in official assessments.

After obtaining permission, 5 language teachers including 2 native speakers in my department completed a questionnaire. All of them agreed that cultural awareness was highly. It arose that 1 person out of 5 (20%, and a non-native) included culture in lessons on a weekly basis. 80% (including 2 native speakers) included cultural information either at the end of the term or

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31 I was note taking and regretted not taking that line of discussion further.
incidentally and therefore supported Simpson’s (1997) argument regarding frequency. All teachers concerned commented on the out of date cultural awareness pages in text books. One teacher added that there was a lack of diversity in text books. 80% of the teachers regularly visited France and used that opportunity to update resources. All teachers used videos from the internet. When asked how to improve cultural awareness in lessons, one teacher suggested increased collaboration amongst the team and therefore in agreement with the opinion of Simpson (1997). The others offered individual solutions. Culture is not assessed in my department. Deciding what to show classes did not appear to be an issue. Simpson reported on this area 20 years ago. A significant number, although not all, of his concerns are still an issue in our classrooms today.

5 | Conclusions

It is important to assign the same level of importance to teaching culture as other content in foreign language teaching. I hold that when successful it can lead to positive outcomes. For example, pupils may consequently increase confidence in communicating with native speakers which is a key aim in language learning. Film was my main resource in this study. Short films are preferred however feature films should not be ruled out as a choice. I see that a wealth of learning can be achieved from a short 10-20 minute film or clip and that it is likely to be well received by classes. There were challenges however. It is important to ensure the work is manageable. I originally planned a series of lessons however the workload proved to be too heavy. Another challenge was sourcing information from recent literature. There are many studies on film but it was considerably harder to find cultural awareness research despite it being a government requirement in last year’s National Curriculum. I am more aware of the different categories of cultural awareness and the varied forms of introducing it in lessons (before I paid more attention to the customs of the foreign language country only (Byram (1995), category 3). Taking part in this study allowed me to learn more about my class, improve my relationship with them and gain information not available in their files.

Looking to the future I would like to explore the area further in classes for a number of reasons: FL films are more readily available nowadays via satellite television, channels and services such as Netflicks; children born in this technological age are more visually literate and probably more receptive to film as a lesson resource; lastly, transport to mainland France is increasingly cheaper and quicker. It would also be beneficial to learn to systematically plan short cultural segments into as many classes as possible and take opportunities to include the input of native speakers. Over 50 languages are spoken at our school therefore we have pupils already exposed to different cultures. Appreciating the varied cultures within the class is another avenue of possibility. There may be scope for intercultural awareness teaching in FL classes. On the subject of French sign language, one lesson on French sign language from the film for example would be educational in several ways. Concerning questionnaires, next time I will leave more space for answers.

It may be best we continue to avoid relying on text books for cultural awareness teaching. The internet, colleagues (particularly native-speaker teachers) and other professionals are a rich resource, as are our pupils on occasions. The solution according to Simpson (1997) lies in teacher training. Teachers via a programme funded by the European Union called Erasmus may now have fewer opportunities to train abroad due to Brexit.

It would be interesting to collaborate with other classes or do a joint project in the department, with another department or another school. More effective this would be if it became standard practice. As for our department, changes could be more permanent and far-reaching if cultural content featured throughout the department’s Schemes of Learning. I could do a similar project
next year and compare the results. Many pupils do media studies at the school. If I were to include critical analysis of the film (Herrero, 2010) that would be a real achievement as well as cross-curricular.

Some questions are to be tackled at teacher level, others at a department or even at school level. Whatever the case, work is still to be done, however now it is clearer to me how that may be achieved.

6 | REFERENCES


6I HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE YEAR 10 STUDENTS TO FOCUS AND WORK MORE INDEPENDENTLY THROUGH CHALLENGING TASKS?

