

Summary

Aim

In June 2020, during the COVID pandemic, a newspaper poll suggested that the least essential job is that of an artist. In response to this, this inquiry set out to explore how artists' skills and knowledge can be actively used to support children. The ability to deal with uncertainty was identified as a skill that artists have in abundance and could be particularly relevant at this time. The aim of this report is to demonstrate how participatory inquiry can capture children's ideas about what is essential to them and how the role of art is conceptualised as an 'essential' tool for learning and ultimately a guide to help other educators equip learners to embrace uncertainty.

Methods

With two project mentors, one from The National Galleries of Scotland and one from Hidden Giants, three visual artists and a filmmaker working in partnership with pupils, teachers and senior management at Blackburn Primary School, three min-case studies were produced. Each case study recorded the answers to the following research questions:

1. How might art play a role in empowering learning through uncertainty?
2. What kinds of art interventions might lead to rethinking the role of art for learning by pupils and educators?
3. How can Pedagogies of Uncertainty guide interventions?

Key findings

Throughout each case study, the research questions were addressed in three ways. This included asking a set of agreed questions at each connection point (i.e., Teacher/ Pupil, Artist/Teacher, Mentor/Artist, etc.), gathering visual data of any artefacts from students and transcribing reflective interview data from the artists and school staff. The data was coded and analysed using thematic analysis.

The case studies utilised various play/art- driven interventions, such as approaching the activity using an open-ended process of creative play with no predetermined outcomes to allow learner-led learning and incorporating time for discussion and debate to allow students time to develop their opinions and understanding of art. Through this, the pupils were empowered and motivated to lead their own individual experiences. In most cases, the artist was seen as a 'trigger' that helped inspire and propel the students into further creation.

Following the framework of the three research questions, the analysis highlighted three key messages:

- The case studies provided evidence for art to be seen as a trigger for self-expression and wellbeing. While young students connected happier emotions to the art making experience, older students added that many other emotions could come through as a result of the art making process. It was found that working without the pressure of specific outcomes and following learner-led learning contributed to the wellbeing of the pupils and also benefited the teachers as they were exposed to new ways of doing.
- Uncertainty was a key factor in all the case studies. While some people were more comfortable with uncertainty than others, it was evident that the incorporation of uncertainty in this project, contributed to many individuals feeling more resilient and provided the stepping stones for some to endeavor towards the entire school adopting aspects of the Pedagogies of Uncertainty, though resistance to change and other aspects of uncertainty were noted as potential challenges.
- Finally, some embraced the idea of a co-created curriculum more than others with some reflecting on the existence of a hierarchy that prioritises achievement and output over process. That said, other teachers described that the project encouraged them to be more flexible and recognise what pupils could achieve without set boundaries.

Recommendations

The following recommendations reflect the participants' responses in this study for further development and dissemination of the key ideas by other schools.

<p>A whole-school approach to a similar initiative would benefit and enable all participants to grow their learning communities in dynamic, safe, and enjoyable ways.</p>	<p>Recommendation 1 – ensure senior management team buy-in and inclusion of professional learning as a school focus on developing pupil voice, self-awareness and wellbeing.</p>
<p>Several teachers focused on the impact on pupils rather than themselves when asked about the impact of artists' interventions.</p>	<p>Recommendation 2 – make explicit and find ways of ensuring that the project and interventions are also for teacher benefit, for example, by linking to professional learning agendas such as those required by GTCS.</p>
<p>Building on projects like this, sustainability needs to be considered to achieve its full potential. Asking long term questions such as – what are the lessons learned? What does this mean for our staff and our pupils? How can we develop further the innovative pedagogical approaches</p>	<p>Recommendation 3 – build time for deep reflection on experiences and consider what changes may be made to sustain the benefits accrued in a rapidly changing educational and societal environment.</p>

which may have been ‘forced’ upon us by COVID but which have enabled alternative teaching and learning practices to evolve?	
Developing a classroom understanding of Pedagogies of Uncertainty requires, in practice, teachers with their pupils to continue to act as critical enquirers, explore the competencies and conditions conducive for developing these, and adapt, refine, and add to the framework – making it their own.	Recommendation 4 – encourage schools to develop critical enquiry approaches to transforming Pedagogies of Uncertainty into their principles for classroom practices to sustain the benefits accrued.
The COVID pandemic resulted in many pupils being based at home throughout this project. In some instances, family or carers were involved. This can be viewed as positive, with further family members and carers involved as active enquirers.	Recommendation 5 – consider the possibility of a close home-school liaison and involvement in adapting this project to suit different school contexts.
Artists have a skill set that enables them to cherish uncertainty, including noticing, questioning, reflecting, provoking, adapting, working collaboratively, researching, employing an enquiring mind, lateral thinking and open-ended creative play.	Recommendation 6 – consider the potential role of artists in schools to go beyond making wall displays, to support teachers and learners with curriculum making for interdisciplinary learning, to enable learners to think like an artist.
There is scope for further discussion with pupils around the role of artists in school and in society – including if they are essential. Many pupils felt art was essential or at least important to them personally or individually but didn’t connect the role of the artists in this project to the role of being an artist more generally (and who is an artist, what makes an artist).	Recommendation 7 – the role of art in curriculum-making has untapped potential for learners of all ages and stages. National Galleries of Scotland would welcome enquiries from schools interested in exploring this further.

Impact

The research advances the understanding of how Pedagogies of Uncertainty support learners to thrive and provides a clear lens through which to explore the value of visual arts to children and the potential role of visual arts as a tool to build their capacity to deal with uncertainty. The arts are often dismissed as ‘non-essential’ but during the COVID pandemic, the arts played a significant role in supporting health and well-being, meaning-making and processing what was going on. This research demonstrates simple practical approaches that can allow learners to thrive in our uncertain world, offers essential information for teachers to apply in their learning setting and encourages reflection on aspects of what they do now in the context of uncertain times. The research provides special insight to those working with primary age children but is also broadly relevant to other educators working with various age

groups. The contributions of the research will not only help build a stronger understanding of how much more the arts have to offer for learners but also promotes the importance of providing opportunities to experience uncertainty in a learning context as a means of preparing them to deal with real-life experiences.