4.3 Environmental studies

The potential for working together in the visual arts and sharing ideas can be fruitfully explored in creating an environment. ‘Environment’ here means the creation of visual (and sound) material, in a chosen area of a room or classroom, in which a chosen theme, or series of developed images, can be explored.

The original ideas developed from the observation of stones or pieces of wood could lead to a space in which the textures and experiences of a forest can be translated into images in two or three dimensions. The space can be open to being viewed from the front or sides, or can be explored by entering into and passing through it. Drawings, paintings and rubbings can form the background or define the limits of the area, and three-dimensional stones, trees, pieces of wood, leaves, grasses, etc. can be produced by pupils and combined in the space.

Music can be incorporated into this activity from the very beginning, as you can create your own sound responses with a variety of instruments and voices. The magic of such activities can be dramatically enhanced by the inclusion of lighting within the environment and either taped or live music.

The national curriculum provides endless potential for these activities. The visit to a local castle, manor house or palace, or a study of an event or personality in history, can lead to creating and bringing together images in a three-dimensional space or environment. The solar system and space is another ideal topic where stars, planets, black holes, comets, space matter, and possibly rockets and astronauts, can all be created and combined with sounds from musical instruments and voices (see video, year 7).

5 Classroom organisation

For the individual at home and for pupils in the classroom the building of a resources box or boxes is as essential as the acquisition of paints, brushes, and pencils. The use of scrap materials as diverse as off-cuts of fabric, lino, carpets, discarded small pieces of wood, yoghurt/cream pots, straw, string and almost anything you can find will enrich the possibilities for visual expression. Hard and soft, rough and smooth, shiny and matt textures all provide variety and, of course, take up valuable but essential storage space.

The distribution of these materials in the classroom needs careful thought. As a new teacher, you should follow the methods adopted by the usual class teacher. The children will feel confident within these confines, and drastic changes to these procedures should not be made unless you feel completely confident about them and have the support of the class teacher.

It is important to gather materials together before a lesson and decide how they may best be distributed. Generally two distinct ways of teaching art are employed: the whole class together or small groups while the rest of the class is engaged in other activities. In the second case distribution is
easier because fewer children are involved. In the former you must decide whether materials should be placed centrally or given out to each group on a table. Should scissors be shared, always assuming there are enough? Should glue be centrally located or each child have a pot? The decisions you make will be governed by several considerations:

1. number in the class;
2. size of the room;
3. surfaces which have to be used, i.e. tables or desks;
4. location of sinks and cleaning materials;
5. ability and temperament of the class/individuals concerned.

Some classes are happy to share materials; others become fractious. Some are used to handling art material; others have little experience.

Initially, in the classroom, moving-about activities need to be reduced to a minimum. The observation work at the beginning of our activities meets that need very well. Slowly, as the children become more confident with the student teacher, they will move around the classroom purposefully, thinking about their work. Classes need to establish a way of working with a new teacher in controllable activities before embarking upon complex creations such as environments. To take a new class into such work straight away would require a confident and probably previously experienced student teacher.

It is vital that the teacher be able to count on the co-operation of the majority of the class. Instructions clearly given, conveyed with interest, enthusiasm and confidence will be carried out with equal interest and enthusiasm. The difficulty for the inexperienced teacher is to sound confident and to convey this certainty in the voice. To sound nervous and uncertain is a sure way to encounter problems. It is essential to be well-organised and to spend time watching the class while you move about, making them aware that you know what they are doing.

The cleaning-up session is very important. Whether you are teaching the whole class or a group the children must be made responsible for clearing away and cleaning both materials used and the surfaces worked upon. Appointing monitors can help in doing this, as can operating a rota system which cuts out arguments about who does what. Some teachers leave it to each individual to clear their own space and materials, but this does require the teacher to watch carefully that children do not avoid doing so.

If work is to be continued, care must be taken to store it safely. All work must be placed somewhere to dry in safety, not to be knocked on to the floor and trampled on or damaged. A few classrooms have good drying facilities, but most do not and the art activities are best completed when the classroom is not immediately in use, e.g. lunchtime, or at the end of the afternoon to allow a longer period for drying.

