Teachers' use of the Visual Arts as a lens to explore issues of Diversity within an Irish Classroom Setting

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Word Count: 10,969
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Submission Date: 9th May 2021
Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme leading to the award of the degree of Professional Master of Education, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I further declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this Institute and any other Institution or University. I agree that the Marino Institute of Education library may lend or copy the thesis, in hard or soft copy, upon request.

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Abstract

In 2020 we witnessed the racial crisis surface over the injustice and discrimination of people of different race and ethnicity, underlining the fact that discrimination is still a prominent issue across institutions and systems in our society today. In a world where hate and prejudice is a learned behaviour, now more than ever, inclusion and the normalisation of diversity and inclusivity should be at the heart of every classroom. The 'hidden curriculum' and teacher have a role in instilling in children open, respectful and positive attitudes towards those outside of their ethnic and cultural norm. This study investigates how the visual arts could be this effective tool as "Art is a critical way of problem-solving, a way of being open to the world, diversifying the world and seeing things in different ways" (Participant A).

This study's main research questions focus on exploring whether Irish primary school teachers are using the visual arts as a tool to introduce and normalise people of different race, ethnicity or culture. Using semi-structured zoom interviews as a means for data collection, this research study explores the perspectives of primary school teachers, educators, and professional practitioners of the Visual Arts.

The main findings of this study indicate that much of the responsibility for regular and positive diverse learning experiences in the classroom lies with the teacher, observing that the teacher's own experience and values of the Visual Arts and ethnic and cultural diversity is a factor affecting this. Recommendations are made for the Irish curriculum to be revisited concerning guidance and direction on implementing diverse visual arts lessons. Teachers' possible actions to create an ethnically and culturally inclusive classroom and
continue their professional development are outlined, and areas for future research are also identified.
Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Elaine Haverty, for tracking my progress, sharing her expertise and giving feedback on my research. Her encouragement and patience is greatly appreciated.

I want to thank all of my lecturers in Marino Institute of Education for their support and I would like to thank all of the teachers and professional practitioners who took the time to take part in my study.

I also take this opportunity to express gratitude to my parents and friends for their persistent encouragement, support and attention during this research project.
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List of Abbreviations

NCCA - National Council of Curriculum and Assessment

VA - Visual Arts
Chapter One: Introduction

Overview and Aim of the Study

The nature of this research is to explore and obtain a more accurate representation of how the Visual Arts [VA] are being implemented within some Irish primary school classrooms in relation to exploring topics such as diversity and other cultures. In examining the approaches to which it is taught, the general attitudes towards the teaching of the curricular area, and the experiences of teachers, we can observe the extent to which the VA can be the means of helping children explore and normalise diversity in a meaningful way. We can also observe how some teachers bring awareness and appreciation to the multi-cultural society we live in. The main themes of this research include; the status of the VA in Irish society and culture, the teacher's personal experience and responsibility, teacher training programmes, the National Council of Curriculum and Assessment's [NCCA] Curriculum (1999) and diversity within the Irish classroom today. This research aims to determine whether these may be a factor in the implementation of diverse VA experiences within some Irish classrooms. Through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews, this study aims to directly hear the opinions and perspectives of six primary school teachers and two professional practitioners of the VA. There are many markers of diversity such as gender, age, socio-economic status, political beliefs, religion, disabilities and sexual orientation. However, for the purpose of this research project, the main focus regarding diversity will be ethnicity and culture.

Research Rationale

From doing some brief research prior to this project, it is clear that many studies have been carried out in this area; however, not many are based within an Irish context. Many studies have concluded the numerous benefits that the VA can have on children's development, however, many agree that the VA are not valued enough or prioritised as a curricular subject
area compared to others. Now more than ever, teachers need to create inclusive classrooms where diversity is viewed as a positive, ordinary part of school life. These classrooms need to tackle issues of diversity, such as racism and religious discrimination. Opportunities should be taken in a learning environment to normalise diversity for children, and the physical environment should reflect the diversity of the children present in the school. The lesson content, displays and resources we use as teachers reflect how diverse or nondiverse we want the children’s experiences to be. Are Irish primary school teachers making the most of the effective tool that is the VA to represent the ethnicities and cultures of all children in our society?