Dianne Minnicucci
Thomas Tallis School

‘Creative people combine playfulness and discipline, or responsibility and irresponsibility. There is no question that a playfully light attitude is typical of creative individuals. But this playfulness doesn’t go very far without its antithesis, a quality of doggedness, endurance, perseverance’.
Csikszentmihalyi (1996)

1| INTRODUCTION

I am a teacher of art and design and photography. I am also the subject leader of photography. I have been teaching at the same school for almost eight years. It is a comprehensive school in South East London, within the Royal borough of Greenwich. I started working at this school after graduating from the Institute of Education. Prior to my teacher training I studied Fine art: Film and video at St. Martins school of art and design. Photography is one of five visual media subjects taught within the school. We also offer fine art, art and design, graphics, film and creative media courses. This report is the second one that I have created within the school.

2| AREA OF INTEREST

Photography is a creative subject requiring students to think and make decisions independently. As well as being a visual subject requiring students to make creative decisions involving the formal and visual elements to communicate ideas, students also need to develop ideas independently after reviewing and analysing the work of other artists and photographers. Students need opportunities to be creative. There needs to be a disciplined attitude towards crafting and improving, experimentation as well as the creative energy required to persist with experiments even when things don’t always go to plan. The report was created, as I wanted to encourage the students to be creative but to also combine their creativity with a disciplined attitude. Students found it fun to be creative but only for short periods of time, they had ideas but couldn’t sustain being creative for long periods of time if it required them to pause and think about what they had created and how they could improve it. I observed the class for a period of time before I thought about what the real
issue was. The issues with students sustaining a long period of development of an idea was an issue that was evident in a wide variety of year groups and not just this one, but it was interesting to focus on this group because of the diverse array of students; male and female, different abilities and various cultural backgrounds. All of the students had the same issue so I wanted to investigate how I could encourage a disciplined attitude to learning. First I had to listen, initially I intended to ask the boys who made up half of the group, I asked them what it was I could do to encourage independent learning, to make learning fun, to challenge them. I started with an informal talk with the boys and asked each one to contribute to the discussion. Then I created a questionnaire that I asked them to complete, and then we had another talk. The conversations then started to happen quite openly within the classrooms and that’s when the girls within the group became involved, the girls thought that it was unfair that it was only the boys and they almost demanded to be involved. After the questionnaires and conversations I read the information and I made the lessons more like mini workshops, I created worksheets where the students could choose an artist and respond independently, I think that this encouraged the students to start thinking.

3| METHODOLOGY

Action research is a form of research where I can identify an issue within teaching and learning. It can be an issue that I can explore between the student and the teacher though studying written material from various thinkers, psychologists or educators. The action part of the research is where I can adapt my teaching practice in order to facilitate a change in habit from the students or indeed myself in order to resolve the issue, although sometimes there may be no resolution but a change in the way in which we have previously practiced both teaching and learning. The research can be evaluated and can be also experimental.

4| AREA OF CONCERN

My concern is that I found that most students found it difficult to be independent. I also thought that the skills that we want to develop within young people are discipline, independence, but also and probably the most important being persistence. I found that the issues were that not only were students too dependent upon teacher support for ideas but that they also couldn’t work without structure. I also realised that I constantly monitored their work during every stage of the project and found that I wasn’t allowing students enough opportunities to work independently; I was in fact enabling them to be dependent on me for support. I was in fact ‘mothering’ the students. This maternal trait enabled them to be dependent, to rely on my monitoring to be more than checking but advice at every step.

5| DATA COLLECTED TO INFORM THE ACTION

As I thought about the issue I remembered during a previous project the students produced a photo book, which demonstrated their ability to work both creatively, and independently producing a successful range of final outcomes. This small project enabled students to show what they were capable of creating and I felt very confident in their ability to produce the final outcome unaided. Almost every student approached the task well, with only two students needing more time to complete. This reminder gave me the idea to plan a series of lessons in order to facilitate the creative and independent learning.

I had several communications with students and they also completed several questionnaires. I also had a few one to one conversations with around half of the students. I also spoke to the parents of
three students. During the conversations I had with the students I realized that we never really have conversations in the lessons about how learning is aiding the students, how best I can support students and especially, when students are developing individual ideas how I can best support them individually. I was able to listen and take action based on what they wanted. The questionnaires whilst informative were not as personal, I felt that the students didn’t feel as comfortable writing communicative words as much as they did when they spoke. I decided to continue the conversing, I also thought that this would be advantageous throughout the project as it would encourage the students to communicate their ideas effectively.