Lack of space should not prevent the children from using large paper or other materials from time to time as this variety of choice can in itself stimulate thought about appropriateness of scale. In providing paper, for instance, it is good to have a variety of colours, and where possible sizes and even shapes. Thin newsprint is good for print-making, sugar paper for

See Appendix 3
painting or collage, and white cartridge for drawing with pencil or charcoal.

It is important to use adhesives that stick. The PVA medium that most manufacturers/suppliers now produce is ideal for most things, bearing in mind that thicker or more absorbent materials take longer to stick and teachers and children need to be patient. Scissors need to be blunt-ended in the classroom, particularly with younger children, and be able to cut. If craft knives are used, they must have secure blades and the children be taught to cut away from their fingers. The collecting of cutting implements is very important; they must be recovered before the end of each lesson and not be allowed to find their way into the waste bin. All material which can be used again should be kept for another day. Suitable storage should be given over to perishable and non-perishable items, perhaps in trays or drawers which are clearly labelled.

5.1 Display

Taking care of children's work and making displays of it helps them to take pride in their creations. Whatever the space available in the classroom each child should have the opportunity to see his or her work on the wall. If it is not possible to display all the pieces of work at once, the class should be told that a certain number are up now and the rest will follow next week, or whenever. The effect upon individuals when they see their own creation displayed is remarkable and helps to remove the belief that 'I'm no good at art'. Each piece would benefit from individual mounting but this does take time. At least the board used for displaying should have fresh backing paper on it from time to time – paper appropriate to the sort of work to be put up. A heading or title describing briefly the origins of the work is a great help to others who may see it, and sometimes it is useful to put names. Displays take a lot of care and time to do well and need to be changed frequently to prevent them becoming so familiar they are no longer looked at. Work on display should always be completely that of the pupils, not improved by the teacher. The work should be discussed with them, to explain and share the good qualities and the possibilities of further study.

5.2 Specialist materials

Specialist materials in the classroom need to be carefully monitored.

Clay needs to be fairly moist; if stored in a plastic bag it will retain a good consistency and can be put straight into use. If it is too wet it needs to be 'wedged' (see Activity 3 in Section 2) on an absorbent surface to remove surplus moisture and, at the same time, remove air bubbles which might cause problems with firing.

Paint requires attention, whatever sort is being used. Powder paint tends to form into small lumps because wet brushes are thrust into it, and squeezy bottles are often left unsealed and therefore dry out. Block paint is the most vulnerable to drying; to prevent blocks from fragmenting it is advisable to keep them in palettes designed to contain them and not to let them spread.
**5.3 The teacher’s role**

The art teacher needs to be well-organised and prepared before the lesson if positive progress is to be made. The teacher needs to have a good knowledge of the material he or she is presenting and familiarity with the media to be employed so that at the very least he or she will appreciate the problems the children might encounter. Persuading the children to listen and not talk at the beginning of the lesson is essential and should be established right at the outset of the relationship. It may be difficult for the inexperienced teacher to attain this state, and help, certainly advice, from the class teacher may be necessary. The delivery of the lesson’s introduction is very important. You should explain clearly to the class the objectives of the lesson, while leaving enough room for personal initiative. The teacher needs to be able to enthuse the class with the possibilities to be encountered.

Talking to the children about their work is an important element in teaching. In discussing your own individual explorations we have used expressions like ‘good’ texture, ‘subtle’ or ‘bold’ colour, ‘delicate’ or ‘strong’ line, ‘varied’ rhythm. These should be used in comments to the children both collectively and individually, praising where possible. Faced with the question ‘What do I do now?’, either reflect it back with ‘What do you think you should do?’ or some simple suggestion such as ‘Perhaps you could try a rougher texture there or a brighter colour here’, rather than dictate by ‘Do this, do that’. The effect of the last peremptory remark is to make the children feel that you are creating the work and not them, which is not conducive to independent thought and creativity.

The tone of voice should convey interest in, and pleasure at, what is being seen, a feeling of gentle persuasion rather than blunt affirmation, for example ‘I like that colour ... that shape ... what do you think ... how might you develop this idea further?’

