



**The Factors that Influence Primary Teachers'**

**Pedagogy in Visual Arts Education in Ireland**

By

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degree of Master in Education Studies (Visual Arts)

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### **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this dissertation is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions from others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly. This work has not been submitted previously at this or any other educational institution. The work was done under the guidance of Dr. Mary Grennan at the Marino Institute of Education, Dublin. I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation upon request.



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### **Abstract**

This small-scale study explores the factors that influence teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy in the Irish primary school setting. A mixed methods sequential explanatory design was adopted, and the data was gathered through questionnaires. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with seven primary school teachers who had experience teaching across a variety of classes and in different primary schools in Ireland. Following the data collection process, the data were analysed and the subsequent findings reported that there were a variety of factors that influenced pedagogy among primary teachers. The data revealed three main themes: the pressures teachers perceived themselves to be under, the importance they placed on Visual Arts in their own pedagogy, and their personal experiences with Visual Arts education in the past, as both student and teacher. This study aims to provide an opportunity for generalist teachers to share how they interact with the Visual Arts Curriculum and discuss whether there are any factors that impact their pedagogical practice.

*Keywords:* Visual Arts, Factors, pedagogy, influence, teachers, primary, mixed methods, explanatory design



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**Abbreviations**

CPD: Continued Professional Development

DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools

INTO: Irish National Teachers Organisation

ITE: Initial Teacher Education

NCCA: National Council for Curriculum Assessment

PST: Pre-Service Teacher

SERCARC: Senate Environment, Recreation, Communication and the Arts Reference  
Committee

SNS: Social Network Site

VA: Visual Arts

## **Introduction**

### **Opening**

Visual Arts is an important subject in the education of every Irish primary school student. It is a key learning area within the curriculum that provides a wide range of benefits. Tyler and Likova (2012) suggest that, while engaging with Visual Arts, children employ cognitive processes that ultimately allow language and thought to be expressed through a variety of representations. Edwards (2014) explains that it provides an outlet for children's imaginations by giving them a physical and tactile way to express their thoughts and ideas, arguably making it a significant subject to include in the curriculum. He also stated that "As children talk to each other about their work, they clarify concepts, develop problem-solving skills, enhance memory and observational skills, and practice language" (p.120). These multiple benefits can only be obtained through high-quality Visual Arts education, demonstrating its importance. However, reviews from curriculum implementation have revealed considerable variability in the quality of Visual Arts experiences received by children in Irish schools. Therefore, this research seeks to explore the factors that influence Irish primary teachers' pedagogy in Visual Arts education.

### **Visual Arts Education in Ireland**

Ireland is known for its rich heritage and culture in art. The arts encompass a multitude of creative subjects including drama, music, dance, poetry and Visual Arts. Various international studies have focused on the importance of the Arts, there are fewer, however, that concentrate specifically on Visual Arts. Instead the studies tend to encompass the combined experiences of all of the Arts subjects. A considerable amount of the literature included in this dissertation was sourced from these types of studies like Kenny, Finneran and Mitchell (2015), Alter, Hayes and O Hara (2009), Edwards (2014) and Robinson (2017). While it would be fascinating to investigate all of the arts subjects, it is beyond the reach of

this study to do so. Therefore the emphasis in this study will focus solely on Visual Arts. Also, studies from an Irish perspective are generally scarce so a considerable percentage of the literature will be sourced from countries with similar educational models.

When discussing the formation of the Visual Arts curriculum in Ireland, it is impossible to do so without first highlighting the work of the Arts Council. This is the national agency for funding, promoting and developing the arts, that was created to nurture the arts in Ireland in 1951. The Arts Council highlighted the needs for arts education and released numerous publications to address the issues it was experiencing.

One notable moment for the council was the release of Bensen's (1979) report *The Place of the Arts in Primary Education*. In this report, Bensen's opening statement proclaims simply that "the arts have been neglected in Irish Education" (1979, p.5). He highlighted the shortfalls of the arts education in Ireland and provided suggestions on how to improve it. On its 40th anniversary of the publication, President Michael D Higgins reminisced that

The Benson Report ... was a radical foundation document which examined the position of the arts in Irish education. It revealed what little sense of the role and function of arts and culture, within society or within education existed and it made over one hundred recommendations as to what steps should be taken to give the arts a proper role in the education of the Irish people" (Encountering the Arts in Ireland - 40th Anniversary Celebration of the Benson Report, 2019).

This report was arguably the catalyst that spurred the implementation of a better arts curriculum in Ireland.

In the intervening 40 years, the provision of arts experiences in primary school has improved considerably, and the arts are generally alive and well in Irish schools today. The current Visual Arts curriculum developed in 1999 encourages children to develop connections between their imaginative lives and the real world, as well as to organise and communicate their thoughts, emotions, and experiences in a visual, tangible format. It states that;

Visual Arts education provides for creative and aesthetic experiences through exploring, investigating, experimenting, inventing, designing and making in a range of media. It promotes observation and ways of seeing and helps the child to acquire sensitivity to the visual, spatial and tactile world and to aesthetic experience ( *Visual Arts Primary School Curriculum*, 1999, p.5).

This program is quite effective due to the broad perspective Visual Arts provides, as well as the wide variety of media and experiences given to students. The Visual Arts curriculum allows children to assimilate and adapt to experiences while also providing them with a way to make sense of their world through various mediums such as drawing, painting, constructing, and inventing. It also provides a robust foundation from which primary teachers can build their own pedagogy. According to the Visual Arts Guidelines (1999), if we provide "a broad and balanced curriculum" (p. 18), children will have the opportunities they need to learn the concepts and skills that underpin visual expression, as well as provide them with meaningful Visual Arts experiences.

When the NCCA conducted a review of the curriculum implementation in 2005 their findings were largely positive, claiming that schools were "providing a breadth of Visual Arts experience for children" and it "was the greatest success reported by teachers, followed by children's enjoyment of Visual Arts and children's self-expression through Visual Arts" (INTO, 2010, p.92).

Even though there are few studies that look directly at Arts pedagogy from the viewpoint of Irish teachers, the INTO discussion document *Creativity and the arts in primary school* (2010) was an important piece of research that looked at teachers' experiences with each Arts subject. This was the last large-scale comprehensive discussion among primary teachers in Ireland on the arts, and while it did not focus solely on Visual Arts, it highlighted how these subjects were looked at nationwide. The document was divided into two sections, the first section reflected upon the current practice of teachers and the importance of the arts in education. The second supplied slides and discussions from the conference where various

specialists in arts education highlighted the importance of the arts and provided ideas and opportunities for teachers to use in their pedagogy.

This national study determined what helped teachers, such as specialist teachers, and support for schools. However it also provided the opportunity to discuss what hindered their pedagogy, such as lack of funding, lack of time and focus being placed on other subjects. It segregated each of the arts subjects and went into great detail assessing what areas teachers felt confident and less confident teaching. A survey of 209 teachers demonstrated that while there was a general sense that the arts subjects were important to foster in primary schools, respondents admitted there were numerous obstacles preventing them from teaching the Arts to the best of their abilities. Some of these obstacles included, but were not limited to funding, space, time, insufficient CPD, poor confidence, mindset and perceived parental expectations.

### **Teachers' Pedagogy and its Influence on Learning**

The INTO themselves reflected that ultimately "it's necessary to ensure that there is a positive classroom and school climate in place one that is constructive, non threatening and is founded on the belief that all pupils can, and have a right to learn" (2010, p.77). They claimed that the teacher's pedagogy would be at the core of the students' learning experiences in the Arts. While the production of the new Visual Arts curriculum was a step in the right direction, there were factors that still hindered the pedagogy of teachers trying to implement it.

There are several factors to consider when analysing a student's learning experience of Visual Arts. It is important that the teacher's approach facilitates their students' creative journeys. As Robinson and Aronica (2015) explains

teachers' expectations have radical implications for the achievements of their students. If teachers convey to students that they expect them to do well, it's much more likely that they will. If they expect them to do badly, that's more likely too (p.97).

If students are given the impression that their teacher does not believe in their ability, they will be less likely to engage with the subject. Edwards (2014) has shared some of the many advantages to promoting successful Visual Arts lessons in the classroom. Some benefits include providing an option for those who learn differently, allowing them to practice lifelong skills like critical thinking in a creative way, and giving them a sense of accomplishment if they struggle with traditional subjects like English, Irish, and Maths. Robinson and Aronica (2015) believe that "the core purpose of education is to prepare young people for life after school; helping them to build up the mental, emotional, social, and strategic resources to enjoy challenges and cope well with uncertainty and complexity" (p. 99). Considering this, teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy is crucial.

According to Robb, Jindal-Snape and Levy (2020) teachers hold a very important role when it comes to children's experiences in Visual Arts. For some students, primary education may be the first and most crucial interaction with the subject so "teachers and schools have a responsibility to ensure that the Visual Arts curriculum is delivered effectively and that the quality of delivery supports the understanding and curiosity of the child" (Robb et al, 2020, p 16). Consequently, it has the potential to lay the foundations of their Visual Arts journey.

### **Aims of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to provide an opportunity for generalist teachers to share how they interact with the Visual Arts Curriculum and discuss whether there are any factors that impact their pedagogical practice. This research will seek what factors, whether negative or positive, affect a teacher's pedagogy of Visual Arts and will provide an in-depth and broad understanding from teachers around Ireland. This study will look at both the general consensus and in-depth conversations to present a diverse viewpoint on the subject utilising quantitative and qualitative data.



There is, at present, a shortage of studies exploring Visual Arts pedagogy from an Irish primary perspective. In their own study Kenny et al (2015) focused on pre-service teaching experiences and how it impacted their emerging pedagogy and highlighted that "there is currently a significant gap in research regarding arts education within teacher education in Ireland" (p.160). However, there are only two other reputable studies which cover a similar overview of the Arts subjects among Irish primary teachers. These two studies, conducted by the INTO (2010) and Benson (1979), gained the general consensus of the policy and practice of the Arts, while also highlighting factors that helped and hindered pedagogy. Uniquely this study will focus purely on Visual Arts education. This research will also provide a more up-to-date perspective. It will highlight the key factors that affect the pedagogy of Irish primary teachers in Visual Arts education and discuss the consequences of these factors. Experiences will be drawn from all stages of their careers, as well as from when they were students. It will look into what type of Visual Arts teacher they have become, while questioning if there are factors that help or prevent them from teaching the subject.

### **Research Question and Approach**

“What factors influenced primary teachers' pedagogy of Visual Arts education in Ireland?” was the key question to be investigated in this study. Personal and external factors, such as the impact of curriculum overload, trust in their own skill, pressure from their schools, and whether their experience as a student and teacher was positive or negative, were all addressed and analysed. In seeking to answer the research question, a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was deemed appropriate, and both quantitative and qualitative data was necessary in fully addressing the aforementioned aims of the research. The first phase began with a quantitative questionnaire amongst primary teachers based in Ireland. The confidence in their own artistic abilities was explored and compared to their impressions of

their ability to teach Visual Arts. Teachers were questioned about where they got their lesson ideas, as well as the pressures that surrounded their pedagogy.

The second phase took the information gleaned and used it to construct the interview questions with seven teachers, sourced from the questionnaire. These questions focused on their personal experiences and went into greater depth on the previous questions. By combining the two approaches, this research was able to get a broad picture of teachers' pedagogy around the country while also getting a closer look at the feelings, perspectives, perceptions, and behavior of several teachers. The goal of this research is to highlight the factors that affect teachers when planning and initiating Visual Arts lessons. It will explore whether they have enough time, space and resources to adequately cover all of the strands while also gaining an insight into what inspires their pedagogical practice and whether their experiences have been positive or negative.

### **Layout of Dissertation**

There are five chapters in this study: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Presentation of Data, findings and analysis and Conclusion. A brief description of each has been provided below:

**Chapter One: Introduction.** This explains the study's context, the research's goals and priorities, the research questions, the methodology approach used, and the study's layout.

**Chapter Two: Literature review.** This begins with a presentation of the research's theoretical dimensions before reviewing applicable literature under the following headings: Visual Arts education, creativity, product vs process, teacher confidence, hierarchy of subjects, apprenticeship of observation, funding and initiatives, reliance on templates and influence of social media.

**Chapter Three: Research methodology.** This section discusses the benefits of using both qualitative and quantitative analysis while examining why mixed methods explanatory

design was appropriate for this study. The key aspects of the research are described, including data collection and analysis methods used, ethics, validity, triangulation, and reliability.

**Chapter Four: Presentation of data, findings and analysis.** This chapter analyses the data collected through the questionnaire and interviews, presents the research findings, and reflects on the main themes that emerged regarding the factors that influence primary teachers' pedagogy in Visual Arts education in Ireland.

**Chapter Five: Conclusion.** The findings are summarised, their implications are addressed, the study's limitations are acknowledged, suggestions for further analysis are made, and the chapter finishes with a chapter review.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The arts are a valuable tool and necessary for every student. Elliot Eisner, a scholar renowned in the field of education, has argued that the arts are an integral component of education. Through arts experiences, Eisner (2004) claims that children are learning how to become the architects of their own life experiences and therefore learning how to create themselves. Visual Arts, in particular, provides many opportunities to foster lifelong skills. According to Eisner (2004), there is an increasing body of evidence showing Visual Arts to have a positive educational, social, and emotional effect on children. Yet the value and place of Visual Arts in Irish education has been tenuous. In order to investigate the importance and value of Visual Arts in primary teachers' pedagogy in Ireland, it is necessary to understand why it is incumbent upon educators to provide meaningful arts opportunities for children in school.

This literature review aims to investigate the importance of Visual Arts and creativity in education while highlighting the factors that can help or impede teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy. Systematic analysis and research focusing mainly on Visual Arts education is scarce. According to Catterall and Pepler (2007) there has been no shortage of rhetoric or wishful thinking on the subject, but we are lacking in systematic, well-reasoned, and calibrated study of mental patterns, thinking dispositions, or self beliefs influenced by Visual Arts learning (p. 550). In order to investigate this gap in the research, the literature explored will be sourced from various nations in which arts experiences are facilitated by generalist, rather than specialist, teachers. Having this varied perspective will show the full scope of Visual Arts pedagogy in multiple primary educational institutions. The literature review will be divided into three distinct yet interrelated sections. The first section will focus on the Visual Arts definition and the advantages they provide in the Irish curriculum. Following

that, the benefits and significance of creativity in teacher pedagogy will be examined. Finally, a number of factors that influence teachers' ability to teach Visual Arts will be identified and addressed.

### **Visual Arts Education**

**Definition and Importance of Purposeful Visual Arts Education.** Purposeful Visual Arts education is described by the Primary Curriculum Guidelines (1999) as activities that broaden children's ways of discovering, expressing, and coming to terms with the world they live in in a structured and enjoyable way. Visual Arts is an inherently visual task, so it comes as no surprise that a particular level of spatial intelligence is required to perceive the visual spatial world accurately. Visual Arts education provides an outlet to explore artwork in both 2D and 3D. "Spatial intelligence involves the capacity to perceive the visual-spatial world accurately and to perform transformations on one's initial perceptions in other words, to perceive and create tension, balance, and composition in a visual or spatial display" (Edwards, 2014, p.131). Gardner's theory of the brain's right hemisphere involvement in processing spatial tasks claims that spatial intelligence is particularly evident in Visual Arts (cited in Edwards, 2014).

By providing a variety of experiences in Visual Arts lessons, children are given the opportunity to explore their visual intelligence while "engaging hermeneutic contexts that often remain inaccessible by other intelligences" (Arnheim,1969, Efland, 2005, Eisner, 2004 cited in Morris & Lumis, 2014, p. 27). This intelligence enables children to be sensitive to space, line, color, shape, form, and the relationship between all of them. In the professional artistic world, sculptors, architects and painters are all perfect examples of those who require a high skill in spatial intelligence.

Morris and Lumis (2014) also highlight that "children who respond to Visual Artworks expand neural pathways (brain novelty), linking sensory perception of new

artworks to new cultural understandings” (p.28). There is also evidence to indicate that Visual Arts inspires a range of skills from fostering critical thinking to providing an emotional outlet for students to express themselves. “the arts embrace pupils’ humanity, support social and emotional learning and, depending on the level of teaching and expertise of individual teachers, contribute to the overall happiness of pupils” (Dowling Long, 2015, p.275). These statements emphasise that Visual Arts education has a positive impact not only on children's education overall, but also on their social and cognitive development. Students are enabled to investigate, explore, discover and express their innermost thoughts and feelings through purposeful Visual Arts activities. As Gardner (1980) argues:

For it is in the activity of the young child - his preconscious sense of form, his willingness to explore and to solve problems that arise, his capacity to take risks, his affective needs which must be worked out in a symbolic realm - that we find the crucial seeds of the greatest artistic achievements. (p.269)

Skills that are honed in Visual Arts can often be utilised in other subject areas. Creative and reasoning skills are one of these cross-curricular skills that are essential attributes to develop.