I had to get permission from the head teacher before the research started but also had to ask the students for consent (BERA 2011). I wanted the students to feel comfortable enough to talk about what their concerns were but at the same time there are several students who remain under the radar’, they are so quiet and so ‘hidden’ that to bring them to the forefront would make them more reluctant to talk about the issue.

6 | Action

I decided to work with a half of the group, which was a group of ten boys. I chose the boys initially as I found that I wanted to focus on a small focus group but also because this section of the group consisted of a wide range of ability and it had some real characters. I initially had a conversation with them about what I wanted to do and was quite open. This initial conversation concluded in a range of interesting ideas including collaborating with another subject, inviting artists in and more school trips. I found that from the beginning students were open, honest and mature, they had strong ideas on what and how they wanted to learn. We had another discussion about trips out of school and inviting artists and photographers to work with them. Luckily I had already invited a group The Wandering Bears in to facilitate a workshop. This was a workshop that I had attended three months earlier. The idea was that the students recreated photographs made by a selection of artists and photographs. They were provided with a photograph, a camera and some props this workshop was an opportunity for the students to work with artists and photographers from outside of the school. I was hoping that the students would feel less restricted than they felt in the classroom and I was expecting them to be spontaneous and creative with the added freedom that such a workshop provides. I tried to stay on the sidelines observing and not be too involved but I found this difficult. Again whilst the students created some really lovely photographs I found that I couldn’t help advising them and asking them to improve what they had done. I suggested that they review, refine their ideas and take more photographs. They left with a book of their photographs and were proud of their achievements. I found that I was too controlling with them as if I didn’t trust their ability to make informed decisions. With this information in mind I decided that I would give them more opportunities for more creative freedom.

Figure 1 - Wandering Bears workshop.
‘Participants were also more engaged in individual and group work versus listening to lectures, watching videos, or taking exams. Suggestions to increase engagement, such as focusing on learning activities that support students’ autonomy and provide an appropriate level of challenge for students’ skills’

Shernoff et al (2003, 158)

I decided to monitor their independence over the course of 4 lessons, I gave them a worksheet to work from enabling them to work at their own pace. I designed a simple worksheet that outlined the four assessment objectives that I wanted the students to focus on and ensured that the worksheet included opportunities to develop all four. I wanted to offer a challenge of working through the sheet largely unaaided and I was able to see the grow and develop. This wasn’t about final outcomes this was about the students rising to the challenge of creating and developing ideas independently. They had to focus and each student began to simply complete the tasks. I noticed that it was easier for them to work their way through the worksheet rather that follow my instructions. As the students began to work through these tasks they reviewed their work and their feelings toward the work altered as time progressed. They now had a little more time to complete the tasks and I also built in time to improve and refine their projects. The last lesson they had to plan themselves and they had to ask for the various resources in advance. This was a responsibility which they rose too quite naturally as they wanted to produce work to the best of their ability. The communication was still good and improving as they sent e-mails requesting materials and resources.

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Figure 2 - Edges Task

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During a conversation with a group of boys during a lesson a small group of three confident girls asked to be part of it they thought that this should be a project for the whole class. We had various conversations as a group which was interesting too as previously the talking had been one sided. Now as a group the students would openly discuss their ideas with each other and myself and I was there to assist on projects but I only offered help when students asked for help.

The atmosphere in the room changed and I found that the students did in fact work with not only more focus but with an attitude of responsibility. Each student seemed to ‘own’ their own work, ideas and working practice so I decided to quietly interview some of the students outside of the room. I asked them all the same questions, which were:

1. How do you think the lessons have changed?
2. How does the idea of working with a worksheet change the way in which you create?
3. Do you feel more confident to develop ideas?
4. Do you think that you work more independently?