Technical help can be given by simply suggesting that a particular colour or shape or texture might be emphasised or extended, a particular piece of fabric added, clay skimmed off or more pressed in. A moment will arrive when individuals, a group, or even a class could be further stimulated by looking at the work of another artist who has explored...
similar territory. Not only might this provide a way forward but it might also engage the child's interest in the work of that artist. Often at the end of a lesson it is appropriate to reinforce what has been learned. Individuals should be encouraged to talk about their work and that of their fellows, expressing pleasure, suggesting additions and generally feeling a sense of sharing what others are creating. If the emphasis is upon the amazing variety we always find in the work of a class, this helps to break down any possible feeling of inadequacy and reinforce the belief that each individual's creation is unique and an important contribution to visual image-making.

5.4 The classroom environment

The classroom should be a source of visual stimulation. Such items as found objects, colour combinations, textures and patterns, photographs of places and holiday snaps need to be on hand to help train the eyes to observe, and extend experience for successful image-making. The classroom should arouse curiosity, invite the handling of objects, the appreciation of visual stimuli all around. In a school which has strong art traditions you will be met by visual imagery as soon as you enter the building.

Much of the stimulus for successful art studies is provided by an exciting classroom environment. The teacher must ensure that at every stage of the school year the wall displays of children's work, the examples of related work from other artists and the objects on display for examination are accessible and attractively presented, and frequently changed.

Colour corners are stimulating areas for study. Bring together as many different greens, blues, reds and yellows as you can find on various objects; when assembled, these will help with colour, shape and texture. Set out boxes with varieties of stones of many shapes and sizes to be handled, large pieces of wood, lengths of materials, mechanical implements. Farm machinery, car engines and many others provide rich visual stimuli which can often carry a child forward in their work or provide ideas for further image-making. Sometimes the classroom is a broad open space, sometimes confined in places, like a magic grotto into which the children can stray and become enthralled. The development of visual art ideas is a close partnership between teacher and class. If we, the teachers, provide the stimulus and encouragement, and stand firm on our requirements for attention and co-operation, the relationship will eventually be extraordinarily fruitful.

6 Assessment

The national curriculum requires that in the visual arts:

- individual pupils are required to be assessed at or near the end of each key stage;
- this assessment should be as simple and straightforward as possible and based on the teacher's own judgements of the work produced during art activities.
The teacher needs to compare and consider the following:

- the use made of the pencil (or other drawing tool) in successive drawings;
- how the child has increased his or her appreciation of the ways of making marks;
- the awareness of the different ways paint may be applied to provide greater variety and extend expressiveness by the use of brighter colour, the blending and combination of colours and balance of them within the picture;
- the response to new materials/media which may help to increase the richness of the child's image-making.

The teacher must ensure that the children have the understanding and ability to cope with the programme of study they are engaged upon. They should be encouraged to pass opinions critically upon their own work and to discuss ways of improving the final product.

The teacher needs to assess the initial aims for the activity and how well the child has achieved these aims, while at the same time providing 'space' to develop individual responses and confidence in the child's ability to bring personal solutions to image-making. If the teacher shows an example of work to the class from another artist, it should be stressed that it is not to be copied but is shown as the way someone else has tackled the subject. Often the breakthrough can be made by seeing a fresh way of using a particular medium, for example sawdust mixed with paint to thicken, pastels or chalks flaked into a powder and either rubbed into the drawing or flaked on to PVA adhesive to provide texture.


There are times when each child functions better alone (pre- and early school), creating within the confines of their still narrow experience. At later stages of development (middle and upper junior), working together can become a powerful stimulus in creative work, and certainly the sharing of opinions and observations can increase the strength of visual imagery. In the middle years of primary education, the development is variable, concentration levels are improving, and more and more creative possibilities are becoming available as the result of a broader experience of life and the familiarity with a wider range of materials in art and craft to aid expression.

As so often with teaching, it is the way that ideas and materials are presented to children that can so strongly affect their response. Simplicity and enthusiasm can convey so much, and give a child far more confidence than complex and often restricting instructions. Art in the primary curriculum needs to include familiarity with materials, experience in drawing and painting, and acquaintance with the work of other artists and craftspeople. Given the thought, care and preparation of the teacher and the often excited response of the pupils, assessment within the key stage levels can be a source of pleasure as well as progress.