**Benefits of Visual Arts.** There are many benefits and skills harnessed in Visual Arts education. Hetland, Winner, Veema and Sheridan (2007) highlighted eight studio habits of mind in their study focusing on Visual Arts education. These studio habits were collectively deemed the “hidden curriculum” and claimed to instil the most important attributes associated with Visual Arts education. These noted skills were to develop craft, engage and persist, envision, express, observe, reflect, stretch and explore and understand the art world. Visual Arts may not be the only way to explore some of these skills but it provides a nurturing environment for them to flourish. When all eight of these skills are harnessed through Visual Arts it can become a stepping stone to help in other curricular areas.

The first step is to assess how well each habit has been learned in a parent domain (art is the "parent" if learning transfers from art to another subject); the second step is to determine whether the strength with which a habit in the arts is learned predicts how well the habit is used in a target domain, outside of the arts (Hetland et al, 2007, p.9).

Research conducted by Catterall and Peppler (2007) concluded that Visual Arts education “encourages a sense of self-efficacy as well as creative, original thinking. Such outcomes benefit all children” (p.559). It showed that Visual Arts allowed children from differing economic backgrounds to feel more confident about their abilities and to have a greater sense of agency. Students can gain far more from a lesson when they are an active participant, not a bystander. “ Visual Arts education tends to place responsibility for learning on the learner ... This may lead to healthy attributions for success involving beliefs in self-responsibility” (Catterall & Peppler, 2007, 548).

Through Visual Arts we can offer students the chance to approach a subject creatively: they have the opportunity to take hold of their own learning journey and provide a sense of personal achievement that cannot always be achieved by rote memorization. Eisner (2005) also has a similar view when he insisted that the extra artistic consequences were fine if and when they occurred, but they should not be our primary justifications for doing the subject. For some educators a way of encouraging the use of the arts was to highlight how it was mutually beneficial for other subjects such as maths or sciences. Murfee (1995) describes an example of this practice and explains how the Arts were marginalised in American schools. In response to this marginalisation, educators sought to justify the Arts in terms of their instrumental value in promoting thinking in non-arts subjects considered more important, such as reading or mathematics (Cited in Tyler & Likova, 2012, p.2).

## **Creativity**

**Defining Creativity.** Creativity can be cultivated through purposeful Visual Arts education. Although it has many advantages, such as promoting critical thinking and self-expression, creativity is an elusive and contentious term. It's difficult to define because it has been used in so many contexts and isn't purely synonymous with the arts. According to Robinson and Aronica (2015), creativity is “the ability to bring to mind things that aren't

present to our senses. Creativity is putting your imagination to work. It is applied imagination" (p.104). He feels that it is a vital component in preparing our students for the future. The NCCA (1999) assert that purposeful arts education at primary level is invaluable in stimulating creative thinking, The arts do not monopolise creativity in any way, yet the arts and creativity are inextricably linked.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) explains that "Creativity refers to people who experience the world in novel and original ways . . . individuals whose perceptions are fresh, whose judgments are insightful, who make important discoveries that only they know about" (cited in Levinson, 1997, p. 447). When creating a piece, be it clay, paint, construction or drawing, the activity can be used as a means to experience the world. Creative acts provide an outlet for discovery which is personal and insightful. Visual Arts can be an effective method of achieving this.

Building on Csikszentmihalyi's definition, Franken (1994) adds that creativity is an ability to recognize and generate ideas. Not only can it become a useful asset when using critical thinking and problem-solving skills, but it also does so in an entertaining way, both for ourselves and others. Therefore, Visual Arts can be considered a successful way to stimulate this ability. Similarly, Edwards (2002) defines it as a purposeful and proactive impulse that extends beyond the present and is characterized by imagination, originality and fantasy.

However, Fazylova & Rusol (2016) caution that definitions of creativity can differ and are subject to cultural and regional divergence. They argue that the western nations have a tendency to perceive it as being a natural intelligence and skill that is demonstrated by an end product or an effect. In contrast to this, eastern views on creativity see it as a process that a person or child pursues in order to gain personal fulfilment. They further explain that while there is a degree of confusion from psychological theorists attempting to define creativity, a



recurring theme can be found throughout the literature. This is the systematization of four distinct facets of creativity, which were the creative person, creative process, creative environment and creative product (2016, p.115). Of these four, the creative process is a term that is constantly evident in literature associated with Visual Arts and creativity.

**The Creative Process.** The creative process has many definitions and is often featured in literature focusing on creativity in Visual Arts. Botella, Zenasni and Lubert (2018) defines it as a succession of thoughts and actions leading to an authentic and suitable production. This creative process can be seen in multiple sequences or steps, through which a creative person works to clarify a problem or work on a solution that resolves a difficulty. Similarly, Davis (2000) uses it as a way to refer to the techniques and strategies that creative people use, explaining that all of these idea combinations, meanings, relationships and transformations are produced consciously for some and unconsciously for others.

Botella et al (2018) agree with these definitions but elaborate that there are two levels to the creative process. The “macro level” features the stages of the creative process, whereas the “micro level” explains the mechanisms underlying the creative process such as divergent thinking or convergent thinking. They describe how the creative process begins with the *orientation*, in which the individual identifies a problem to be solved. The individual immerses themselves into the problem and reflects on how to solve the problem at hand. It is the catalyst which begins the process. Following this preparation, the *concentration* stage occurs, whereby idea associations take place between the conscious and subconscious level. In art, this is when the idea for the piece is inspired and generated. This could also be considered as the *incubation* stage, where ideas are nurtured and thought through, allowing experiences and insight to assist their creation. It is the “eureka” moment where the start of the idea begins to take form.

Once a general idea is decided upon, the next stage is regarded as the *ideation* stage, where the individual plays with the original idea and experiments with tools and processes. “In the field of art, Mace and Ward (2002) named this step idea development in which the artist structures, completes, and restructures the idea” (Botella et al, 2018, p.2). Finally, the last part of this process is labelled the *examination* or *presentation* stage. This is the point where the individual takes a step back and analyses their work. “The artist reassesses the production and may choose to finish, to elaborate, abandon, delay, store, or destroy it” (Botella et al, 2018, p.2).

With these numerous levels to the creative process, there has been much speculation over which steps should be considered relevant. Theorists such as Osburn (1953/1963), Busse and Mandfeild (1980), and Carson (1999) all have their own theories and steps in regards to the creative process. However, the general consensus among these theorists is that there are numerous stages involved in the creative process.

**Product vs Process.** According to the Irish Visual Art Guidelines (1999), when it comes to creating art, the process is just as important as the finished product. The focus should be on experimenting and exploring the expressive possibilities of various materials, tools, and media. “The task of the teacher is not to teach clever techniques or to demonstrate ways of producing images and forms he/she finds acceptable but to build on interests and strengths by drawing the children out and making suggestions as appropriate” (p.12).

Children should not be trained to blindly obey directions, as this will stifle their creativity and spontaneity. They should be taught the importance of working individually with both two-and three-dimensional work to nurture their creativity and perception of the subject.

An Irish study, conducted by Kenny, Finneran and Mitchell (2015), examined student teachers' experiences and confidence within an arts education module in initial teacher education. The findings revealed that when shown the positives of implementing

student-centered Visual Arts lessons, those who lacked confidence in their own skills were able to see that it was not about the product a teacher can get their students to produce, but rather the process their students experienced and the learning therein: One pre-service teacher remarked that

it was more about your process that ended up in your product, not just looking at your product. So I feel way better about art now, like I actually enjoy going into art. I'm not scared to go into art (Kenny et al, 2015, p.163).

When the focus shifts from one to the other it can have a lasting effect on the quality of art lessons. Designing appropriate experiences in Visual Arts for young children will partially depend on the knowledge each teacher brings to the experience. One pre-service teacher reflected that what they experienced in classroom observations was quite the opposite to what they were taught in college:

Our teacher had done art lessons where they [children] were all trying to copy the same Vincent van Gogh painting. Now I realise you're just meant to let kids do what they want. It's not a matter of getting them to try and copy one another to make twenty copies of the same thing. It's about twenty individual pieces of art created by children as they want (2015, p.164).

Here the student teacher witnessed a lesson with a predetermined end product, whereby a child's success or failure would be determined by their ability to recreate the work of another. It should be noted that the pre-service teacher saw this one lesson in isolation; however, it still provides a valuable snapshot of practice in a modern classroom. While it is not argued that this practice is widespread, it is worth highlighting that both the NCCA (2005) and INTO (2010) have found this practice in a minority, though not insignificant number, of Irish primary classrooms. "An overemphasis on "template" or replica art was found in teachers' individual planning in a minority of schools... the majority of teachers did not plan for individual differences in Visual Arts" (INTO, 2010, p.44).

In the Australian context, Boyd and Cutcher's (2015) study on Visual Arts pedagogy in early childhood education, found that teachers send clear messages to their students by how they teach Visual Arts. At the age of 4 and 5, they noted that most children do not question if their work is of good quality. They have joy and confidence in something that they have created because it is 100% their process. In fact, whether they can actually draw well is irrelevant; to them it is a game, a bit of fun that helps their learning journey. If we as educators provide activities that have predetermined visual outcomes, what will the children learn?

On the other hand, if we provide opportunities for children to paint often with good quality art materials, with an educator who raises the child's awareness about their art making then they will have a better chance of engaging with the creative process. Barnes (1990) warns that when teachers provide an example of an end product or goal to the lesson, the teacher is instilling the idea that there is a correct way to do art.

The preoccupation with completing the work correctly can completely overshadow the creative process of the child. There is no experimentation or discovery, there is only a single, clear, set way to complete the task at hand. All this lesson teaches our children is to become more reliant on adults and less on their own skills. Barnes (1990) warns that

Teachers who use such devices are probably not so much concerned with drawing as with coping with the difficulties of surviving the school day. Templates are a way of keeping children busy without actually having to grasp the nettle of teaching them art (p.29).

Once you instil this need for work to look a certain way, children then expect their art to look this way.

Many teachers, according to Edwards (2014), have had little exposure to process-oriented arts experiences. As a result, they treat Visual Arts with trepidation and apprehension. In the INTO (2010) discussion document *Creativity and the arts in Primary*

*School* almost all generalist teacher respondents (98%) considered the Arts to be an “important or very relevant part of the primary curriculum” (p.75). Some teachers still focus on the product because it is something tangible. They can feel pressured to ensure their art lessons include a specific end goal for display purposes. There is nothing wrong with wanting to strive for a pleasing completed piece, but if the emphasis moves from the process to the product, it comes at the cost of the child’s creative journey. “Drawing on the characteristics of high-quality teacher-child interaction, one is left to wonder what benefits exist for children when the purpose of their artistic endeavours is to create a similar piece as their peers or a replica of their teacher’s creation, closed ended art” (Mc Lennan, 2010, p. 82).

By placing our own preconceived notions of what a child’s picture should look like, there is a higher chance that we hinder their exploration and sometimes enjoyment in the lesson. “Remember, there is no right or wrong in children’s early representational attempts. We must take care not to impose adult standards on children’s artwork or to evaluate their ways of artistic expression” (Edwards, 2014, p.126). Teachers play an important role in protecting these ideas and encouraging young students’ creativity.

**Importance of Creativity.** According to the NCCA (1999), in primary school, purposeful Visual Arts education is life enhancing and invaluable in promoting creative thinking. It's crucial because children are inherently imaginative and excel when they're given the opportunity to express themselves, as Robinson and Aronica (2015) explain “Children are naturally curious. Stimulating learning means keeping their curiosity alive. This is why practical, inquiry-based teaching can be so powerful” (p.96). One of the most compelling reasons to work with children is to foster their natural curiosity, as "children tend to learn in creative ways" (INTO, 2010, p.12) rather than simply memorising knowledge presented by teachers or parents.

To instil this creativity in students, teachers themselves should have some level of creativity, or at least an interest in it. "Teaching for creativity might best be described as using forms of teaching that are intended to develop students' own creative thinking and behaviour... teaching for creativity must involve creative teaching" (Morris, 2006, p.4). The task of cultivating creativity in classrooms can be daunting, but one which must surely begin with the cultivation of the teacher's own creativity. By preparing innovative lessons that allow children to approach new challenges in a safe and exploratory environment;

Undoubtedly the cultivation of classroom creativity requires committed creative teachers. And if these teachers work in schools in which there is a culture of creativity, playfulness and collaboration the potential to enhance children's creativity is greatly increased (INTO, 2010, p.110).

Teaching for creativity is not often easy, but it has the potential to be deeply fulfilling and enjoyable. It requires the teacher to have confidence to improvise and take detours, to notice the unexpected opportunities for learning and take advantage of them. Teachers may be uncertain during these detours and there is a risk that the lesson could end up going nowhere. It more than likely will involve more time and planning to develop ideas and to evaluate whether they have worked. "Creative teachers are always willing to experiment but they recognize the need to learn from experience. All of this requires more, not less, expertise of teachers" (Morris, 2006, p. 5).

**Importance of creativity in the Visual Arts pedagogy of teachers.** By preparing innovative lessons that allow children to approach new challenges in a safe and exploratory environment, teachers can create a classroom that fosters the creative process in Visual Arts, but what role should teachers adopt during these lessons?

A study conducted by Friedman, Lee, Liu and Watson (2018) argued that it may be necessary to start with a teacher-directed approach to provide the appropriate skills for students to properly explore the Visual Arts strands. Their study focused on differing

approaches, adopted by two teachers. One was teacher-directed, whereby the students were given the relevant skills needed to work with a specific medium, such as clay or paint. This teacher preferred to spend about half the class explaining a new concept and demonstrating how the students should begin tackling the given assignment on that one medium. In contrast, the other teacher preferred to use a choice-based approach, whereby the students picked any medium they desired to work with and directed their own learning. By choosing which type of art-making they wanted to pursue in a given class, this teacher aimed to develop the students' autonomy and individuality in their art making.

The results of the study supported the teacher-led approach, deeming that “young students may benefit from learning specific, concrete skills before they can increase the creativity of their artwork” (2018, p. 489). Surprisingly, they noted that their original assumption of a choice-based approach being more beneficial to children's creative development was not accurate. They discovered that there was very little difference between the results of both classes. “The teacher-directed program elicited higher scores in overall art skill and realistic drawing ability than the choice-based program; however, contrary to predictions, no differences were found for intrinsic motivation or for creativity.” (2018, p. 489).

One limitation of this study is that, of the two teachers who were involved, one was a specialist teacher. This was the teacher who conducted the teacher-directed approach. However, it does give us information to reflect upon. The teacher-directed approach in this case did not support step-by-step guidance towards a specific end product that would produce multiple pieces that look identical to one another. Instead, it spent time focusing on each discipline and provided the skills needed to explore the chosen medium, showing that both of these teachers agreed that it was the process that was most beneficial for fostering the creativity of these students.

As has previously been highlighted by Morris (2006) to cultivate an appreciation for creativity in students, teachers themselves should have some level of creativity, or at least an interest in it. In the INTO (2010) discussion document, they argue that cultivating classroom innovation necessitates dedicated creative teachers. And if these teachers work in schools with a community of imagination, playfulness, and teamwork, the chances of enhancing children's creativity are greatly improved. Teaching for creativity is not often easy, but it has the potential to be deeply fulfilling and enjoyable. It requires the teacher to have confidence to improvise and take detours, to notice the unexpected opportunities for learning and take advantage of them. These are key skills needed for Visual Arts educators, and if teachers are able to instil a confidence in their own creativity when teaching, then this can become a positive factor that works towards a more nurturing pedagogy in Visual Arts.

### **Key factors that influence teachers' pedagogy in Visual Arts**

Ultimately, the core role for a teacher is to facilitate learning. That being said, with teachers nowadays having a number of roles to fulfill before they are able to even teach, their pedagogy can be influenced by numerous factors. A great deal of time is spent administering tests, settling social disputes, attending meetings, writing reports, and taking disciplinary action. "You may say that these are all part of the job, and they are, but the job they are meant to be part of is helping students to learn" (Robinson, 2015, p.101). When those other responsibilities divert attention away from actually teaching, then the true nature of the profession is blurred.

The INTO (2010) discussion document noted numerous factors that influenced generalist teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy. Teacher confidence, lack of space, the time constraints of an overloaded curriculum, perceptions of parents' appreciation of the subject, the differentiation requirements of the multi-grade class and the need for an extra pair of hands (especially in the infant room) were only some of the factors highlighted (p.76).



Unfortunately, there is a paucity of research on Irish teachers' experiences of teaching Visual Arts, although there are a small number of studies on curriculum review (NCCA, 2010), pre-service teachers' experiences with Visual Arts instruction (Kenny et al., 2015), and how the hierarchy of subjects affects Visual Arts implementation (Dowling-Long, 2015). Since there is a scarcity of studies in the national context, a significant portion of the data for this segment may come from Australia, where generalist primary teachers are also charged with the responsibility of implementing Visual Arts curriculum.