Again their answers were more mature but I could see that some of the students were still tentatively taking small steps to independence. The most popular answers were:

- All of the students preferred using the format of having their own worksheet allowed them to work at their own pace, for example some students require a longer period to write and less time to be creative by taking photographs.
- Other students felt as if they had more time and felt less stress, as they didn’t have to work with such strict timelines.
- Student felt that as the ownership of their outcomes had been passed onto them they felt responsible to complete tasks and complete them well.
- All of the students felt that they didn’t need as much any help from me.
- One boy stated that the format showed that I trusted them in a way that I didn’t before. He said that the worksheet format allowed him to demonstrate his ability to work unaided and that it allowed him to prove that he could work creatively and independently.

These results should have made me feel happy as I finally achieved what I set out to do but instead I felt a little sad that I wasn’t needed as much. I discovered that this was as much a problem for me as it was for them. I didn’t trust them to work independently and I thought that they were not able to produce work to a high enough standard. I still gave the students feedback but now it was a more holistic approach to feedback, I had conversations with them instead of a didactic, formal written feedback which they rarely read in fact they only viewed and acted on the feedback only when asked to. The verbal feedback through conversations meant that we bonded on a profession level and they acted on it without offence. I was very pleased with the outcomes from a range of students within the group. The most interesting fact was that this structure allowed them to work to their own structure within the lesson spending time on various tasks that meant they were spending more time where they needed it.

At the same time, the size of the zone may vary for the same child from one area to another or at different times in the learning process. A highly verbal child may not have trouble acquiring concepts in reading comprehension, for example, but have great difficulties with long division. Vygotsky would interpret this as the child needing more assistance in one area than another. In addition, at various times in the process of learning, children respond to different types of assistance.
7| EVALUATION OF THE ACTION

The students responded to this experiment in a mature way and I have learnt a great deal from they way they learn best. I have been able to provide opportunities for them to feel a sense of achievement and this has been made possible through communication and listening to the students needs. I realised that I had been completely restricting students by expecting them to be creative but in a very restrictive format that didn't suit any of the students. I also didn't realise that within a two-hour lesson I had stated that all 4 tasks had to be completed but with certain time frames, this made the students feel as if they could never meet the expectations, as they could never accomplish the set tasks. Because of this most of the students felt underwhelmed and stressed.

For all students. In changing these formats the atmosphere within the classroom changed and it was clear that the students were happier working on creating something personal and meaningful. Whilst I have high expectations of the students this also brought an obligation to fill my expectations even if they were unrealistic. I asked students to complete a questionnaire at the end of the project too and here are their results. It is clear that the students have habitually adapted their learning styles to the new format.

Figure 3 - Results – evaluation process (Q1)
Allowing students to think by putting them into a different mindset of independent learning has enabled them to mature. I asked them during another questionnaire about their ability to work independently and many of them now said that they way in which they worked hadn’t changed, they seemed to be convinced that they had always been independent creative learners. I asked them questions that linked to the Tallis habits so that the focus was now on the students as individual learners having responsibility for their own projects rather than ‘work’ to do. I wanted them to become more disciplined and independent through habitual practice rather than fear of achieving specific grades.
8 | CONCLUSION: CHANGES IN IDEAS AND PRACTICES

I have often thought that a more holistic approach to learning was my most successful way of communicating ideas and improving learning. I felt that this could only be achieved through conversation and discussion about ideas and treating each child as an individual. I have begun to know each student’s strengths and weaknesses and their ways of approaching and working on various tasks.

I have discovered that teaching a whole class simply doesn’t work for each individual. Obviously whilst we don’t have time to plan for every student we do have time to give every student the same starting point enabling them to work at their own pace and more importantly within their own fashion.

This research project has also highlighted the way in which I teach and communicate with students is a battle of being a more axiological facilitator rather than a demanding teacher. The students have brought up the issue of trust which is something that I’d never considered in teaching but I haven’t shown the students that I trust their judgement which, in as creative environment can be a sensitive subject.

In concluding I would like to continue to allow for focus, independent learning and creativity by planning opportunities for students to develop through challenging tasks.

9 | BIBLIOGRAPHY


