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COMMENTARY

Coalition cultural and education policies: Impact on art and design education in schools

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In 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition’s programme for government promised “freedom, fairness, responsibility” (Cabinet Office, 2010). But, what impact have its education and cultural policies had on art and design education in schools in England?

Educational policy

The last five years have been marked by a number of policy initiatives introducing new kinds of schools as well as changes in the curriculum and examinations. These, together with increasing pressures of management, inspections, assessment procedures, performance indicators, accountability measures, league tables and teacher appraisal, have raised important issues about the purposes of education, the place of art and design in the school curriculum and its role and status in general education.

National Curriculum

The government’s view is that “art, craft and design embody some of the highest forms of human creativity” and should be part of a broad and balanced curriculum. This aims to ensure that all pupils produce creative work, become proficient in various forms of art, craft and design techniques, and are able to critique creative works and understand their historical and cultural context (DfE, 2014). Current government policy is to return teachers’ freedom to determine curriculum content. It follows that schools are required to publish their curriculum online for each subject and each year group (DfE & DCMS, 2013).

This is, however, inconsistently applied: Local authority schools are required to follow the National Curriculum. However, the 4170 academies and 174 free schools, also publicly funded, are not. The government claims that such schools provide greater choice for parents, drive up standards and create the potential for new partnerships and opportunities for learning. Critics anticipate that they will drain pupils and resources from other schools. The fear is that the education system, not only academies and free schools, will be privatised – rather like the National Health Service (Hunt, 2014).

Despite the rhetoric around school autonomy, the general thrust of curriculum policy in England has been highly centralising (Hallgarten & Pehlivanova, 2013), and the National Curriculum has had an inhibiting effect on art and design education. Since 2010, the number of hours that the arts are taught has fallen by up to 11 per cent; the number of art and design teachers has
fallen by 4 per cent with a reduction of 6 per cent in their teaching hours (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2013). Not all those who teach art are qualified art teachers.

**Teacher training and professional development**

The diversification of routes into teacher training means that there are fewer places in higher education institutions for art and design student teachers (Maddern, 2011). Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses have been severely cut: 40 per cent of art and design courses were lost in 2011/2012, despite their high Ofsted rating (Guardian, 2014). The fear is that with training increasingly school-based, teacher training will be reduced to a toolbox of techniques overseen by mentors, already over-stretched by their own workloads (ATL, 2011).

The continuing decline of local authority influence and change of emphasis from advisory support to inspection mean that schools must choose from the marketplace of independent providers for curriculum and professional development, primarily arts organisations, museums and galleries as well as professional organisations, consultants and artists. This has had a disastrous effect on art and design education in schools, particularly primary, where least advice and support have been available. The National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD) reports that 72 per cent of art and design teachers fund their own professional development (NSEAD, 2014a) – unfairly so, given that other subject teachers do not pay for continuing professional development, of which more is available to them.

**Assessment, performance, accountability**

The Coalition holds that accountability for student achievement is critical to driving educational improvement, and has strengthened indicators of schools’ performance. But, Ken Robinson has described the “tyranny of testing” as a “massively profitable enterprise … an engine of the education economy”, and highlighted its limited educational value (Robinson, 2014). Art and design has been both a core and a popular subject in schools, but the imposition of performance targets, assessment measures and levels had a profoundly negative impact – leading to superficiality and shallowness of educational experience, rather than the depth of study the government hoped for. Instead of improving quality of art and design education, it has impoverished it.

NSEAD’s (2014a) survey of heads of art and design departments revealed that performance measures excluded, or marginalised, art and design education, and impacted negatively provision, pupil choice, gallery and museum visits, specialist staff, professional development and the perceived value of the subject in state schools. Learning opportunities were reduced significantly. Excessive monitoring and assessment targets based on inappropriate evidence (i.e. English and mathematics test results) created an unsuitable framework for art and design, and for the monitoring and assessment of pupils’ development. Indeed, the National Association of Head Teachers recommends that “a system wide review of assessment should be undertaken to help to repair the disjointed nature of assessment through all ages, 2–19” (NAHT, 2014).

**Cultural education**

Having examined the broad cultural education provided by teachers, arts and cultural organisations and practitioners, Darren Henley Review (2012) called for a national plan for cultural education to be included in the National Curriculum, and for the creation of a new funding enterprise, the Cultural Education Partnership. The government has subsequently come to regard Arts Council England (ACE) as its main agency for implementing cultural education policy. ACE’s 10-year strategic framework declared that every child and young person should experience the
richness of the arts. Its goals were: “to improve the delivery of art opportunities in a more coherent way; and to raise the standard of art being produced for, with and by children and young people” (ACE, 2010).

In practice, ACE supports

(1) The Cultural Education Partnership Group comprising the Heritage Lottery Fund, the British Film Institute, English Heritage and itself.

(2) A national network of 10 Bridge Organisations, which commission arts organisations to collaborate with teaching schools to develop resources and guidance for teachers.