**Teacher Confidence.** One Australian study, conducted by Alter, Hayes and O Hara (2009) among generalist teachers in 19 Australian schools had multiple research findings that suggested primary school teachers lacked confidence in teaching the arts and felt they didn't have time to do so in an already overburdened curriculum. It also found that there was a correlation between the lack of confidence in the arts and their own arts experiences in primary, secondary and tertiary education. The Australian Senate Inquiry into Arts Education found that 'generalist primary classroom teachers, because of their own poor arts experience at school, and because of inadequate teacher training, lack confidence to teach the arts. As a result... there is a strong impulse to marginalise the arts in their teaching' (Russell-Bowie & Jeffery, 2004, p.4).

Granville (2011) claims that for Irish primary teachers, "The space for innovative art education projects within the school curriculum has always been restricted by low levels of teacher confidence in art" (p.358). When teachers believe their own creative abilities aren't up to par, they can feel unable to teach the various Visual Arts strands. Similar to Australian context in Alter et al. 's (2009) study, perhaps the teachers' level of confidence in Ireland could be attributed to their own personal experiences with Visual Arts in education too. If their Visual Arts experiences have been quite negative, then teachers may be reluctant to pursue their CPD (continued professional development) in Visual Arts as it has not been a

priority for them in the past. Kenny et al (2015) found that “student pre-existing assumptions about teaching often had a significant influence on the way they envisioned their future classrooms and so this led to varied beliefs and values on the profession” (p. 163). While these are only in two studies, the findings here indicate that a teacher's personal, academic and life experience can seriously impact their Visual Arts pedagogy.

In the INTO's (2010) discussion document , it has been noted that a lack of confidence in certain strands of the Visual Arts Curriculum affects some teachers' pedagogy. Around one fifth of teacher respondents admitted they were unable to cover all strands of the Visual Arts curriculum due to lack of expertise, time, resources and ideas. They found that Construction, Fabric and Fibre, Clay and Print were the strands most difficult to teach. Students would not be able to receive a comprehensive Visual Arts education if there was a preference for specific strands over others. It would be helpful if schools encouraged CPD to ensure teachers feel confident in teaching all of the strands they are uncomfortable with. However, in the current system the onus is on the teacher themselves to upskill.

**Hierarchy of subjects.** With such a packed curriculum, it's not uncommon for some teachers to find it difficult to devote the time and energy needed for faithful implementation of the Visual Arts curriculum. This may be due, in part, to how certain subjects are prioritised in individual countries' educational systems. When discussing this phenomenon, observed worldwide, Robinson and Aronica (2015) describe how;

In most systems there is a hierarchy ... At the top are literacy, mathematics, and now the STEM disciplines. Next come the humanities, including history, geography, and social studies. Because the standards movement emphasizes academic study, it places less value on practical disciplines like art, drama, dance, music, design, and physical education and on (p.29).

There have been several instances in Australian schools where primary teachers feel restricted by curriculum changes due to a combination of lack of confidence and an

overloaded curriculum; “the increase in expectations in literacy and numeracy education leave little room for teachers to build confidence in their teaching of Visual Arts” (Garvis, 2008; Hallam et al., 2008; Harker et al., 2003, cited in Wittber, 2017, p.43). Perhaps a similar focus on numeracy and literacy in Ireland could become a deterrent for those who already lack confidence in Visual Arts? Breacháin and O Toole (2014) argue that the current focus on numeracy and literacy can become detrimental to the emphasis placed on the Irish arts curriculum, when they claim that “there is a real danger that the current focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other curricular areas could thoroughly undermine this (arts) ethos” (p.402).

Researchers have noted that pressure of standardised testing is increasing in numerous countries. An increased focus on standardised testing reinforces the hierarchy of subjects and has the potential to push the arts to the periphery of education. Hetland, Winner, Veema and Sheridan (2007) warns that “all too often the arts have been considered a ‘luxury’ in our schools, an arena for self-expression, perhaps, but not a necessary part of education” (p.1). If the arts are viewed by teachers or parents as a frivolous section of the curriculum, students will lose an essential part of their education. Similarly Robinson and Aronica (2015) warn how detrimental a practice of focusing on standardised tests can be for students “if you run an education system based on standardisation and conformity that suppresses individuality, imagination, and creativity, don’t be surprised if that’s what it does” (p. 16).

While all of these examples are based on classrooms in the United States, this is also a problem that is seeping into the Irish educational system. The aforementioned work of Kenny et al (2015), conducted after the publication of *Literacy and Numeracy*, revealed that a number of pre-service teachers witnessed this hierarchy in action, with priority being placed on core subjects, to the detriment of the arts education for some children.

One PST observed how students' experience of Visual Arts tended to be marginalised both in terms of time and priority towards learning in the core subjects: 'this was the time (arts) that students who were struggling on a certain topic academically would attend a resource teacher' (Kenny et al, 2015, p.165). This is not to say that it is in general practice in Ireland today, but it indicates that there may be some who still believe that the Arts are less important. But the students also admitted that their experiences in ITE highlighted how these subjects should be taught correctly and fostered their own practice.

**Apprenticeship of observation.** The term 'the apprenticeship of observation', coined by Lortie (1975), conceptualises the phenomenon whereby PSTs come into teacher training with preconceived notions of what it means to be a teacher, based on their own experience and observation as schoolchildren. This is incredibly relevant for the development of teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy, as a large percentage of teachers have not experienced the newer 1999 curriculum as a student. If they arrive at their teaching courses with a preconceived notion of what teaching Visual Arts entails, their preconceived notions based on their experiences can lead to outdated pedagogy. Bergman (2018) deduced that, based on Lortie's apprenticeship of observation, the foundation of a teacher's professional identity is conceptualised long before they enrol for their first class at university or enter a school for teaching practice (cited in Botha, 2020, p.51). This shows how important it is to provide appropriate instruction in college to ensure they receive up to date knowledge of purposeful Visual Arts pedagogy.

In Kenny et al's (2015) report on Irish PSTs, they noted that 'teachers' beliefs about the arts, prior experience of the arts and self efficacy in teaching the arts has important consequences for how it is taught in schools' (p.160). The PSTs' reflections of their Arts education were mixed and many admitted to having a set impression as to what Visual Arts education should entail: 'from my own experiences in primary school I came to the belief that

these subjects didn't have much importance and the reason we didn't do them was because you didn't learn anything from them' (p.164). Another PST remarked how, in their experience, the Arts were treated as extra-curricular and more a reward than a subject in their own right. Having these preconceived notions about the arts makes it paramount that PSTs' tertiary Visual Arts education is fully comprehensive. In this same study, students admitted having to relearn what it means to teach the arts subjects correctly, shifting their focus from the product to the process. Without this intervention at such a critical moment of their education, PST's could have replicated outdated and ineffective pedagogical practices when they themselves became fully qualified teachers.

**Influence of social media.** With the dawn of information technology, the internet has provided access to numerous resources. The popularity of seeking help from social media is growing and its role education is significantly evolving among teachers. Platforms like Pinterest, Facebook and Twitter have quickly become a regular source for lesson ideas. According to Carpenter, Cassidy, and Monti (2018) Pinterest was the fifth most popular website for all categories of teachers, and the third most popular among elementary school teachers, in a survey of 20,000 U.S. educators conducted in 2014.

The ease with which teachers can sort, search and access these materials makes social media an attractive and visually appealing option when planning for lessons. In this curriculum-heavy climate, teachers understandably search for assistance with managing their curriculum obligations, often through the online sourcing of teaching activities, (Chapman, Wright, & Pascoe, 2019). Although the Irish Visual Arts curriculum covers a broad range of topics that teachers can try to cover in each year group, deciding what to cover and how to teach those skills can be difficult. Chapman et al. (2019) insist that when the written curriculum's complexity is compared to activities found online, it's easy to see why teachers choose to use online resources as they explain "visual, immediate, and seemingly 'tested' by

others, online ideas for activities are a world away from the text heavy and jargon specific curriculum” (p. 961). This makes it a very attractive option for sourcing Visual Arts ideas. However, without using their own critical thinking, they can run the risk of falling into lessons that tend to focus on the end product rather than their students' process.

**Reliance on templates.** While reliance on online resources does not automatically lead to teachers' focusing on the product of Visual Arts activities, it creates the potential for teachers to lean to more templated work. Focusing purely on the end product could become counter-productive for teachers if this becomes a habit. When the focus shifts away from the creative journey, the lessons become more craft-orientated and teacher-led. “Consequently, the activities on ‘Pinterest’ provide ‘things to do’ but do not necessarily improve arts learning for our students; the critical link between the two being broken” (Chapman et al, 2019, p.966). If templates become incorporated in a teacher's Visual Arts pedagogy, the wrong message can be communicated.

With overloaded curricula and large class sizes, purposeful Visual Arts pedagogy can fall by the wayside in favour of a lesson that is quick and that has a tangible result. In the discussion document of the INTO (2010), Irish generalist teachers agreed that while in general the inclination towards the ethos of Visual Arts was positive, they still reflected that “in a few classrooms it was found that activities were almost entirely teacher directed, with an overemphasis on copying and the production of ‘template’ or formulaic art, at the expense of creativity” (p.43).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the importance of creativity and Visual Arts in primary education. While there is still a dearth of research in this area in the Irish context, this chapter has demonstrated how certain teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy is profoundly influenced by a mixture of demands, stresses, and personal experiences. While some of these experiences

may have a positive influence on their pedagogy there are many factors that, without intervention, may continue to negatively affect the quality of Visual Arts education received by primary school students.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The aim of the study was to discover which factors influenced teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy in Irish primary schools. Personal and external factors, including impact of curriculum overload, trust in their own skill, pressure from their schools, and perceived experiences as students and teachers were the key themes explored in this study. A mixed methods sequential approach was used to address and analyse these recurring factors. To begin, this section will discuss the various methodological approaches available and those selected for this research. The advantages and disadvantages of this design will then be addressed. The study began with a comprehensive questionnaire among primary teachers, the data gathered from which aided the development of the study's qualitative component, the interview. The design of both will be described in depth, their relevance to the study will be questioned. Finally, any ethical implications will be discussed, and a conclusion will be reached.

### **Research Approaches**

**Quantitative and Qualitative.** In order to choose a suitable research strategy for this question, various potential methodologies were considered. Both qualitative and quantitative research have numerous benefits in their own right. When investigating the literature on both methodologies, the terms 'positivism' and 'interpretivism' are often used (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Positivism, or quantitative research, focuses on the researcher as being an observer of social reality, whereby the information gathered is analysed using the likes of questionnaires, experiments and statistical procedures.

In contrast, when a researcher focuses on interpretative, or qualitative research, they seek to try to understand the subjective realm of human experience. Trochim and Donnelly (2007) explain "qualitative research is emergent; that is, it is well suited to situations in which



preconceived notions are purposely limited and where the intent of the researcher is a more gradual process of discovery as the study unfolds" (p.158). This type of research focuses on the actions and meanings of an individual person more so than exact numerical facts.

**Mixed Methods.** This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods, also known as mixed methods, to provide accurate, ethical, and meaningful data for the research question. Ivankova, Creswell and Stick (2006) describe mixed methods research as a method for collecting, analysing, and "mixing" or integrating quantitative and qualitative data in order to obtain a better understanding of the research issue. Quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for a more robust analysis, taking advantage of the strengths of each. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) highlight that mixed methods aim to legitimize the use of various approaches to addressing research questions rather than limiting or constraining researchers' options. It is a type of research that is both expansive and imaginative. It is inclusive, pluralistic, and complementary, and it means that researchers choose methods, learn about and perform research in a variety of ways.

Mixed methods research has been gaining momentum among educational researchers, according to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004). They even proposed labelling it as a third research paradigm as they believe that, as a result of its widespread use by educational researchers in the past, it has evolved into its own research model (p.14). This growth clearly demonstrates the immense potential of mixed methods paradigms in the field of educational research.

**Mixed Methods Sequential Explanatory Design.** The methodology used for this study was a mixed methods sequential explanatory design. This design, as outlined by Ivankova et al. (2006), can be particularly useful when trying to encompass a multitude of views. Bowen, Rose and Pilkington (2017) explain that this approach includes a multiple level strategy which incorporates two phases. Quantitative research is undertaken first and is

followed by the second phase, qualitative research. Data from each phase can then be triangulated in a third phase, enabling close comparison between data sets. Using both methods allows the researcher to gather a broad and comprehensive account of the situation that covers not only the scale of the issue, but also gives a better insight into the participants' motivation and behaviours. It facilitates the provision of a comprehensive overview where quantitative analysis is presented alongside participant voices, giving the research depth as well as breadth.

The rationale for pursuing this combination method is due to the fact that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods were fully sufficient to adequately address the study's research questions. According to Trochim and Donnelly, "in mixed methods research, we simultaneously conduct both qualitative and quantitative research to achieve the advantages of each and mitigate their weaknesses" (2007, p.144). The aim was to acquire both a broad sense of Visual Arts pedagogy from a large number of teachers, as well as more nuanced discussions of the main factors that influence their Visual Arts pedagogy, which was successfully achieved through the use of questionnaires and subsequent in-depth interviews. Following the distribution of a quantitative questionnaire to a larger pool of teachers, seven volunteers were invited to elaborate on their given responses in interviews.

This design was especially useful when unexpected results arose from the quantitative study that required further clarification. The largest drawback of implementing this method was its time-consuming nature. However, as Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) surmise, though time demands of this form of research are high, "it can help to address broader questions adding insight that could have otherwise have been missed" (cited in Bowen et al, 2017, p.11). Thus, by using both the questionnaire and the interview, the research benefited from their combined advantages.

### **Quantitative Phase**

**Questionnaire.** To gain a broad view of how teachers engage with the Visual Arts curriculum and how they teach it, a questionnaire was created in the first phase of this study. In this, teachers provided information about themselves, their own practice and their pedagogical beliefs when using Visual Arts. It was the goal of this questionnaire to identify the current mindset of primary teachers with regards to their teaching of Visual Arts and to highlight the potential factors that may influence its implementation. This was an effective tool to acquire the breadth of information required, through gleaning multiple teachers' perspectives.

One of the key advantages of using anonymous online questionnaires, according to Denscombe (2014), is that participants do not have to worry about the researcher scrutinising their responses. In the interest of safety during the pandemic, and to try to gain a high-volume response, the questionnaire was created and distributed digitally via the online platform Google Forms. This questionnaire was online for ten days and featured multiple question formats, including multiple choice questions, rank order questions and Likert scale questions.

The construction of the topics featured in this questionnaire followed the stages mapped out by Cohen et al (2007). Firstly, the general purpose was clarified, i.e. sourcing opinions from teachers about Visual Arts. Then this was translated into a specific set of questions which focused on the factors which influence primary school teachers' pedagogy in Visual Arts. Once the research question was specified, the second stage involved the "identification and itemizing of subsidiary topics that relate to its central purpose" (Cohen et al, 2007, p.319). Teachers responded to questions about both positive and negative experiences of Visual Arts including, but not limited to; the benefits of Visual Arts; their experiences of it; the curriculum; their views on process- versus product-oriented instruction;

time dedicated to Visual Arts; the use of online platforms to aid planning; and their own personal confidence in the subject.

The questionnaire started with a cover letter, informing all participants about the aims of the study and what was to be expected of them in this research, which can be seen in Appendix 1. By clicking a link at the end, they agreed to participate in the research. In the final part of the questionnaire, participants were asked if they would like to further discuss their opinions and experiences. Any interested candidates were able to provide an email for a potential interview.

**Sample for Questionnaire.** Non-probability/ convenience sampling was used. Cohen et al (2007) describe this as a type of sampling used whenever the researcher targets “a particular group, in the full knowledge that it does not represent the wider population; it simply represents itself” (p.113). In this case, the specific targeted group was primary school teachers in Ireland. The participants were recruited through personal contacts, a local county teachers email list and teacher blogs. There was no limit to the number of participants taking part. The majority of participants, 91.8% ( $n=112$ ) were female. This is reflective of the gender differences that are quite common in primary education. The types of school for each teacher was also recorded, the most common being Mainstream non DEIS at 52.5% ( $n=64$ ).

Through the use of online social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook or Instagram a potentially vast audience of people was made available. Denscombe (2014) deduced that there were a few benefits to launching a questionnaire through SNS. Firstly he claimed that at the very heart of every SNS lies some form of communication between people. They exploit new technologies to make it both faster and easier for users to send messages. This can be incredibly valuable for social researchers. Following this he explained that research populations can be identified on the basis of their interests and the personal information they

provide about themselves. Therefore by selecting blogs that focus on primary teaching and Visual Arts, contact can be made with the relevant candidates to invite them to participate in the research. "This is very useful for researchers because it provides a way of targeting groups of people who have something in common, a thing that the researcher wishes to investigate" (2014, p.18).

**Piloting the Questionnaire.** After the questions were chosen, the questionnaire was piloted to confirm that it was understandable, not overly time-consuming, and answered the research question. As Cohen et al (2007) warns "A key issue that permeates this lengthy list is for the researcher to pay considerable attention to respondents; to see the questionnaire through their eyes, and envisage how they will regard it" (p.343). Once the pilot was complete, edits to questions, length or format were amended as necessary. The final version of the questionnaire contained 27 questions, 24 of which were compulsory, and can be seen in Appendix 2.