Research Context

In 2020 we witnessed the destruction of COVID 19 and its challenging effects on education, many professions (including within the arts), and our everyday lives. In 2020, we also saw the racial crisis surface over the injustice and discrimination of people of colour in America. This lead to thousands of protesters demanding police accountability and reform throughout the world, including Dublin city. This highlights the fact that discrimination is still a prominent issue across institutions and systems in our society today and that diversity and inclusivity should be at the heart of every classroom. One cause at the root of this problem is our education system - the exposure or lack of exposure to diversity within a learning environment. Educators may be creating specific, meaningful learning experiences for children to encounter diversity but are they incorporating and immersing diversity itself within our everyday lessons and learning experiences in the classroom? In many school contexts across the globe, VA are seen as a unique, engaging and effective tool in facilitating the exploration of other cultures and ethnicities; however, it has not been explored in depth within an Irish context.
**Research Motivation**

The basis for this research stemmed from the researcher's passion for the arts that they have possessed from a young age. Growing up, having a creative outlet was very important to them, whether it be painting, drawing, singing, drama, piano or dance classes. The arts were always their favourite part of the curriculum at school, and they often wondered why most of these activities only occurred once a week as these were what they found most enjoyable and what they excelled at most. The arts are a big part of their personal motivation and development, they are a therapeutic way of keeping themself present and mindful and offer an outlet for expression, creative freedom and escapism. They also provide opportunities to learn something new and to see from other peoples' perspectives. They attended an all-girls Catholic primary school growing up. It was in a nice area and had a very homogenous school staff. They had a very narrow and limited experience of diversity, other cultures and ethnicities. Now, as they are about to become a newly qualified primary school teacher, they are very motivated and determined to include and normalise other cultures and diverse representations in everyday school life. They intend to keep the arts, particularly the VA, at the forefront of their teaching. They believe the VA have so much to offer, provide many learning opportunities, and can benefit a child's life in so many ways.

**Organisation of Thesis**

The introduction chapter of this study describes the research question and lays out the reasoning behind it. This justifies the need for the study, the kind of information it will provide and how this information can be used to further our understanding of the VA, diversity and intercultural education. Chapter 2 will review relevant literature in the field on the topic of the VA and intercultural education relating to the research question. This chapter supports the basis of this research and shows the researcher is informed regarding the significant ideas in findings.
relating to this topic. Chapter 3 will outline the methodology used to carry out this study and
the limitations and considerations made by the researcher to ensure that the data is valid and
reliable. Chapter 4 will present the findings gathered from the data, organising the main
features of the data into themes and subthemes. There will be an interpretation and discussion
of this data in light of the research question and literature discussed in chapter 2. The
conclusions made from this study will be presented in chapter 5 while also providing general
recommendations regarding the research question and recommendations for further research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Status of the Visual Arts Today

When we question the status of the VA in our society and culture, we may consider the meaningful role it has in our lives. Not only are they a source of enjoyment and creative inspiration, but a stimulus for meaningful conversation and placing important issues on a platform. John Dewey felt that art adds a rich and meaningful quality to our lives that material wealth could not. He writes that:

Not merely individuals, but communities and nations, put their cultural good taste in evidence by building opera houses, galleries, and museums. These show that a community is not wholly absorbed in material wealth, because it is willing to spend its gains in patronage of art (1958, p. 8-9).

Art Culture can be viewed as a part of our national identity. In an increasingly multicultural world, one must participate in and celebrate their own 'national artistic culture' as it is an important part of who they are (Bergonzi & Smith, 1996, p. 11). This can only happen "via exposure, experience, skill, and understanding in the arts" and "gained through socialization and arts education" (Bergonzi & Smith, 1996, p. 11). Therefore, art education plays a crucial role in preserving one's culture and identity.