(3) Artsmark, intended to enable schools and other organisations to “evaluate, strengthen and celebrate” their arts and cultural provision.

(4) Arts Award, a national qualification, which encourages young people up to the age of 25 to be involved in the arts.

(5) The Cultural Passport, which encourages children and young people to record, share and review their engagement with cultural activities.

(6) The Museums and Schools programme, intended to spark young people’s curiosity and encourage a lifelong passion for culture and learning.

Government funding has been made available to other organisations to extend art and design education. The DfE, for example, provides £395,000, combined with a further £90,000 from ACE and other support from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, to expand the Sorrell Foundation’s National Art and Design Saturday Clubs for young people (Paul Hamlyn, 2012). English Heritage aims to help teachers to use the historic environment as a resource, and provides free school visits to its 400 properties and online resources.

Impact of education and cultural policies on art and design education

Government has devolved responsibility to ACE to lead support for art and design education. But, by definition, ACE’s prime concern is for the arts, and its funding for education initiatives is directed at agencies outside schools. The Bridges may encourage collaborative partnerships between schools and cultural practitioners, but anecdotal evidence suggests that this does not always extend or enrich school’s provision: it pays primarily for increased costs of administration and coordination. The auditing measures and accreditation promoted by ACE have not necessarily resulted in higher standards of art and design education in schools.

As for “freedom, fairness, responsibility”, schools and teachers are less free than in the past: their scope to determine their curricula is severely diminished by the controls exerted by assessment and inspection requirements. The system is unfair, funding is controlled by coordinating bodies and initiatives do not reach all schools. Pilot schemes are easy to set up, but it is neither straightforward nor cheap to roll out successful schemes nationally. Innovation does not necessarily result in development. The bidding culture means that schools compete with each other: most schools are unsuccessful; not all teachers are competent in seeking and securing funds. Demands on teachers’ time to assess, manage and administer have increased; time spent teaching has decreased.

Against a backdrop of uncertainty over changes to the curriculum and examinations, reductions in and inadequacy of teacher training and professional development, increasing accountability and assessment, and attacks on the teaching profession (many by Michael Gove, the former Secretary of State for Education), art and design education has been marginalised and teachers demoralised. Numbers of pupils who study art and design are falling (NSEAD, 2014a). The NSEAD identified a number of key problems facing art and design education in schools:
performance measures continue to erode provision; fewer specialist teachers are being trained; paucity of specific subject development; learning opportunities in school and the cultural sector have diminished; the subject lacks value. (NSEAD, 2014a, p. 1) Surely, this is not the “stability and reform” that the Coalition planned.

The NSEAD’s proposals include a curriculum for all pupils, which makes explicit the distinct value and future of the subject, which provides for subject-specific professional development, which offers a high level of teacher education, and most importantly, and which requires an accountability, assessment and progression system that supports, not restricts, the subject. It calls for more effective partnerships with other cultural institutions and better advocacy for the subject (NSEAD, 2014b).

These elements have been lost in recent years. In their attempts to structure the school curriculum and manage learning and teaching, governments have failed to understand the nature of art, craft and design in general education and the relationships between these aspects of cultural education, based on learning through making. Here, education is concerned not only with knowing that and knowing about, but also with knowing how and knowing why.

We now often talk about a knowledge-based society. Governments all over the world have realized that somehow the economic wealth of society is related to the amount of knowledge in it. But this subtly misses the point. The crux for a successful economy is not knowledge itself (though knowledge must be there) but the ability to deploy knowledge creatively in responding to and shaping change. (Baynes & Norman, 2013)

Successive versions of the National Curriculum have reinforced a clumsy dichotomy between art and design, design and technology. The result has been confusion and neglect of key areas of learning. Environmental design is a glaring omission: how we shape and manage our environment is one of the major challenges of the twenty-first century.

Should art and design education continue to be based on a fine art model, or should it benefit a broader practical education by emphasising making and designerly thinking? Should it be concerned with the past and our artistic heritage, or with the future of material culture? Should it be to nurture the individual’s ability to understand the world, think independently and do things? Should it encourage pupils to learn how to learn, and to learn to be creative? Should art and design be part of a broad and balanced curriculum in general education or a specialist subject, providing a stepping stone to higher education, vocational training and industry? Should the art/design teacher be a civil servant, apparatchik, administrator or educator?

Such issues will continue to be debated, but “let me make it clear”, as David Cameron is so fond of saying, what we need now in art, craft and design education is indeed “freedom, fairness and responsibility”. Freedom is vital for educational professionals to develop a curriculum to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, and as an escape from the tyranny of testing, which has distorted the nature of learning and teaching. There needs to be greater fairness in resource provision, so that teachers receive adequate training and so that all schools are able to secure support, especially for professional development. Teachers need the professional responsibility of making informed decisions about what pupils learn and how they learn, independent of government diktat and restrictive practices such as the burden of inappropriate accountability measures.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
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