**Quantitative Data acquisition.** The questionnaire was first created and released online through Google Forms for a ten day period. A direct link was sent to teacher colleagues through an email and it was also posted on selected teacher blog pages on social media. There was no definite way to ensure that the participants who took part were primary school teachers, however there were no incentives for others to take part if they were not in the primary school profession. Therefore only teachers with an interest in Visual Arts would have been likely to respond. When the questionnaire closed, the data was transferred into an Excel spreadsheet. In total, data from 122 respondents were collated.

### **Qualitative Phase**

**Interview structure.** In order to address the research question in greater depth, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted. After the questionnaire, each participant was given the opportunity to take part in the interview stage, by providing their email address in

the optional question located at the end of the questionnaire. The aim of the interviews was to elicit experiential knowledge of the participant's everyday world. Bell (2005) explains that a "skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings which the questionnaire can never do" (p.157). He also remarks that "the interview can yield rich material and often put flesh on the bones of questionnaire responses" (p.157) .

Denscombe (2003) reminds us that "interviews are 'live' events which require the interviewer to adjust plans as things progress" (p.179). As a result, a semi-structured technique was followed to allow the researcher to be as flexible as possible. Despite the fact that the interviews were semi-structured, there was a clear set of questions to talk about and examine. The results of the quantitative phase informed these questions. The interviewees were allowed to set the pace and to speak widely on their thoughts and opinions, whilst prompts and probes were also employed by the interviewer. Cohen et al (2007) highlights the necessity of such tools in interviews: "Prompts enable the interviewer to clarify topics or questions, while probes enable the interviewer to ask respondents to extend, elaborate, add to, provide detail for, clarify or qualify their response, thereby addressing richness, depth of response, comprehensiveness and honesty" (p.361)

Denscombe (2003) also emphasises the need for "trust and rapport" (p.179). Cohen et al (2007) warn that attempting an impartial unbiased interview is no easy feat. Rigorous training is required to educate the interviewer and make them more aware of the potential bias they are inadvertently supporting. "Reducing bias becomes more than simply: careful formulation of questions so that the meaning is crystal clear;...and sometimes matching interviewer characteristics with those of the sample being interviewed" (p.151). One of the inherent dangers in an interview situation is that of bias and subjectivity of the interviewer. This is a common risk in qualitative research. Bias and subjectivity are at times considered unavoidable when using interviews.

Due to Covid 19 restrictions, interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Although meeting in person would be preferable, as certain nuances and gestures can be missed or misinterpreted online, this was the safest option. Denscombe (2014) suggested that there are both advantages and disadvantages to online interviews. On the one hand they may make the interviewees comfortable because they are in their own surroundings. This can positively affect the interview as more information may be divulged by the participant when they are more relaxed. It can also reduce what he calls the 'interviewer effect' which can cause participants to say what they think the interviewer is looking for, and not what they personally have experienced or believed. On the other hand, technical difficulties may hinder the flow of the interview. If there are any delays in connectivity or if participants get cut off due to slow internet the interview can become choppy and erratic (Denscombe, 2014). All participants were informed about the interview and assured that their data would be securely processed and that their privacy needs would be met. They each signed the consent form in Appendix 3 before participating. "Otter.ai" transcription service was used to gather a basic transcription of each conversation. This is a software that can be used through Zoom which transcribes the information throughout the interview. Transcriptions generated by the software were subsequently proofed and edited. Each meeting's transcriptions and audio recordings were uploaded to a password-protected Google Drive.

**Pilot Interview.** Similar to the approach taken in Bowen et al's (2017) study on mixed methodological research, a pilot interview with one teacher was conducted to ensure that the actual interviews went smoothly and that any issues that arose were addressed. After the pilot, alterations were made to the interview script as the initial discussion went over the allotted time. The general flow of the questions was re-ordered to create a better flow of conversation. After the pilot, the interview schedule was edited and finalised. The end result can be found in Appendix 4

**Interview Response.** Out of the 122 respondents, nine volunteered their emails for further discussion and an interview request was sent out when the questionnaire concluded. Seven teachers replied to the invitation and participated in Zoom interviews. Each interview lasted between 30-40 minutes. There were multiple recording devices used to ensure that the data was successfully collected. The interviewer's field notes from these interviews were also included to record any relevant gestures. The qualitative data were transcribed and analysed after each interview by the researcher using the transcripts from "Otter.ai" as a base. Thematic analysis was then performed on two levels, looking at each individual response and then analysing across the multiple responses provided. The analysis was informed by the work of Braun and Clark (2008). Recurring themes and categories were highlighted and compared to the data collected in the quantitative phase. These themes were then compared to the information noted in the literature review of this study. At the end of this study, key themes and subthemes emerged, which revealed the factors that most influenced the Visual Arts pedagogy of participating teachers.

### **Validity and reliability of the study**

Validity is an important key to effective research and Eisner (2017) states that it is a complex topic to define. He describes it as a purchase of reality "as it really is." (p.98) However, he also claims that conducting fully valid research is theoretically difficult because we can never be confident that we have discovered the facts since we can never fully understand things "as they are" (p.98). We are constantly stuck with judgments and interpretations. Yet if there is a fault or issue with the validity of a study it has the potential to be deemed worthless. Validity is solely concerned with reflecting the truth of the research data and methodology of how the data was obtained accurately. Cohen et al (2007) claims that regardless of the type of study, qualitative or quantitative, validity is an integral



requirement. Similar to Eisner(2017), they also note that there is no human study that is 100% valid as human error and bias will always be present. “Quantitative research possesses a measure of standard error which is inbuilt and which has to be acknowledged. In qualitative data the subjectivity of respondents, their opinions, attitudes and perspectives together contribute to a degree of bias” (2007, p.133). Consequently they reflect that validity should be seen as a matter of degree rather than as an absolute state. Hence at best a researcher should strive to minimize invalidity and maximize validity.

Trochim and Donnelly (2008) surmise that reliability and validity should not be considered separate ideas and that, alternatively, they actually form a type of continuum. “On one end is the situation where the concepts and methods of measurement are the same (reliability) and on the other is the situation where concepts and methods of measurement are different (very discriminant validity)” ( p.112). The questionnaire and interview were both piloted to ensure understandability and reliability. The only people interviewed for this study were primary school teachers in Ireland. Only teachers would have been interested in participating because there were no incentives other than to add a point of view or share experiences to the study.

### **Ethical Issues**

When conducting research, a researcher has a duty to obey ethical guidelines, so the researcher became familiar with the Marino Institute of Education's Ethics in Research Policy. Approval for this study was granted from the Marino Ethics Research Committee prior to any data collection taking place. Cohen et al. (2007) insist that educational researchers have a duty to their participants, and they must consider any potential negative consequences of their study on those who are taking part. All of the participants were adults who gave informed consent and were told that they were not under any obligation to

participate. They were all treated fairly and equally, and their identities were kept private. Both of these factors are important when performing educational research (Wellington, 2015).

Participation in this study was on the basis of informed consent, and on a voluntary basis, with rights of withdrawal at any time. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants read a cover letter stating the intention of this research, what was expected of them and what would happen to their received data. A copy of this cover letter can be seen in Appendix 1. All questionnaires had the option to be anonymous, alternatively those who wanted to take part in the interview section could provide their email in an optional question. Those intending to take part in the interview stage could not be guaranteed complete anonymity. Nonetheless, their information was kept private and confidential so only the researcher knew their names and they were not shared with anybody else. Before each interview a consent form was emailed and assurances that all of their privacy needs will be met. Appendix 3 shows a copy of the information letter and consent form which all the participating teachers read and signed. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the process at any time without having to give a reason.

Participants were informed that their data would be stored, accessed and retained. No video recordings were taken for the online Zoom interviews, only audio recordings and transcriptions. Headphones were worn by the interviewer to ensure privacy of the participants. Interviewees were made aware that at any stage they feel the need to, they may withdraw their data from the study. Participants were also made aware that after 13 months their data collected would be discarded. Copies of their own transcriptions were available for all the participants throughout the study. They were also given the option to be provided with a completed study of the research, if they desired.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has given a summary of the study's research design, the Mixed Methods Sequential Explanatory approach. Both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to understand the experience of teaching Visual Arts in primary school today. This research was able to incorporate the perspectives of a broad number of teachers whilst also hearing in-depth conversations from individuals through a mixed methods approach. As a result, a clear picture of the factors that influenced their pedagogy emerged. It is clear from what has been noted in this chapter that this approach was most suitable for the study. Data gleaned through quantitative methods provided a broad overview of the experience and educational practice of primary school teachers nationwide. While the quantitative method elicited a broad response from a greater number of teachers, the qualitative element of this design dug deeper into those responses and offered an in-depth reflection from seven volunteers.

Thematic analysis, influenced by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse the data obtained in this study. The questionnaire data provided the themes to explore in the interview section. After the interviews were transcribed, the data were analysed, a code was created in the transcripts, the initial themes that appeared in the data were highlighted and then the emerging themes were reviewed to build an overall image. Following this, specific themes were refined and described and finally a summary was created based on the data analysis findings. At the end of this study, there was a clear impression of the factors impacting teachers in regards to Visual Arts pedagogy. The recurrent themes and subthemes from this data will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Presentation of Data, Findings and Analysis

### Introduction

The study's research design – Mixed-Method Sequential Explanatory – was described in the previous chapter, and it included both quantitative and qualitative phases in order to gain a comprehensive insight into the teaching of Visual Arts in primary schools and the factors that influenced teachers' pedagogy. The sequential nature of data collection was critical in gathering the necessary information for the analysis. The aim of starting with a questionnaire was to get a broad overview among a large group of teachers. The questionnaire was crucial in identifying important points and questions to investigate during the qualitative stage of the study. The interviewees were chosen from among the respondents who completed the questionnaire and provided insight on the topics that were highlighted in the quantitative data. As can be seen from Table 1 the interviewees came from varied schooling backgrounds and years of experience.

Table 1

#### *Interviewee Teachers Details*

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Years Teaching</b>	<b>School Type</b>	<b>Personal Interest in Visual Arts</b>	<b>CPD</b>
1	20-25	Rural Mainstream	Yes	No
2	6-10	Rural DEIS	No	Yes
3	16-20	Rural Mainstream	Yes	Yes
4	11-15	Mainstream non DEIS	Yes	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>
5	6-10	Mainstream non DEIS	Yes	Yes
6	1-5	Substitute	Yes	No
7	1-5	Private	Yes	No

The approach that was used for this study has been outlined in Figure 1. As mentioned previously, the questionnaire offered a broad range of information and served as a springboard for the interviews' discussion points, while the interviews delved deeper into each of the topics. Throughout this chapter, each section will begin with a discussion of the data collected from the questionnaire. Following that, data gleaned through the subsequent interviews will expand upon and elaborate this information, allowing for a greater depth of understanding of those factors which influence the pedagogy of primary school teachers.

### Mixed-Methods Sequential Explanatory Design Procedure

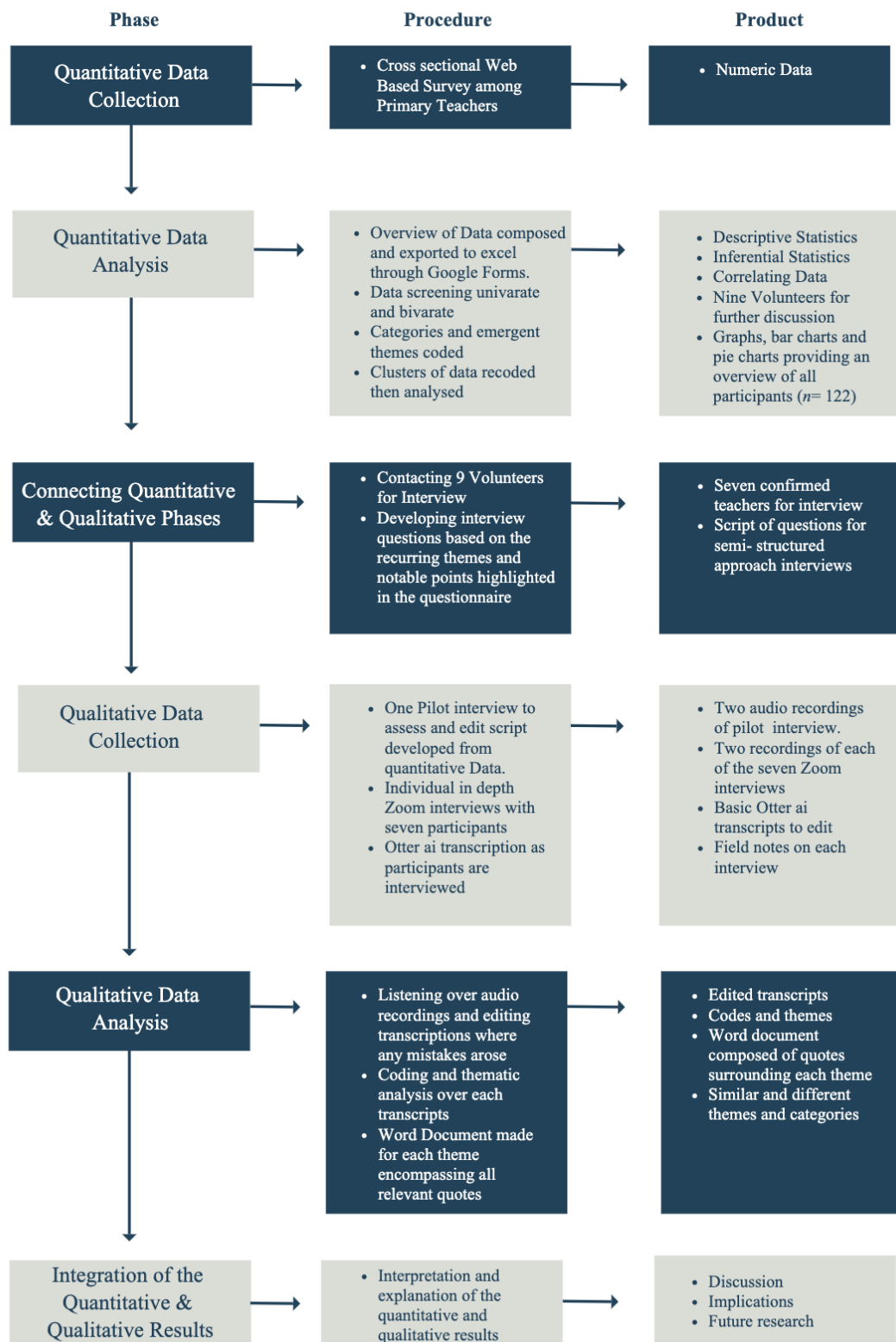


Figure 1. Visual Model For mixed methods sequential explanatory design.

### Themes from Data

Three key themes emerged from the data. The first focuses on the pressure that teachers perceive themselves to be under. This section will discuss the different factors – identified by participants – that constrain teachers' ability to plan and teach Visual Arts. The second theme covers the extent to which these teachers view Visual Arts education as a priority within their own pedagogy. Here, the sub themes of confidence and fear, as well as integration and the use of templates, will be discussed. Finally, the relationship between teachers' personal experiences with Visual Arts and how they have influenced their teaching will be investigated. This segment will start by analysing the broad impression obtained from questionnaire responses and then will delve deeper into the interviewees' personal histories, based on their own Visual Arts experiences in primary school, secondary school, and initial teacher education (ITE).