The Status of the Visual Arts in Education

However, the status of the VA in education is a slightly different story. It is widely understood that the arts are not seen at the forefront of our education systems and have "taken a backseat in educational curricula" (Heilig, Cole & Aguilar, 2010, p. 136). Walling (2001) notes how, in the American context, supporting the arts once made it a 'pervasive presence' within schools, but that this gradually 'dried up', particularly due to the Soviet launch of
'Sputnik' in 1957 (2001, p. 626). The emphasis in American schools "swung dramatically toward math and science" (2001, p. 626). Similarly, in Ireland, Seán O'Connor claims it was the "greatest single event in post-war education worldwide" (Walsh, 2016, p. 6). Today, many schools are still experiencing cutbacks in the area of the arts. Walling describes witnessing art classrooms being "replaced by 'art on a cart'" (2001, p. 626). This highlights how the arts were not seen as a priority, worthwhile or deserving of quality resources. It presents the curricular area as a narrow and limited experience that is restricted to the contents of a small cart.

**Significance of Testing and Assessment**

The gradual shift in focus to other curriculum areas goes hand in hand with the emphasis placed on state examinations and testing. As Heilig et al. commented on the Centre on Education Policy of 2008, "when scores on standardized tests are at the forefront of every educator’s mind, certain subjects are being emphasized to the exclusion and detriment of others"(2010, p. 136). Since 2007, Mathematics and Literacy are the only areas included within compulsory standardised testing in Ireland and the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011) mandates that schools must report their aggregated scores/data "to the Boards of Management and the DES at the end of the school year" (O’Leary, Lysaght, Craith & Scully, 2019, p. iii). The teaching to tests approach is causing "certain classes of students" to be "systemically denied exposure to subjects not covered by the tests" (Heilig et. al., 2010, p. 136).

Keeping this in mind, many studies have shown the benefits that art education can have on a child, yet the arts would not get the attention that a formally assessed subject would. Sowden's studies have asserted the wide benefits that come with engaging with the arts (2015, p. 3); however, we can see worldwide that the arts or 'creative' subject areas are not being utilised to their full potential. Sowden describes the UK's education system's "increasing
emphasis on acquiring knowledge through ‘traditional’ approaches rather than on learning to think. An implicit assumption appears to be that knowledge should come before creativity” (2015, p. 3). Paulo Freire firmly opposed traditional approaches to education such as the 'I talk, you listen' approach i.e., 'the banking model'. Alam explains Freire's "dissatisfaction with the traditional teacher-centred class where knowledge is transferred one-sidedly " (2013, p. 27). Freire felt education was suffering with 'narration sickness', where students never questioned their world (Freire, 2005, p. 71). The banking model may still be implemented today due to test-taking and memorisation meaning children may be becoming passive learners rather than active learners.

**Educational Testing in Ireland**

A recent study in Dublin City University titled *Standardised Testing In English Reading And Mathematics In The Irish Primary School: A Survey Of Irish Primary Teachers* explored the use of standardised tests in primary schools. It concluded that "increasing the frequency of standardized testing can have unintended negative consequences" (DCU, 2019, p. v). Burns' study displayed the immense pressure on teachers to achieve and maintain high scores in their classroom noting strained parent-teacher relationships and emotional conflict from discussing children’s standardised test results (Burns, 2016, p.277-278). Gleeson, Klenowski and Looney's analysis of the Irish curriculum in 2020 found "curriculum overload emerging as a dominant concern"( p.492). The NCCA sets out a minimum of two hours and thirty minutes to be spent on Arts Education lessons per week (VA, Drama and Music), unlike Mathematics, for example, being allocated three hours alone (NCCA, 2016, p. 11). Similarly, in the United States, a 1999 fact sheet from the National Centre for Education Statistics highlights that "22% of eighth-graders typically receive instruction in the VA less than once a week (5%) or not at all (17%)". It seems the emphasis on testing will
The Benefits and Potential of Art Education

Ewing asserts that the arts add value to our lives and explains how they "enable an immensely rewarding way of human knowing and being – of imagination, aesthetic knowledge and translation and expression of ideas" (2011, p. 5). Ewing describes the benefits of art education under the headings of social, attitudinal/behaviour (2011, p. 14-15). The arts help us develop "a greater ability to accept constructive peer critique" (p.14). Collaborative or community-based art projects provide "a sense of community identity" with participants coming together to "pursue shared goals" (p. 15). Perhaps, many do not see the value in art education as they do not feel it would contribute to our economy, however, Heilig et al. mention the opinion of both the American Arts alliance as well as Berliner, explaining that "art provides an alternative means to view reality", expands the way we perceive the world" and "often has immediately unobservable benefits for workers in a market economy" (2010, p. 137).

