



An investigation into the ways in which art is taught in an English Waldorf Steiner school



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ABSTRACT

Children who are educated using a Waldorf Steiner approach demonstrate superior expressive drawing skills (Rose et al., 2011) but little is known about how art is taught within this educational system. Four Waldorf Steiner primary school teachers participated in semi-structured interviews designed to explore the Waldorf Steiner educational philosophy, their training and the ways in which they approach art in the classroom. A social constructionist thematic analysis identified two themes – teacher's experience of art and the teacher and child's approach to art. Within these themes the importance of adequate training which stresses the value of art and gives teachers opportunity to engage in art activities was emphasised. Such training was linked to an effective teaching approach which placed importance on teaching skills and encouraging children to develop their understanding of art through discussion.

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1. Introduction

There is a general consensus amongst academics and educators that art is an important subject which offers multiple benefits to children such as facilitating confidence and feelings of self-worth, creativity and imagination, a positive disposition towards learning and developments in motor control, language and literacy (Davis, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978; Yagamata, 1997). By enhancing children's ability to observe, communicate and be creative through art children can be equipped with the vital skills needed to express themselves (Hetland & Winner, 2004). With the knowledge that adult art is vital to express moods, feelings and ideas (Jolley, 2010) it is essential that children's expressive art skills are developed to aid their imaginative and expressive thinking (Burkitt, Jolley, & Rose, 2010). Given the importance art has for children and adults the suggestion that the development of expression in children's drawings declines during the primary school years (Davis, 1997; Jolley, Fenn, & Jones, 2004) and that interest in art declines with age because children feel less positive about the activity as they get older (Burkitt et al., 2010) is a cause for concern.

Although parental input and the child themselves have an impact on how well children develop good artistic skills and a healthy relationship with their own ability in art, the way schools approach art education has been found to be vital in forming a child's expressive drawing skills (Burkitt et al., 2010). Indeed, Davis (1997) and Jolley et al. (2004) suggested that educational factors could explain the dip in expressive development they identified. Research conducted in an English

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context has given some insight into educational practices which could shape children's artistic development. Hallam, Lee, and Das Gupta (2007) reported that the English national curriculum presents three different teaching positions – facilitator (which emphasises freedom and self-expression), philosopher (which focuses on art history and appreciation) and expert (which prioritises a directive approach and a focus on skills). Within the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013) each of these teaching positions is given equal weight and this suggests that teachers must develop an approach that gives children the chance to develop skills, have free expression and develop their aesthetic sensibilities. However, the lack of curriculum guidance on how to adopt a balanced teaching approach can be an issue because many primary school teachers are non-specialists who have received limited exposure to art in their teacher training (Clement, 1994) and have little confidence in their own skills as artists (O'Connor, 2000).

Interviews conducted with English primary school teachers highlighted dissatisfaction with their curriculum and a gap between educational policy and practice (Hallam, Das Gupta, & Lee, 2008). Teachers suggested that they adopt the position of expert or facilitator during art lessons and this was further supported with classroom based observational research (Hallam, Das Gupta, & Lee, 2011; Hallam, Lee, & Das Gupta, 2011). The gap between policy and practice is an issue because children do not receive a consistent and balanced approach to art. Children are primarily encouraged to focus on skills or free expression and their opportunities to develop their understanding of art appreciation are extremely limited. Furthermore, when evaluating child art teachers demonstrated a preference for photo-realistic art over abstract or expressive art and this promotes a message that to be successful at art, children must closely follow instruction and create photo-realistic art without free expression (Hallam, Lee, & Das Gupta, 2012). Although empirical research suggests that adults in general show a significance preference for realistic images (Vessel & Rubin, 2010) it could be argued that one role of art education is to challenge this bias and to increase the understanding and appreciation of a diverse range of artworks (Parsons, 1987; Leder, Belke, Oeberst, & Augustin, 2004).

Research which has examined the ways in which art is taught in English National Curriculum schools suggests that educational practices within this education system could be detrimental to children's creative and expressive development (Jolley et al., 2004). However, it is important to remember that not all children are educated within the state system and alternative educational approaches are growing in popularity (Sobo, 2014). Within the UK there are a number of Waldorf Steiner schools which are informed by their own specific educational philosophy.

In the UK, Waldorf Steiner schools are mainly independent non-denominational private schools. Recently three have been granted state-funding and run as academies (Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, 2014). Waldorf Steiner teachers aim to educate children to meet them at their developmental stage according to the philosophy of Austrian scientist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). Due to this philosophy the arts are an important aspect to education because children are not seen as cognitively orientated individuals. It is suggested that children require combined nourishment of head, heart and hands to be educated as a whole person and develop as valuable members of society (Barnes, 1991). Within the Waldorf Steiner movement art is depicted as “the start of a long journey over eight years that gradually acquaints children with the pictorial resources, aiming to develop artistic skills and abilities for self-expression” (Wildgruber, 2012, p. 96). Art is regarded as crucial to the harmonious development of the child's inner life (Nicol, 2011) and the entire curriculum is described as artistic-imaginative, with the dramatic and creative facets of art incorporated into the teaching of other subjects, including mathematics and the sciences (Lim, 2004). Artistic striving is encouraged in staff as well as pupils (Nicol, 2011) with Woods et al. (2005) reporting that 95% of teachers from fifteen Waldorf Steiner schools in Britain believed that one characteristic of most teachers was superior artistic and creative skill.

Research has demonstrated that the educational system a child is exposed to plays a key role in shaping their artistic development (Cherney, Seiwert, Dickey, & Flichtbeil, 2006). Findings consistently report that children educated at Waldorf Steiner schools have superior expressive drawing skills and creative ability when compared to children educated in National Curriculum and Montessori schools (Ogletree, 2000; Cox & Rowlands, 2000; Kirkham & Kidd, 2015). More recently, Rose, Jolley, and Charman (2012) tested the expressive and representational drawing development of 135 children; 45 from each type of school, in three different age groups (5-, 7- and 9). Within the study children were asked to complete three expressive drawings (that gave them freedom to draw anything that depicted the moods angry, happy and sad) and three representational drawings (observational drawings of a wooden mannequin, a house from memory and a free drawing). Analysis of the drawings revealed that those completed by Waldorf Steiner children were of higher expressive quality with more content themes and an increased use of formal artistic properties such as line and composition. Representational drawing was comparable among the schools, which shows that the expressive drawing skills of children within the Waldorf Steiner environment are not at the detriment of the ability to draw realistically.

The experimental research outlined above suggests that educational values have an integral role in shaping children's artistic development and have highlighted key differences in ability between different educational approaches. However, the methods utilised in this research did not explore the wider educational context and so little is known about the approach adopted by Waldorf Steiner teachers and how this approach facilitates superior expressive and creative artistic skills. The current paper addresses this by using qualitative methods to explore how Waldorf Steiner teachers conceptualise their approaches to art and how the Waldorf Steiner philosophy informs their teaching practice. This will enable an investigation of how these teaching differences may differ from practices adopted within the National Curriculum and provide the basis for future, observational studies which Jolley (2010) argued are essential for a more thorough understanding of art teaching approaches.

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