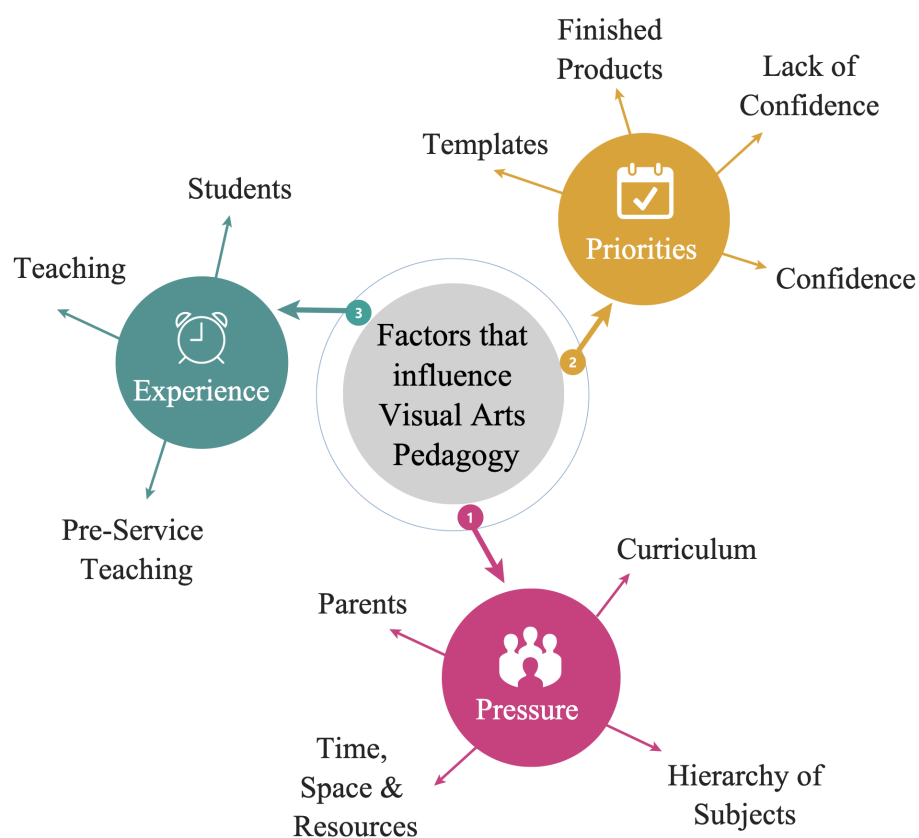
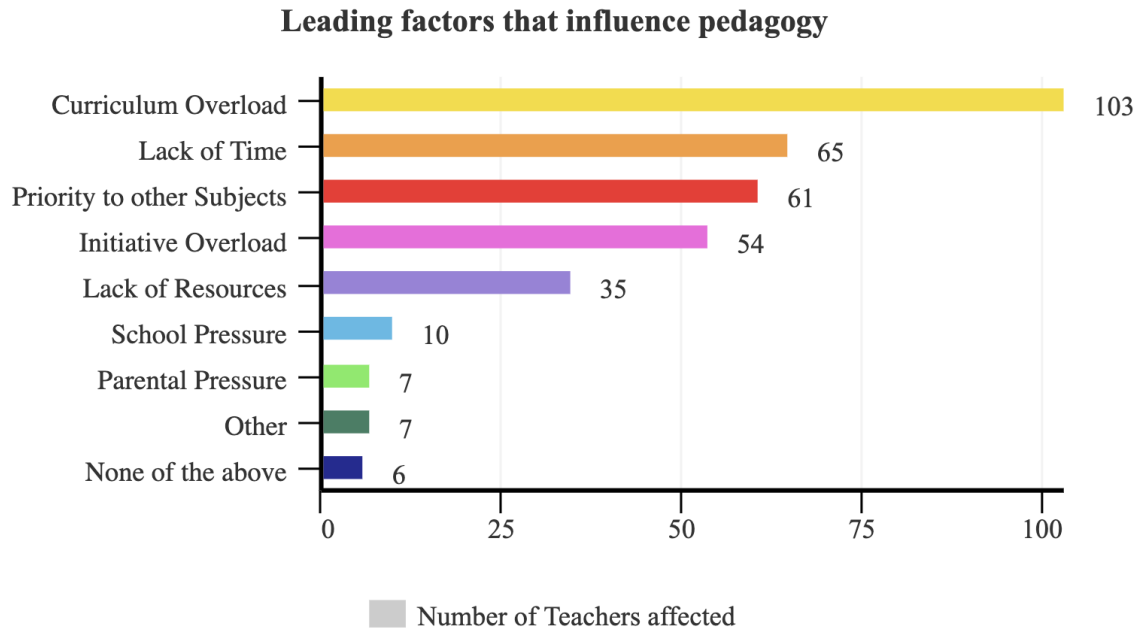


Figure 2. Themes and subthemes

## Pressure

One recurring theme that emerged from the data, both quantitative and qualitative, was the multifaceted strain that teachers face and its subsequent impact on their professional practice. The following section delves into the pressures that Irish primary teachers face while attempting to facilitate purposeful Visual Arts lessons.

**Pressures of the curriculum.** Certain expectations are placed on primary school teachers and, while some of these expectations are of course necessary for successful practice, arguably there is a lot of box ticking that adds extra unnecessary workload on teachers. When questioned on the factors which influence their pedagogy of Visual Arts, 84.4% ( $n=103$ ) of respondents identified curriculum overload as a leading factor. Other notable factors highlighted included initiative overload, 44.3% ( $n=54$ ), lack of time, 53.3% ( $n=65$ ), and priority to other subjects 50% ( $n=61$ ) (See Figure 3).



*Figure 3:* Leading factors that hinder teachers' pedagogy.



The impact of curriculum overload was reflected in the interview discussions, with six of the seven teachers interviewed stating that they were overwhelmed by curricular demands and that it was a problem that affected their Visual Art pedagogy. However, it is important to emphasise that some thought it was a bigger problem than others. The NCCA (2010) surmise that with such a competitive timetable it comes as no surprise that teachers may feel this strain when trying to segment their timetable (p.13). Teacher 7 – whose sentiments were echoed by the majority of interviewees – described it as a serious issue that placed a lot of unnecessary strain on teachers

I just think schools have so much to do, and especially with all these initiatives and this massive curriculum that we have and there's limited hours per day and also... So the fact that kids are not robots and can just learn intensely for like five hours a day, we have this very high expectation set that we're going to maximise those one hour of Visual Arts every week and..... It's going to be perfect. We're going to cover all the strands but expectation is just unrealistic (Teacher 7).

Similarly, teachers interviewed observed that there is very little time allocation for dealing with the unexpected real-life challenges of in a typical school day. While they believed that the Department makes some efforts to ensure that subjects receive a fair distribution of time, they felt that certain considerations were overlooked.

In contrast, Teacher 1 did not believe that curriculum overload had an influence on her own Visual Art pedagogy. It's not that she didn't believe it existed; rather, she believed it was a long-standing issue that she would not allow to influence her own practice. She implied that teachers who blamed curriculum pressure for their failure to adequately teach Visual Arts were exaggerating the problem: "Oh I think people... they love to be under pressure as well...there is, there is an overload, we all know that but sure, you know, that's nothing new it's always been the way you know". She firmly believed that curriculum overload only affected her pedagogy if she allowed it to and her view was in strong contrast to the other participants. Perhaps the difference of teaching experience between Teacher 1 and the rest of

the teachers could explain this difference of opinion, as Teacher 1 had the most years of experience (see Table 1).

**Time, space and resources.** When asked to highlight the factors that greatly affected their Visual Arts pedagogy "Lack of Time" was chosen by 53.3% ( $n=65$ ) of the respondents. Figure 3 shows this was the second highest factor that teachers selected. Furthermore when asked if they had sufficient time to teach Visual Arts properly 60.7% ( $n=74$ ) admitted that they did not (see Figure 4). Regardless of all these curricular pressures, Visual Arts requires a significant amount of effort. Lessons are time-consuming, and planning, preparation, and clean-up were additional stresses highlighted by teachers in both the questionnaire and interviews, all of which were viewed as contributing to a teachers' reluctance to teach Visual Arts.

#### Sufficient Time for Visual Arts

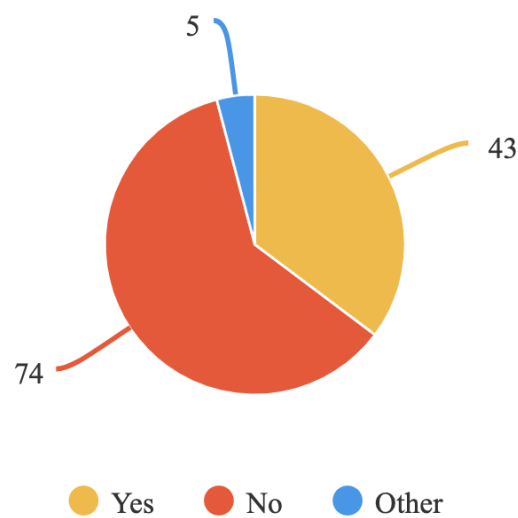


Figure 4. Do you have sufficient time for Visual Arts?

Similar sentiments were echoed among five of the seven interviewees. As Teacher 5 explained, "No matter what, art always involves more effort in terms of gathering materials, you have to be prepped for it...it just takes up an awful lot of extra headspace compared to other subjects." This view is supported by Russell-Bowie and Jeffrey (2004) who proclaims,

"with the crowded curriculum the arts are generally the first set of subjects to be left off the timetable" (p. 5).

Laying out the classroom for Visual Arts requires time and effort as well, made more difficult by large class numbers. Four of the participants reported that class sizes seriously affected their ability to teach Visual Arts. Visual Arts activities (e.g. painting, clay, printing) require larger surface areas. According to the INTO (2020), Irish primary schools have an average class size of 25, which is higher than the EU average of 20 pupils per class.

Unfortunately, crowded classrooms make it a daunting prospect for some teachers: "If you've 30 something of them all fighting for paint brushes like it is in a small room it is you know... Just manpower and space. Thirty infants so you'd have to just, it's just managing it" (Teacher 1).

Lack of resources was selected by 35 respondents (see Figure 3). The NCCA's (2010) review of curriculum implementation highlighted the fact that "Schools also struggle to fund the purchase of the many resources, materials and consumables required for subjects such as Visual Arts and Science" (p.19). Given the challenges of implementing a curriculum with time and space constraints, teachers at one school described the Visual Arts curriculum as idealistic in general (NCCA, 2005, p. 84). This point appears to be very dependent on each individual school's policies in regards to purchasing materials; it differs from teacher to teacher. As one participant of the questionnaire shared, "It would be amazing if all schools could receive enough resources for art. I'm in a lucky position where the art supplies are very good in my school but I know it's not the same in every school" (Response 12, questionnaire, 08/02/2021).

Similarly the issue of resource allocation was a point brought up by three of the interviewees in this study. Some schools have a limit on how many resources they can pay for, and for a subject like art, which is highly reliant on resources to make the lesson

worthwhile, many teachers have to fund their own Visual Arts lessons "schools are underfunded... I mean teachers are paying for basic equipment.. with their own money, that's definitely a factor too" (Teacher 4). While teachers can be quite creative with their limited resources, the general consensus among the interviewees was that without adequate investment, they would be at a disadvantage when preparing their Visual Arts lessons.

**Hierarchy of subjects.** When asked "Do any of these factors hinder your teaching of Visual Arts?" the third highest choice was "Priority to other subjects", which affected 50% ( $n=61$ ) of questionnaire respondents (Figure 3). While the majority of the respondents identified curriculum overload as having an influence on their Visual Arts pedagogy, there was also a general reference to the expectations now placed upon teachers to hold certain standards when it came to the core subjects. Open-ended questions, which afforded respondents the opportunity to elaborate upon what personally affected their pedagogy, highlighted this issue. One respondent believed that because their school prioritised English and Maths above all other subjects, this had a significant impact on their pedagogy: "Literacy and mathematical education take precedence in our DEIS classrooms. I hope that the power of the Visual Arts will be recognised and that its powerful pedagogical benefits can be realised for our children!" (Response 2, Questionnaire, 08/02/21). This sentiment was echoed by both respondents of the questionnaire and three of the interviewees.

Although there are many reasons for teachers to feel under pressure, questionnaire respondents were asked if they had ever postponed or cancelled a Visual Arts lesson to work on a different subject. Figure 5 shows that there were slightly more in the Never 28.7% ( $n=35$ ) and Occasionally 33.6% ( $n=41$ ) compared to the Sometimes 23.8% ( $n=29$ ) and Often categories 9% ( $n=11$ ). While there are almost 30 respondents who had never postponed a Visual Arts lesson, there were roughly 70 teachers that admitted to postponing or cancelling a lesson, albeit to varying degrees. This shows that the overloaded curriculum is definitely a

factor for a large number of teachers.

### Have you ever had to Postpone V.A. for Another Subject?

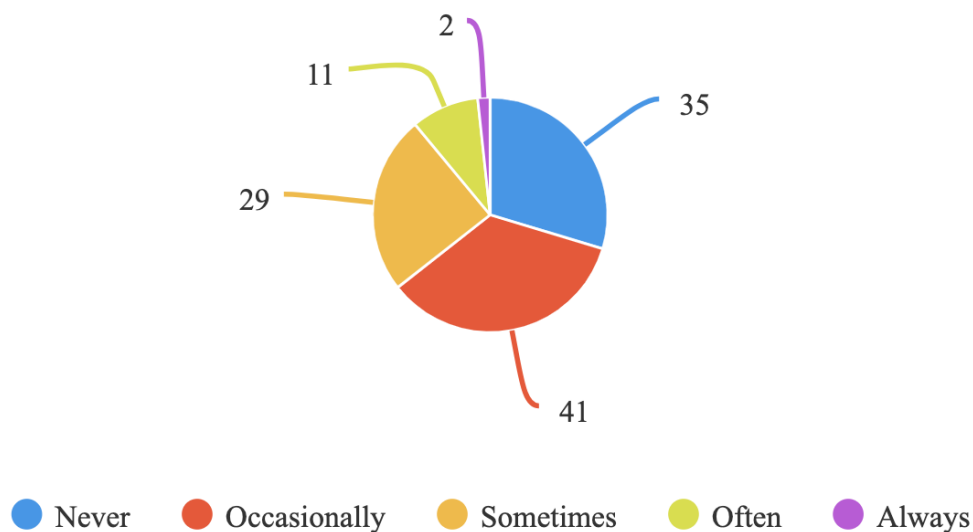


Figure 5. Have you ever had to postpone a Visual Arts lesson for another academic subject?

To elaborate on these responses, the hierarchy of subjects was discussed in subsequent interviews and three of the seven interviewees mentioned the general pressure they felt to prioritise the core subjects. Teacher 7 expressed that "I just think that we have such an obsession with literacy and numeracy that more or less everything that falls out of that bracket is viewed as just less important and disposable" (Teacher 7). These sentiments were also echoed by Teacher 3 when she clarified "there's so many standards that have to be met in the core subjects like English and Maths, it's natural that these 'less important subjects' (air quotes) will be like.. kind of thrown to one side." The use of the term "less important" is intriguing in this statement, as the teacher elected to take part in this research and mentioned several times that she strongly believed in the importance of Visual Arts. Her tone in this statement suggests that she has worked with people who don't care about the issue. She used air quotes to demonstrate that she does not consider Visual Arts to be a lesser topic, but that she has heard other teachers use the term.

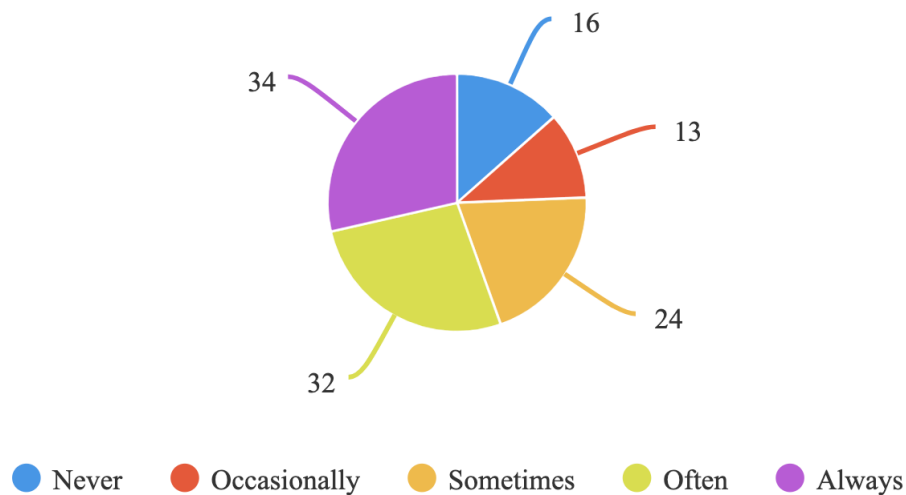
The INTO (2010) reflected on the implementation of the new curriculum and how we had a tendency to treat the Arts as “the Cinderella of the education system” (p.30). These responses show that teachers feel the pressure to prioritise certain core subjects in order to achieve results for their schools. To add to the stress of timetabling, the areas of literacy and numeracy development have significantly increased since the publication of the *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (2015). Robinson (2011) warns that “policy makers typically narrow the curriculum to emphasise a small group of subjects, tie schools up in a culture of standardised testing and limit the discretion of educators” (p.42): the experiences and insights of teachers participating in this study indicate that this may be the case in Ireland.

Indeed in the national context Breacháin and O' Toole (2014) have argued that teachers are under even more pressure from parents and principals to meet higher expectations as students' literacy and numeracy skills are expected to improve. Their article explained that this pressure could potentially have a negative impact on the arts and that we need to be mindful of creating a balanced curriculum. They called for a more reflective, research-based education system in Ireland, one that values a holistic approach to children's educational experiences and moves away from prioritising certain skills as "core" or "central."

**Parents.** Parental support can be very effective with helping students foster a meaningful Visual Arts pedagogy. According to respondents and interviewees, some parents were unaware of what a Visual Arts lesson should entail. They saw some parents' expectations as being overly focused on the product, particularly at certain times of the year. When asked about the pressure to send home seasonal artwork “Always” 27.9% ( $n=34$ ) “Often” 26.2% ( $n=32$ ) and “Sometimes” 19.7% ( $n=24$ ) had the highest responses with a total

of 74.8% ( $n=92$ ) of the respondents feeling some level of pressure to do so (see Figure 6).