Ewing describes how quality arts education needs "quality resources, works of art and accomplished artists and teachers, and experiences of quality interactions, performances and expressions" (2011, p. 19). Therefore, we can note how vital funding is and how budget cuts could shape its effectiveness. The Irish Curriculum notes the benefits of the VA for the holistic development of the child. For example, the aims to "to explore, clarify and express ideas, feelings and experiences", to boost their "confidence and self-esteem through valuing self-expression", "to create cultural awareness and empathy" and to explore and appreciate "the arts in local, regional, national and global contexts, both past and present" (NCCA, 1999, p. 4 - 5).
We can note how this would contribute to wellness, a concept now heavily incorporated in schools, especially when dealing with the impact of COVID19.

One must also question whether this curriculum is adapting to other cultures and ethnicities or is it considered an 'add on' approach. Bryan mentions how "In 2005 and 2006, the NCCA published intercultural guidelines for primary and secondary schools, which focuses on ‘mediat[ing] and adapt[ing] the existing curricula to reflect the emergence of a more culturally diverse society in Ireland’ (2010, p. 256). Perhaps a focus on promoting positive responses to diversity within the current curriculum would prevent misrepresenting diversity as a separate, exotic 'other'. This could be done through a wide range of means, such as literature, poetry, art, music, dance, and food. By aiming to normalise all ethnicities and cultures, the curriculum can be made "as accessible as possible for children from minority ethnic groups" (NCCA, 2005, p. 5).

Discrimination and the need for Inclusivity in a Modern World

In 2020 we have witnessed the destruction of COVID 19 and its challenging effects on education, many professions and our everyday lives. We also saw the racial crisis surface over the injustice and discrimination of people of colour in America which lead to thousands of protesters demanding police accountability and reform throughout the world, including Dublin city. This highlights the fact that discrimination is still a prominent issue across institutions and systems in our society today and why inclusivity and respect for difference should be at the heart of every classroom. At the root of this problem is our education system - whether other cultures and ethnicities are being normalised within a learning environment. The Celtic tiger made Ireland "increasingly more ethnically diverse in the late 1990s and early 2000s", which led to a "growing anti-immigrant" attitude where the media "depicted immigrants, refugees,
and asylum seekers in a predominantly negative and stereotypical light" (Bryan, 2010, p. 253). As noted by the NCCA, "Intercultural Education is one of the key responses to the changing shape of Irish society and to the existence of racism and discriminatory attitudes in Ireland" (2005, p. 18). Education is a primary social structure in which institutional racism may occur, which is why we must be aware of and prevent things like "indirect discrimination" and "a lack of positive action to promote equality" (NCCA, 2005, p. 16).

**Diversity in the Classroom**

Irish teachers may be creating specific, discreet and meaningful learning experiences for children to explore diversity, but are they normalising and incorporating diversity within the everyday lessons and learning experiences in the classroom? In many ways, the hidden curriculum plays an immense role in creating a classroom that embraces diversity. The hidden curriculum could be defined as the unwritten values, lessons, and perspectives students learn in the classroom. A teacher's perspective, positionality and bias may affect how they teach and how diverse their classroom may be. For example, if the school's entire staff are white, catholic and middle class, their experiences and perspectives are somewhat homogenous. In many school contexts globally, VA is seen as a unique, engaging and effective tool in allowing children to explore topics such as diversity and other cultures; however, it has not been explored in depth within an Irish context.