### Pressure from Parents for Event Specific Art



*Figure 6.* Do teachers feel pressure from Parents for event specific Art pieces eg. Christmas

Four of the interviewees explained that they had started facilitating more product-focused lessons so that pupils had something tangible and pleasing to give home to their parents. As Teacher 7 states;

When it comes to Christmas time or Mother's Day there's an .... I don't want to say expectation...but yeah I think they'd be disappointed without those little pieces coming home. And then I don't want to let them down or be the only one in the school not sending stuff home.

This teacher believed that although sending home a seasonal inspired piece is understandable from time to time, the only appropriate way to do so is to return to a product-centered lesson. By instilling in children that only the end product matters, teachers and parents can put too much emphasis on **what** they create and not **how** it was created. The experiences of participating teachers reflect those of Mc Lennan (2010) as she explains "when children participate in activities that encourage them to copy or produce an adult created or modeled activity, the scope of their creativity is limited, their interpretations of personal and peer work are greatly diminished" (2010, p. 82). This can become confusing for a child if they prefer

their creative journey but still want to impress their parents. This creative dissonance has been eloquently summarised by Edwards (2014): "Sometimes young children are caught between what you tell them about the creative process and what their parents expect to see" (p.41).

At times, teachers may bend to the pressure and have their students produce specific end goal pieces, purely to appease or impress parents and colleagues. This was the case for Teacher 4: "With a lot of teachers there is that kind of competitive thing where your display, you know, you feel under pressure from other teachers to have your displays changing regularly and to look good". But when children start to try to replicate or follow very specific steps, their creativity becomes stunted.

The interviewees also believed that some parents didn't entirely appreciate what purposeful Visual Arts lessons entailed. Three of the interviewees mentioned that a large proportion of their parents didn't appear to value Visual Arts education and felt that as a result they were slightly dismissive of work that was sent home. Teacher 1 explained how the parents would be waiting with their "blue bins" as the children came out of the school. What she meant by this statement was that parents already expected the work that she was about to send home and that they felt it was only suitable for the recycling bin. She felt that this mindset of dismissing their work was detrimental to how the children viewed their own creative process. She acknowledged that the confidence level of her Junior Infants class was much higher than that of her previous 3rd class, suggesting that something began to weaken the students' confidence in their Visual Arts abilities during their primary education.

One participant observed that, in her opinion, the community did not value Visual Arts. She found both her school and the wider community had very strong GAA ties and were more focused on the sports subjects than the arts. As a result, she noted that the motor skills of her incoming Junior Infants were limited:



You're trying to explain to them, you know that creativity is important for everything as well, but.... Yeah. Like, they're not even they're not picking up crayons or pencils at home. I think for fine motor skills and for colouring and just messy painting and all that it's very important (Teacher 4).

She hypothesized that their inability to use pencils, scissors or crayons effectively was due to the fact that their parents did not nurture art in the home. She also suggested that parents felt Visual Arts was just too messy a pastime to engage in their own houses. When the general impression towards Visual Arts at home is potentially indifferent, this may seriously affect how the child approaches Visual Art in the future: "if parents do not value children's artwork this sends very clear messages to their children of the value (or not) of their art-making" (Boyd & Cutcher, 2015, p. 92).

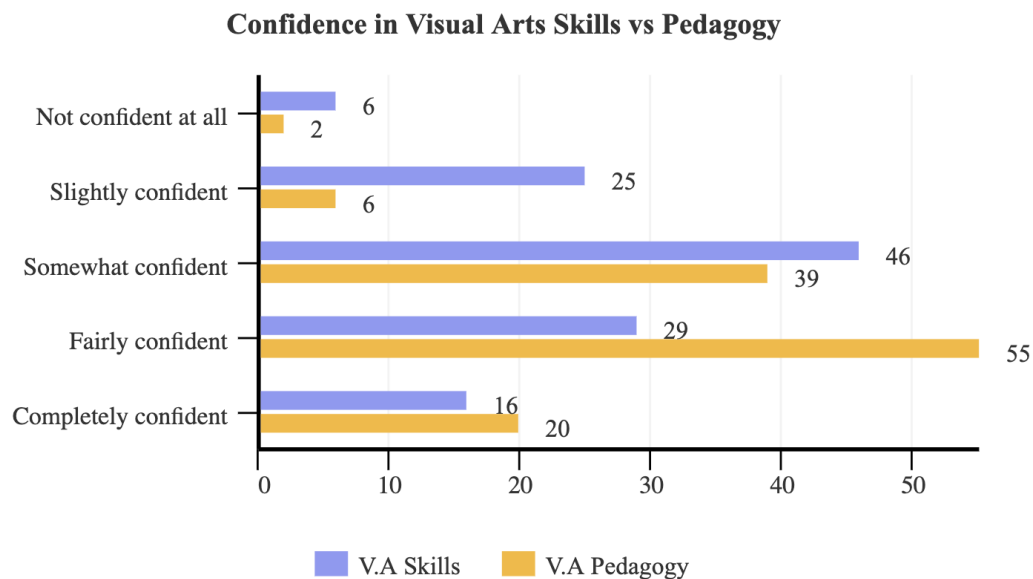
### **Priorities**

These compounding stressors, like the overloaded curriculum mentioned previously, can add additional pressure to teachers. As Chapman, Wright and Pascoe (2018) explain, "This responsibility can result in a heavy curriculum load for the classroom teacher where competing priorities are persistent. Depending on a teacher's background, experience and confidence, this "load" may be manageable or onerous" (p.957). When the data were analysed, the issue of "priorities" arose as a dominant theme in how teachers chose to teach Visual Arts. This next segment will look at how a teacher's pedagogy is influenced by their predisposition towards certain subjects.

**Confidence.** When questioned about confidence in their own artistic abilities, the questionnaire responses display a clear bell curve, providing a general impression of the 122 teachers' confidence levels. This indicates that many teachers are only somewhat confident in their own abilities in Visual Arts.

Interestingly and encouragingly, however, the levels of confidence teachers reported in their own artistic ability did not appear to impact the level of confidence reported in their ability to teach Visual Arts. Indeed, as you can see from Figure 7, while the highest response

for teachers' confidence level in their Visual Arts ability was 'Somewhat confident' at 37.7% ( $n=46$ ) the option of 'Fairly confident' was the more popular choice when asked about their pedagogy of Visual Arts. This clearly shows that, while the respondents may not have been overly confident in their own creative abilities, they are very confident in their ability to teach Visual Arts.



*Figure 7.* Teachers' confidence level in their own Visual Arts skills vs their pedagogy.

Teachers in the interview process were asked to reflect on the data in order to determine why this may have been the case. Five teachers confessed to having little confidence in their abilities, but they also admitted that this was not altogether a bad thing. As Teacher 3 explains, "But, I think if you enjoy something, even if you're not good at it, it comes across so that then they might enjoy it as well." They were proud to show the kids that they weren't particularly talented in Visual Arts, and they wanted to instil in them the value of giving it a shot.

These five interviewees also agreed that, despite their lack of faith in their abilities, they did have an interest in and respect for the subject. As a result, they still wanted to

prioritise the correct implementation of Visual Arts and instil a positive attitude towards it with their students:

if I felt that my piece of art wasn't amazing I'm like oh you know I did my best. I'm just trying not to knock it, but just acknowledge that I'm trying, because I don't want to put in negative attitudes that they can't draw (Teacher 3).

This can occur when a teacher is either confident in the subject or understands the importance of faithful curriculum implementation. When a teacher designates time and energy to Visual Arts, they are showing that they value it as a subject and understand its benefits. They acknowledge there are many roadblocks when it comes to teaching purposeful Visual Arts lessons, but they make a decision not to allow these obstacles to get in their way. For example, the five of the seven interviewees described how they implemented strategies to ensure that the children's Visual Arts experience was not hindered.

Such strategies included careful timetabling, planning lessons over a set period of time, and using their resources and space strategically. Teachers 2 and 3 highlighted that they wanted their Visual Arts to be held on a Tuesday as they felt leaving it to Friday afternoon gave the impression that it was more a reward than a subject in its own right. As Teacher 2 explains

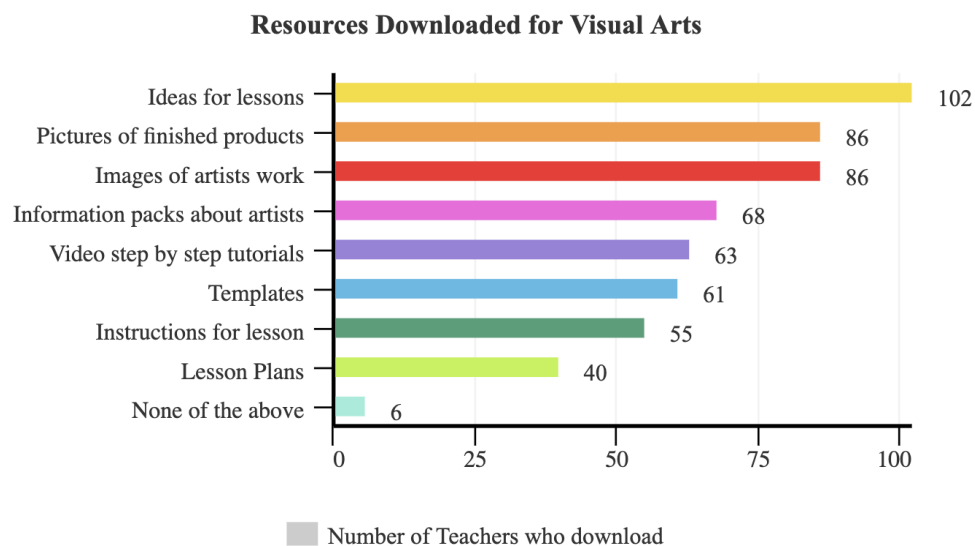
Now, I'm not a person who says we do art on a Friday to kill some time before kids come home. I actually used to teach my art lessons on a Tuesday afternoon, because I want the children to understand that Art has its proper place... It's as valuable as any other curricular areas that I teach.

Benson's (1975) seminal report which emphasised the phenomenon of Visual Arts being treated as a second thought "it is no accident that Friday afternoon is such a popular time for art and craft in the primary school. A set of subjects regarded and treated as unimportant will become peripheral in the curriculum" (p.20). It is encouraging to see that the interviewees understand the importance of designating time towards art, even when they admit how challenging it is to do so.

**Focus on the finished product.** On the other hand, some teachers who are unsure of their abilities in the Visual Arts may prefer to work on projects with a clear end product. As one respondent states;

I feel my ability in art hinders me from teaching it. I don't feel confident therefore I feel I can't teach it as well. I also feel that classroom management is much harder in art lessons, meaning I plan much easier step by step lessons with young children as to let them be creative or take their own spin leads to chaotic classrooms. While there are lots of benefits to the process of art, there is very limited time to do this and I end up just teaching to achieve the final product (Response 34, Questionnaire, 08/02/21).

When asked about resources they were most likely to download, teachers were given a multiple choice option, the results of which are displayed in Figure 8. While “Ideas for lessons” 83.6% ( $n=102$ ) and “Images of artists’ work” 70.5% ( $n=86$ ), could be used to help prepare purposeful Visual Arts lessons, this bar chart also shows that significant numbers of teachers download resources for product-centered lessons. Respondents reported that they downloaded “Pictures of finished products” 70.5% ( $n=86$ ) and “Templates” 50% ( $n=61$ ) for their Visual Arts lessons.



*Figure 8.* Resources downloaded for Visual Arts.

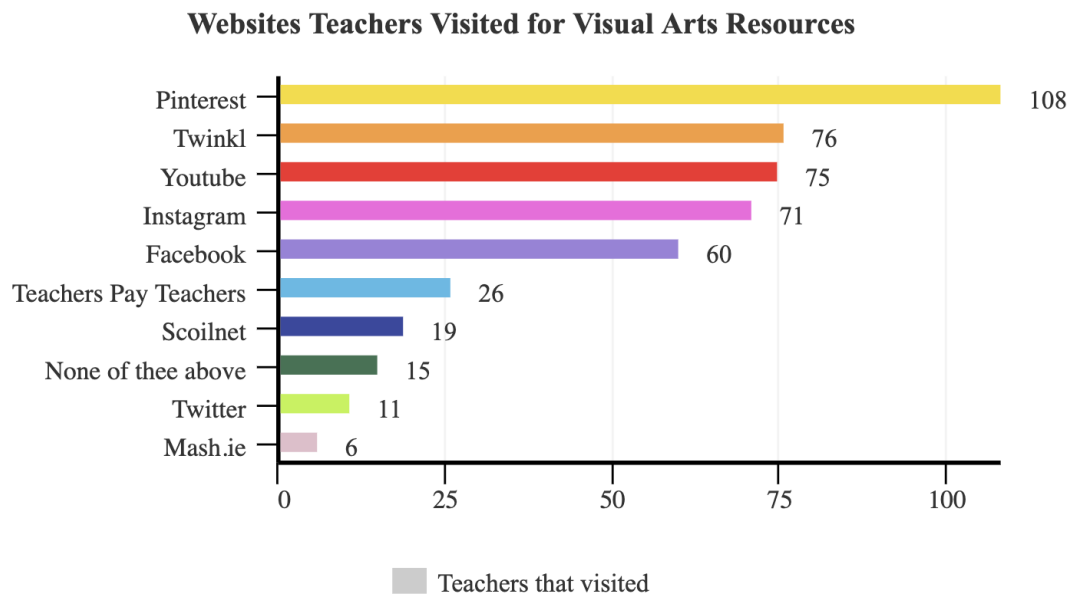
While teachers continue to believe in their ability to effectively teach Visual Arts, data shows that they often confess to starting certain lessons with an end product in mind. This response prompted a line of questioning during the interview process to see whether the pedagogy of the seven teachers matched the quantitative findings. In comparison, none of the interview participants felt this way about Visual Arts; in fact, most of them felt the contrary, despite the fact that they interacted with a lot of teachers who tended to concentrate on product-oriented lessons. As Teacher 4 explains "I still think a lot of teachers are obsessed with that kind of, you know, does it look good at the end.. does the product look good".

**Templates.** For those who lack confidence or prefer to focus on the end product the option of using a template can become incredibly tempting. Again, Figure 9 shows that 50% ( $n=61$ ) admitted to downloading them for Visual Arts lessons. In contrast, it was widely agreed among six of the seven interviewees that templated Visual Arts lessons do not teach the desired skills and should be used sparingly. They were seen as a last resort for teachers who were overburdened by their schedules. As Teacher 2 explains

I'm not a big fan of these template art lessons at all just be honest with you.. but they have their place sometimes, and oh my God, sometimes I'm exhausted and I just think right. Here's the template we're going to follow the template, and we'll have something lovely at the end of it.

This statement reflects how the stress and pressures of the job have affected her in the past and she had to reluctantly use a template to ensure a Visual Arts lesson was taught. One of the interviewees (Teacher 6) suggested that a templated lesson was preferable to nothing.

An explanation suggested by Teacher 7 for the overuse of templates may be the ease with which they can now be downloaded. "In this curriculum heavy environment, teachers understandably look for assistance with managing their curriculum responsibilities, often through the online sourcing of teaching activities" (Chapman et al, 2018, p. 958). When questioned respondents admitted to accessing websites which host product orientated resources as can be seen in Figure 9.



*Figure 9.* Websites teachers accessed for Visual Arts resources.

With the increased availability of online tools, teachers now have access to a greater number of product-oriented resources. Teacher 4 commented on this fact as she reflected on why teachers access these types of resources: “Yeah, they’ll keep just going back to Twinkl or to Pinterest, and, you know, the easy product.” According to Chapman et al (2018), when teachers are short on knowledge, they search for easy ways to fill in the gaps, and places like Pinterest become the go-to resource. Yet this does not mean that teachers who use these websites will only focus on the end product. Teachers interviewed argued that while they themselves might access online resources for a lesson they still ensured that it did not focus on the end product. “It’s great to have Pinterest as a reference point. But ... sometimes you can walk into somebody else’s classroom and everything you see is from Twinkl. I don’t want to be that person” (Teacher 2).

Two teachers interviewed admitted they had little confidence teaching in junior classrooms, and suggested that, due to their younger age, templates should be used in the infants classroom. They assumed that since these children were so young, they would need

the assistance of templates in order to produce artwork that resembled their vision of a finished product: “Em so yeah, I do think it's important to use them with younger children, like if you want them to put wool on a sheep. If you don't give them a template, they have no concept of how the sheep is supposed to look... so I don't know. I think templates for younger kids are quite necessary” (Teacher 6).

Boyd and Cutcher (2015) warn us about the pitfalls of using templated art, especially with younger children. They believe that by providing students with templates to use, they are instilling the expectation that their work must look a certain way or meet a certain norm. They argue that "the pedagogical approach to stencils and worksheets enables the teachers to intentionally teach specific concepts and skills, and the end-products explicitly demonstrate children's learning" (p. 92). If a predetermined end product is what certain teachers are striving for, then the question should be asked: Are they meeting the objectives of the curriculum with this type of practice? According to the Visual Arts Curriculum, “The emphasis should always be on art as inspiration, and not as something to copy” (1999, p.14). Although they may provide an assessment of what the children have learned, the nature of templates does not show a true representation of their Visual Arts skills and, as a result, can have a negative impact on Visual Arts pedagogy of teachers.

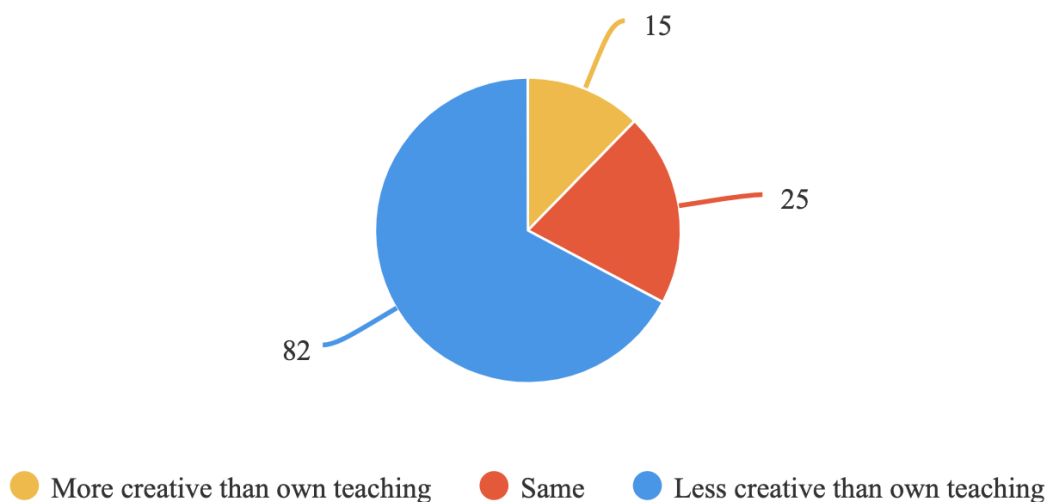
### **Experience**

It was clear from both the questionnaire and interviews that a fundamental influential factor in each teacher's pedagogy was their educational experience as students themselves. These experiences, both positive and negative, appeared to help shape their perspective and served as the foundation for many of their pedagogical views. The apprenticeship of observation was defined in previous chapters as a manifestation of this phenomenon. Lortie (1975) coined this term to explain how teachers approach the profession with a clear sense of what their pedagogy should be, based on their own personal experiences as students. Clearly,

each participant's experiences influenced how they taught certain subjects. This segment will examine their personal experiences and how they have shaped their pedagogy in the Visual Arts.

**Student Experience.** Respondents felt that their own pedagogy was more innovative than that which they received as students. Figure 10 shows that 67.2% ( $n=82$ ) of the teachers felt this way. Only 12.3% ( $n=15$ ) believed that they received a better experience than their own teaching when they were students. These sentiments were echoed by the interviewees.

### Student Experience vs Teaching Experience in V.A



*Figure 10.* Do you feel that your own personal experience of V.A as a student was more creative than your own teaching?

There can be a number of reasons as to why teachers have such a strong belief that their own pedagogy of Visual Arts is more creative. In the past, Visual Arts was often undervalued and treated as a reward (Benson, 1975). This was the experience of Teacher 1 and she suggested that her past teachers may not have believed that it was a subject in its own right. She was firmly opposed to this type of treatment of Visual Arts "I have a big problem with that... should be always given, that's the way I remember it..... That if you were good



you got to do art and if you weren't that was the thing that was taken away" (Teacher 1). The older curriculum allowed for this type of practice.

In the previous section, confidence in Visual Arts ability played a vital role in how teachers taught their lessons. Teachers who experienced the old curriculum as students did not develop skills in Visual Arts, and now feel underprepared to teach it as a result. This was possibly why Teacher 5's experiences on the older Visual Arts curriculum were so similar to Teacher 1:

I definitely know that we did very minimal amounts of anything other than like paint and colour. I remember doing clay the odd time. Probably did some print in the junior end of the school but, construction, maybe a pop up card but that's about it..I can remember some teachers just ... you got the vibe that they just didn't want to do it. Or were scared of it. (Teacher 5)

Walsh (2016) analysed 100 years of the curriculum and primary education in Ireland. In his reflection he concluded that, while teachers were generally supportive of the inclusion of art and craft activities in the curriculum, many lacked the confidence and felt unprepared for their implementation. This led to a preponderance of activities in routine aspects such as painting, with few instances of implementing aspects such as construction and appreciation (p. 9).

For both Teacher 1 and 5, they felt that their experiences did nothing to put them off Visual Arts. Instead, they both expressed disappointment that they had not been taught more purposeful lessons. They still maintained a positive attitude towards the subject. In contrast, Teacher 2 had a completely different reaction. Her experience instilled in her a deeply negative attitude toward Visual Arts, leading to a fear of the subject. Her Visual Arts classes were mostly focused on drawing and painting, with the occasional piece of clay "thrown in for good measure". This did not work for her because she admits that her skills in Visual Arts were limited, and she felt like she was always failing at the subject. It seemed that her teacher's priority of focusing on the end product was the reason that Teacher 2 was

completely turned off Visual Art at the end of her Primary education. From then on she claims that she "avoided Art like the plague" because she "detested" her experiences of it (Teacher 2).

Teacher 2 shows us how much a product approach to teaching does not help students with little confidence in their own artistic skills. The literature review has already delved into the mindset of process vs product among academics and teachers. Boyd and Cutcher insisted that "the decisions made by educators directly influence children's opportunities for art-making and learning" (2015, p. 92). They challenged educators to consider the extent to which activities with predetermined visual outcomes for students would actually benefit their students, aside from being able to replicate and recreate the teacher's set idea.

Teacher 2 reflects that had she been allowed to focus on the process rather than the product, she may have been able to progress more in Visual Arts and she also would have had a much better understanding of the subject:

You know, like, I want the kids to enjoy art. And I want them to enjoy the process of doing, and of exploring. I suppose exploration is a huge part of my art lessons. Maybe that's because I never had the chance to do it myself until I got to college. Things... they may have been different if I'd had the chance to explore in primary school.

Despite the fact that she had such negative experiences as a student, the focus on exploration in initial teacher education positively influenced her teaching.

**Initial teacher education.** It is fortunate that Teacher 2 had an incredibly positive experience of Visual Arts education when she entered college. She admits that "it completely changed the way I thought about art, and I loved art then in college.... It's one of my favourite subjects to teach. Talk about a complete one eighty." Without this intervention, her reaction to her disappointing primary school experience may have had a negative impact on her Visual Arts pedagogy. This happens to many teachers and, according to the Australian Senate Inquiry into Arts Education (SERCARC, 1995), "primary classroom teachers, because of their own poor arts experience at school, and because of inadequate teacher training, lack

confidence to teach the arts. As a result... there is a strong impulse to marginalise the arts in their teaching" (Russel-Bowie & Jeffrey, 2004, p.49). The experiences of interviewees indicate that if a Pre-Service Teacher (PST) has had negative experiences of Visual Arts in their lifetime, then college can often be the last chance to show them the benefits of it.

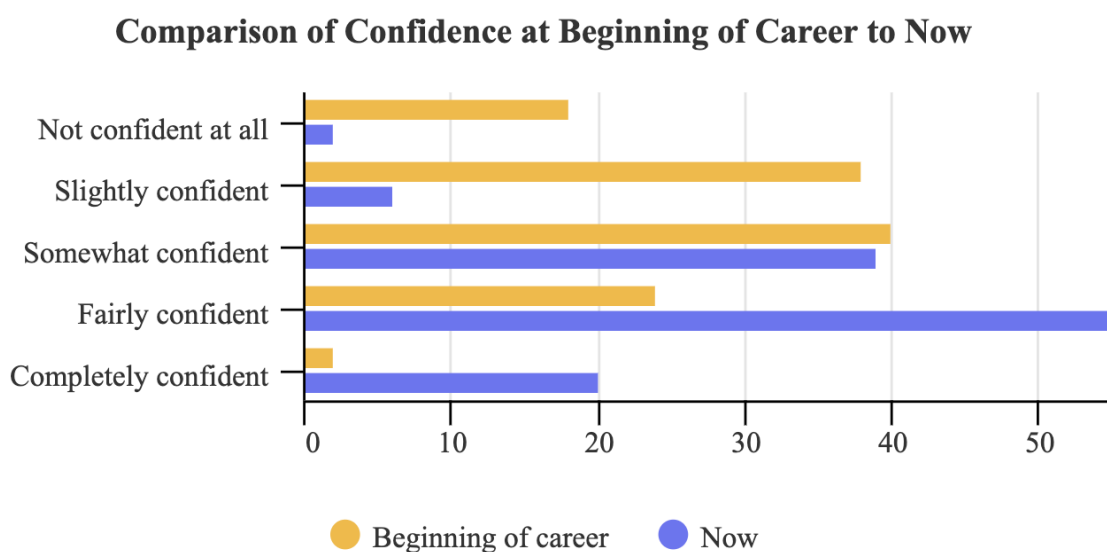
Unfortunately, a common sentiment that appeared in both the questionnaires and the interviews was the belief that PST's do not receive sufficient amounts of instruction in Visual Arts. When asked if there were any additional comments on Visual Arts in the questionnaire, four teachers said that they did not receive enough training to prepare them: e.g. "I received inadequate training in VA in college. The teaching of VA varies widely between teachers with regard to the quality and the quantity taught" (Response 31, questionnaire, 08/02/21).

Similarly, when asked about their experiences, all interviewees stated that, in ITE, there was simply not enough time spent teaching Visual Arts to prepare them for an effective pedagogy, irrespective of their diverse educational backgrounds. As Teacher 6 reminisces, "Yeah, we only had art in first year, I think and we had it for like two only like two hours. Em and it was only one semester. I'm trying to look back but you know it's actually a very, very small, I think every college spent too many hours on pointless lectures". Regardless of the college they attended, the sentiments of Teacher 6 were echoed by many of the other participants.

Teacher 5 admitted that she didn't feel she had covered everything, but as she had no more lectures in 3rd year, she opted to do Visual Arts as one of her electives: "I wouldn't have had any Art that third year and there was still so much to go through. It definitely should have more time allocated to it". Russell-Bowie & Jeffrey (2004) highlighted that teachers' lack of expertise and personal arts experiences must be discussed both at the preservice level and by in-service teachers. Teacher education institutions can play a critical role in resolving these issues by offering quality programs.

It was perceived by four of the seven interviewees that by allocating only a small section of their college timetable to Visual Arts, PSTs are not provided the opportunity to become familiar and comfortable with each strand. Teacher 7 admitted this when she claimed that only after 3 years of teaching was she finally grasping how all the strands of Visual Arts should be taught "I feel like I'm only learning that now. After like three years of class experience". Without sufficient time to engage with each of the curriculum strands, teachers can only receive a simplified overview of what they are expected to teach.

**Teaching Experience.** When teachers enter the profession, there can be a lot of uncertainty, as is natural at the start of any new job. Classroom experience is invaluable to informing a teacher's pedagogy. When comparing the confidence levels of their Visual Arts pedagogy and the start of their career to how they feel about it now there is a noticeable increase (Figure 11).



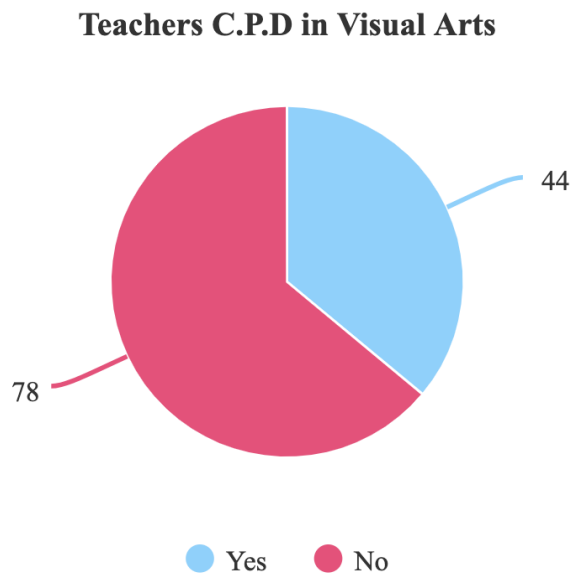
*Figure 11.* Confidence in ability at beginning of career vs confidence in ability now.

To elucidate the reasons for this increase in confidence identified the numerous ways they have been influenced by their teaching experience. Unsurprisingly, classroom

experiences were cited as one of the most effective factors. For Teacher 2, her love for process approach pedagogy was accentuated when she had a year working in a special needs class: "Actually that's probably part of why I am the way I am, because when you teach severe profound special needs. It's all about the experience."

Both Teacher 4 and 5 admitted their confidence grew as they explored more with their students. Teacher 7 had experience teaching abroad in both Italy and Switzerland. She felt that, because she had been shown the variations on how other countries prioritise Visual Arts in their curricula, she was given invaluable experiences that really nurtured her pedagogy. "The way the art education that I'm doing, how it differs in the main way from my work when I was at school is that the kids have a lot more freedom of what they create. And I really think that because I've travelled and taught in so many different places. That has seriously impacted why I teach the way I teach now" (Teacher 7).

One notable factor that was highlighted in the questionnaire was the lack of emphasis on professional development of Visual Arts skills in schools. It is very much down to the personal interest of the teacher and whether they wanted to hone any of their Visual Arts skills. Around 64% ( $n=78$ ) of teachers in the questionnaire confirmed that they had never completed any additional CPD to help inform their Visual Arts pedagogy (see Figure 12). When you combine this with the fact that their Visual Arts lectures in college were given such a small amount of time, it's clear that if teachers don't have a personal interest in the topic, they're unlikely to have enough experience to cover the Visual Arts curriculum to a satisfactory degree.



*Figure 12.* Teachers that completed CPD courses.

Interview participants generally had more experience of CPD compared to questionnaire respondents, with six of the seven interviewees having taken part in some Visual Arts course or initiative. Five reported that they learned a lot from these experiences and were introduced to new creative ways to approach Visual Arts that influenced their pedagogy.

In Donahue and Stuart's (2010) guide on integrating the arts into busy curricula, they advised that for purposeful Arts lessons, professional development, including arts experiences, was required for all teachers: "All the teachers, even a few self-proclaimed "art phobic" teachers, have participated in the visual art professional development and have gained confidence in their own artistic abilities. All the teachers at the very least use art in some new way in their classrooms" (p.90).

In contrast, Teacher 4 felt that the CPD was not enough to bridge the gap of what they had not learned in college "I suppose, like we do training days and lots of things, don't we, but I mean, I don't feel competent. There was so much to cover now that I look at the

curriculum and realise how much we are expected to know... I'm a little overwhelmed by it to be honest."

### **Conclusion**

This research set out to highlight the factors that influence primary teachers' pedagogy in Visual Arts in Ireland. The goal was to use a large-scale questionnaire to gather general consensus among Irish teachers while also using interviews to investigate the related themes and issues raised in the questionnaire. This offered a comprehensive overview of 122 teachers' experiences while also delving deeply into the practices and beliefs of the seven interviewees. The data indicated that there are numerous factors that currently influence teachers pedagogy in Visual Arts. The primary factors of experience, priority and pressures converge to determine how teachers will teach Visual Arts. The vast majority of participants, to both the questionnaire and the interview believe that Visual Arts is a topic worth devoting time and effort to. The problem is finding that time in such a busy curriculum. While there was a general positive response towards the subject, many challenges prevent teachers from teaching it to the best of their abilities. Without addressing these issues Visual Arts will continue to be a challenge for certain teachers. However, when a teacher values the subject and focuses on the learning experiences and creative journey of their pupils, they will be enabled to design and facilitate purposeful Visual Arts lessons.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The main objective of this research was to examine the factors that influenced primary school teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy, using a mixed methods approach to gain both an in-depth and broad understanding from teachers all over Ireland. Teachers were given the chance to share all experiences, both positive and negative, and divulge the various contributing factors that have impacted their pedagogy. A review of the literature on this subject showed a scarcity of evidence in the Irish context, which strengthened the rationale for conducting this research. The question which drove this research was whether factors such as a teacher's confidence, experience, or personal interests influenced how they designed and taught Visual Arts. Further, this piece of research sought to investigate whether external factors such as perceived pressures related to the curriculum and school or parental expectations impacted teachers' pedagogy. Findings were largely consistent with existing theoretical and empirical literature in the field of Visual Arts. This section will summarise the findings, consider their implications, describe the study's limitations, make recommendations for future studies, and conclude with a review of the chapter.

### Main Findings

Analysis of the data concluded that a teacher's pedagogy is a product of their experiences, the external pressures they perceive, and their own educational priorities. While every teacher experiences the world differently, there were a number of recurring themes that were highlighted in the data. The most commonly identified factors by participants were curriculum overload, the hierarchy of subjects, their personal experiences and the pressures of the job.

**Factor one: Curriculum overload/hierarchy of subjects.** In the questionnaire and interviews, it was widely stated that an overloaded curriculum was the most significant impediment to their teaching of Visual Arts. Participants felt that the expectation to include



every aspect of the curriculum was incredibly challenging. With such a busy schedule, participants suggested that some teachers viewed Visual Arts as a lesser subject. They spoke of the increased pressure placed on schools to focus on literacy and numeracy in relation to standardised testing scores. With the mounting pressure to achieve better results they found less time was being spent on the creative subjects. While the core subjects are obviously vital for our students to learn, so too is the experience of partaking in creative subjects like Visual Arts.

**Factor Two: Time, space and resources.** Subjects such as Visual Arts, according to participants, are underrepresented in time allocations. To teach lessons and give children the opportunity to explore and provide time for their creative journey, purposeful Visual Arts education requires a significant amount of time. Teachers have also struggled to find enough space and resources to teach Visual Arts, according to the INTO (2010). This subject necessitates a large amount of space to comfortably explore concepts and materials. As several participants pointed out, having one of the highest class sizes in Europe severely restricts what teachers can do in the classroom. Lack of funding towards resources was also highlighted as an issue, however this did differ from school to school.

**Factor Three: Perceived Parental Expectations.** According to participants, some parents did not appreciate the value of the learning and expression that take place through the process of making art, and have tended to focus instead on the product created. They reported that some parents' expectations were heavily focused on the product, especially at certain times of the year. Due to this point some teachers admitted to completing product inspired thematic work specifically for the parents.

**Factor Four: Confidence.** The data revealed that many teachers had only a moderate level of confidence in their own abilities in the Visual Arts. Surprisingly however, the interviewees admitted that the degree of confidence in their own artistic skills did not impact

their confidence in their ability to teach Visual Arts. By demonstrating to the children that they did not need to have a high level of Visual Arts skills, children were shown that lack of ability should not deter them from trying.

**Factor Five: Focus on the finished product/ templates.** During the interviews, some teachers implied that they had colleagues who, due to a lack of confidence, found the option of using a template to be particularly appealing; they felt more confident about the lesson when they could focus on the end product. The teachers in this study felt that using a template was not considered appropriate pedagogy for Visual Arts. However they admitted that there are times that the choice was between a template or no Visual Arts at all. A substantial number of questionnaire respondents confirmed they would download a template for their Visual Arts lesson, highlighting that this practice, while admittedly product focused, is very much in use in many teachers' pedagogy.

**Factor Six: Experiences.** The questionnaire and interviews revealed that a major influencing factor in each teacher's pedagogy was their own personal educational experience, both as a child and as a teacher. The term "Apprenticeship of observation" was used in the literature to describe how some of the participants came to the teaching profession with preconceived notions of what Visual Arts education should look like, based on their own experiences as a student. This study revealed that many of the participants felt that their own Visual Arts pedagogy was far more creative than what they received. It was hypothesised that this could be due to the curriculum change in 1999, making teachers more aware of purposeful Visual Arts activities for their lessons.

### **Strengths of the Study.**

This study has provided a more up-to-date understanding of Visual Arts pedagogy among primary teachers. Prior to this, the INTO conducted a similar comprehensive study of 209 teachers in 2010. Although the research of this study was performed on a smaller scale,

the 122 respondents still provide a wealth of data that can be used to illustrate the key factors affecting the Visual Arts pedagogy of primary school teachers. While there has been a noticeable improvement in the quality of Visual Arts lessons as compared to the findings of the aforementioned Benson (1979) and INTO (2010) studies, many similar factors continue to influence the pedagogy of primary teachers.

The mixed methods approach gave this study scope for teachers to discuss in depth what they found challenging about implementing Visual Arts. Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis provided a broad sense of the practice of Visual Arts from a large number of teachers, while also conducting in-depth discussions of the main factors that influence teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy. This combination provided a wealth of data to work with, and provided recurring themes from both a large group and individual perspectives. The large sample, online questionnaire format and open invitation provided a broad perspective. While not perfectly representative of the population of primary teachers in Ireland, it does provide a valuable overview of educational practice as it unfolds in classrooms across the country.

In the interviews, each participant was asked the same open-ended questions. Cohen, Manion and Morrison, (2010) believe that it is important to avoid bias, and this research method ensured consistency in the semi-structured interviews.

### **Weaknesses of the Study.**

This was a small-scale study using mixed methods sequential explanatory design. While the design itself was ideal for the study, there was limited time between the quantitative and qualitative analysis. Due to the Pandemic restrictions all of the interviews had to be conducted online via ZOOM. In some cases the connection was choppy and difficult to hear. As the participants were discussing this in their own personal spaces, there were moments when the flow of discussion was interrupted by door bells, phone calls, family members compared to if the interviews had taken place in a formal face to face setting.

Participants who completed the questionnaire and volunteered for an interview were more than likely to have an interest in Visual Arts. To gain an unbiased opinion, sourcing participants who explicitly don't have an interest, or even feared Visual Arts, could provide a contrast to the opinions of the teachers who took part. Although the findings in this study highlighted that there are numerous factors that influence teachers' Visual Arts pedagogy in Ireland, more research will be required to establish the exact main factors.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

With the construction of a new Visual Arts curriculum underway, policymakers would do well to reflect upon what works in our current Visual Arts curriculum and what can be improved upon. Looking at how time is allocated among subjects would be advisable and investment into resources would also alleviate some issues that participants had. By putting less focus on standardised scores and more on the students' learning experiences, creativity should be given the chance to bloom through subjects like Visual Arts.

Regarding ITE, getting adequate time to explore each of the curriculum's strands would be extremely beneficial to students. Time was the most obvious concern for participants in college, and the general consensus was that if teachers had been given more time to explore the strands, they would have felt better equipped to teach Visual Arts. For teachers themselves, this research would suggest that CPD is paramount in ensuring they understand and are comfortable with all the skills needed to teach Visual Arts.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This was a small-scale research project with time limitations, so the data collection methods and research participants had to be chosen carefully and timetabled meticulously. Additional research that takes these variables into account will be needed. The data gathered, however, would support the following recommendations:

- A broader study involving participants from a wider geographical area and a variety of confidence levels to assess the views and experiences of all teachers on Visual Arts Pedagogy.
- Ensure that teachers with low and high confidence in Visual Arts were interviewed to provide a direct contrast and to see if any of the factors changed or new ones were added.
- Conducting case studies where students and teachers were interviewed on Visual Arts lessons in several schools around the country could provide a clearer picture of the pedagogy of generalist teachers.

### **Chapter Review**

This study is one of very few Irish research pieces that explores Visual Arts from a primary teacher perspective. The majority of respondents to both questionnaire and interviews believe that Visual Arts is a subject worth devoting time and effort to. In such a hectic curriculum, finding the time is a challenge. Having more of a contrasting viewpoint from teachers who are not interested in Visual Arts would give this discussion a broader perspective. Although there was generally a positive response to the subject, there are a number of obstacles that prevent teachers from teaching it to their full potential. Visual Arts will remain a problem for some teachers until these issues are addressed. However, when a teacher puts an emphasis on the subject and reflects on their students' learning experiences and artistic journeys, they will be enabled to produce effective Visual Arts lessons.

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## **Appendix 1: Questionnaire Letter**

To whom it may concern,

You are invited to participate in a web-based online questionnaire on the factors that influence primary school teachers pedagogy in Visual Arts education. This is a research project conducted by Lorraine Higgins, a student at Colaiste Mhuire Marino, Dublin. The 27 questions will take between 10- 20 minutes to complete.

### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this questionnaire is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time without penalty. When you are finished reading this form please click the link below to access the questionnaire.

### **BENEFITS**

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about the factors that influence primary school teachers pedagogy of Visual Arts.

### **RISKS & CONFIDENTIALITY**

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Your survey answers will be sent to a link at Google forms where data will be stored in a password protected electronic format. Google Forms does not collect identifying information such as your name, email address, or IP address. Therefore, your responses will remain anonymous. No one will be able to identify you or your answers, and no one will know whether or not you participated in the study.

At the end of the survey you will be asked if you are interested in participating in an additional interview through ZOOM. If you choose to provide contact information such as your phone number or email address, your survey responses may no longer be anonymous to the researcher. However, no names or identifying information would be included in any publications or presentations based on these data, and your responses to this survey will remain confidential.

### **CONTACT**

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact me via phone at 0870642599 or via email at lhigginsmva19@momail.mie.ie

### **ELECTRONIC CONSENT:**

By clicking the link below you will agree to the following and be taken to the start of the questionnaire:

- You have read the above information
- You voluntarily agree to participate
- You are 18 years of age or older
- You are a primary school teacher working in Ireland

**Click [HERE](#) to go to the questionnaire**

**Appendix 2: Questionnaire Script****Factors that Influence Primary School Teachers Pedagogy of Visual Arts**

In this questionnaire I am looking for Irish primary school teachers' experiences on how the subject of Visual Arts is taught and what can affect their lessons. You will find 27 questions to answer. The total time spent on this questionnaire should take around 10-20 minutes.

**Biographical information****1. What is your gender?**

- Female
- Male
- Non Binary
- Prefer not to say

**2. What type of primary school do you work in? Please tick any box that is relevant.**

- Mainstream DEIS
- Mainstream non DEIS
- Rural
- Urban
- Special School
- No School: Substitute

**3. How many years have you been in the teaching profession?**

- 1-5

- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 30-35
- 36-40
- 40+

### Personal relationship with Visual Arts and Creativity

#### 4. Do you have any personal interest in Visual Arts?

- Yes
- No

#### 5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 standing for very little confidence and 5 standing for incredibly confident) What is your level of confidence in:

A. Your own Visual Arts skills?

	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>

B. Your own creativity? (does not have to be connected to Visual Arts. Can include hobbies, personal interests and your pedagogy in other subjects)

	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>

C. Your knowledge of artists and the art world?

	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>

D. Your ability to teach Visual Arts at this stage of your career?

	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>

E. Your ability to teach Visual Arts at the beginning of your career?

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>
F. Your knowledge of the Visual Arts Curriculum?						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>
<b>6. How confident are you in teaching the following strands of the Visual Arts Curriculum?</b>						
A. Drawing						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>
B. Painting & Colour						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>
C. Print						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>
D. Clay						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>
E. Construction						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>
F. Fabric & Fibre						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not at all confident</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<i>Confident</i>
<b>7. Do you think there is a difference between Visual Arts and Craft?</b>						

Yes No

**8. Would you like to elaborate on this answer? (optional)**

### Visual Arts practice in School

**9. Have you completed any professional development courses/ post graduate courses/ CPD that helps inform your visual arts pedagogy**

 Yes No

**10. If yes could you list them below (optional)**

**11. If you compare the Visual Arts lessons you facilitate to your own personal experience as a primary school pupil would you say your experience was:**

 More creative than my own teaching Same as my own teaching Less creative than my own teaching

**12. How frequently do you facilitate a Visual Arts lesson with the intention of having a display at the end of it?**

 Never Occasionally Sometimes Often

Always

**13. How often do you feel pressure from parents or school leaders to create a Visual Arts piece to mark specific holidays e.g Christmas, Mothers Day, Valentines Day etc?**

- Never
- Occasionally
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**14. At the end of a typical Visual Arts lesson are there multiple artworks that look the same?**

- Never
- Occasionally
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**15. How frequently do you use a completed product as an example for your pupils?**

- Never
- Occasionally
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**16. Have you ever had to cancel or postpone a Visual Arts lesson to work on another academic subject?**

- Never
- Occasionally
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**17. Have you ever used any of the following websites to get resources or ideas for Visual Arts lessons? Tick any that are relevant to you:**

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Pinterest
- Youtube
- Twinkl
- Teachers Pay Teachers
- Scoilnet
- Mash.ie
- None of the above

**18. What resources have you accessed on these websites and platforms for Visual Arts lessons? Tick any that are relevant to you:**

- Templates
- Lesson Plans
- Pictures of finished products
- Information packs about Artists
- Images of Artists work
- Ideas for lessons
- Step by step instructions of lessons
- Video step by step tutorials
- None of the above

**19. How important do you think Visual Arts is in contributing to the holistic education of the child?**

	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>Not important at all</i>	○	○	○	○	○	<i>Very Important</i>

**20. Compare your personal view with that of your school: within your school**

**how much importance is placed on Visual Arts in the provision of a holistic education for your pupils?**

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	
<i>Not important at all</i>	☉	☉	☉	☉	☉	<i>Very Important</i>

**21. Do you feel that you have sufficient time to teach Visual Arts?**

- Yes
- No

**22. Do any of these factors hinder your teaching of Visual Arts?**

- Curriculum Overload
- Initiative Overload
- Pressure from Parents
- Pressure from School
- Pressure from Colleagues
- Lack of resources
- Lack of time
- Priority to other subjects
- None of the above

**23. Have you ever had an artist in your school?**

- Yes
- No

**24. Did their visit change how you viewed Visual Arts or influence your own teaching? (optional)**

**25. Has your own school ever held any Visual Arts initiatives? (e.g Creative Ireland)**

- Yes
- No



**26. If yes could you tell us a little about that initiative?(Optional)**

**27. Any further comments about Visual Arts in Education? (Optional)**

**Thank you for taking part. If you are interested in a further discussion on the factors that influence your pedagogy in Visual Arts could you please fill in your name and email address below for a possible ZOOM interview**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix 3: Interview Consent Form**

<b>Participants Name</b>	<b>Interview Date</b>
_____	_____
<b>Project Title</b>	
<p>Factors that influence and inspire generalist teachers pedagogical practices in the visual arts curriculum in the Republic of Ireland</p>	
<b>Project Description</b>	
<p>This thesis aims to discuss, with the average primary school teacher in the republic of Ireland, how they find their visual arts lessons are affected by a variety of factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, school management, expectations from parents, influence from social media, impact from fellow teachers' pedagogical habits, confidence, and their own artistic skill. While examining these factors we will also discuss whether the process or product approach is most important, in their own opinion, when it comes to visual arts lessons. The role of the interviewee will be to provide their own insight into how they teach visual arts, reflect upon lessons that were successful or unsuccessful and discuss what they believe is best practice for planning a visual arts lesson.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● I confirm that my participation in this research project is voluntary.</li> <li>● I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought provoking, however I have the right to decline to answer any questions or to end the interview without giving any reason.</li> <li>● I understand that I will not receive any payments for participating in this research interview.</li> </ul>	

- I can confirm that the research interview will last approximately 30-40 minutes and will focus on the research mentioned in the online survey I previously completed.
- I understand that the audio of this interview will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher to use for their study.
- I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.
- I understand that the audio recordings, transcription and any field notes of my interview will be stored securely by the researcher.
- I understand that the audio recordings, transcriptions and notes will be destroyed 13 months after the dissertation has been submitted.
- I understand that I will be given a copy of the consent form for my own records.
- I know that I am able to review any notes, transcripts, or other data collected from during the research interview

**By signing this form, I agree to the terms indicated above**

**Participants Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Date Signed**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature**

*Lorraine Higgins*

**Date Signed**

*10/03/21*

#### Appendix 4: Script for Interview

As we progress through this interview try to highlight points or follow points that relate to

- Teacher confidence
- Process vs product learning
- Ability to determine useful and purposeful online resources
- Critical thinking
- School influence
- Curriculum influence
- Apprenticeship of observation (Where did they learn their most meaningful lessons when it comes to teaching Art?)

Thank you again for taking the time to do this interview. We will aim to keep under 40 minutes

1. To start can you remember what your Visual Arts education was like when you yourself were a primary school student?
  - a. *Was it a subject that you enjoyed?*
  - b. *Did you continue on with it to secondary education?*
  - c. *What types of lessons do you recall being used?*
2. In the questionnaire, the majority of the participants stated that their own teaching of Visual Arts was more creative compared to that of their own teachers when they were students. Could you explain why this is the case for you?
3. How was your initial teacher education in college when learning about Visual Arts?
  - a. *How did you find the experience?*
  - b. *Were there any lessons that resonated with you?*
  - c. *Was there anything missing that you would have liked to cover?*
  - d. *How much time can you recall was allocated to it?*
4. In your own opinion, what does it mean to teach a purposeful Visual Arts lesson?
  - a. *Can you give me an example of a lesson of this type?*
  - b. *Did the children enjoy this lesson?*
  - c. *What do you like about this lesson?*



10. With curriculum reform occurring in so many subject areas. It is plausible to assume that Visual Arts will undergo some type of change in the next few years. Do you think there is something that should be changed in our current curriculum?
- a. Would there be anything additional that you would like to add?*
  - b. Are there any things that you feel are unnecessary and should be taken out?*