The immigration levels have significantly increased since 2017, with 258 million international migrants worldwide (United Nations, 2017, p. 4). This means that many communities and classrooms are becoming increasingly more multicultural. In this sense, it is a teacher's responsibility to cater for different cultures and identities and avoid 'othering'. As noted by Devine, "dominant discourses of ethnic identity (in this instance 'being Irish') have
important implications for the experience of and attitude towards immigration into Ireland, positioning those outside the ethnic norm as 'other' and on the margins of Irish society" (p.50, 2005). In New Zealand, Pohio carried out a study that explored how teachers responded to young children's ethnic diversity through the VA (2017). One participant explained how by using "cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students", you can "make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them"(Pohio, 2017, p.10). Exploring different cultures in a multicultural classroom will make children feel that their identity is important. The Intercultural policy of the school will reaffirm the aim that all children are to be represented throughout the school and the classroom.

The Visual Arts and Inclusivity

It is important to remind people that art is for everyone. Goldblatt describes the ideas of John Dewey, who believed that "every person is capable of being an artist, living an artful life of social interaction that benefits and thereby beautifies the world" (2006, p. 17). She mentions Dewey's description of art as an experience, one which has the potential to be transformative, expand our perceptions and "open venues for understanding and action"(2006, p. 17). Visual art can be that transformative experience. The more detailed, informed and open our experience with the arts, the more "potential for meaning" and "yielding important societal insights, previously taken for granted" (Goldblatt, 2006, p. 17). In this manner, we can use art as a tool to make meaningful experiences that open our minds, give us insight into things we usually would not see, transform our attitudes, build our understanding and empathy towards others, and reflect on who we are as people. Goldblatt concludes her thoughts by referencing the 'moral conscience' we experience through art "that calls upon the imagination to conceive of and follow paths that ameliorate lives, shaping rich experiences that add value and dignity to how we lead our lives (2006, p. 33). Heilig et al. describe how the enormous amount of pride
and sense of community that comes from the creation of VA is visible through "a school’s display of student expression" and how this "transcends class, race, and gender" (2010, p. 144).

The Visual Arts as a Unique tool to other Learning opportunities

The arts have the potential to promote change in our attitude and the way we think. When we think of issues in our society such as racism or religious discrimination, we often think of conflicting attitudes and opinions of others. Ewing feels that these 'habits of thinking' can be challenged through the arts (2011, p. 47). Ewing explains how "a community’s habits of thinking, seeing and behaving can be transformed through active participation in creative processes" and "critical engagement through arts processes can help us to see things from a different perspective" (2011, p. 47). Therefore, the VA could be used as a lens to challenge our habitual ways of thinking, open our mind and help us to become more empathetic individuals. VA are a flexible form of creativity where pieces of art can be created collaboratively, therefore encouraging "social skills and [the] ability to work cooperatively" and from this a "Social cohesion and community can develop because multicultural understanding is promoted"(Ewing, 2011, p. 47). Ewing deems the arts as a method of fostering transformative learning and mentions how it can impact "our sense of possibilities for social justice, peace and personal joy" (2011, p. 33). Ewing mentions the work of Gadsden (2008) and the effects of not giving children opportunities to engage with the arts by saying how "not offering students the opportunity to experience a broad array of thinking, social and emotional dispositions through the Arts – to reorder their ‘habits of mind’ – is to deny them the full experience of learning" (2011, p. 34).

In Connecticut, USA, a teacher named Sara Orr Poskas invited an artist named Mohamad Hafez to her school to take part in a project which explored how art might be used
"to explore humanity, or simply to help communicate, between cultures and groups of people in a divided society and increasingly intolerant world" (Poskas, 2019, p. 9). Both the children and Hafez created a sculpture that represented their ideas of "home" with a particular focus in the context of immigration - the loss of a home and the gain of a new home. It was described as the "exploration and expression" of "their own unique concept of home using found objects" (Poskas, 2019, p.11). The results of this project were deemed a success as the children were feeling more connected to their peers, personal stories were shared, and shared experiences of loss and displacement were discussed. This project is a teaching example to aspire to in relation to the research question, where the VA has started a conversation regarding other cultures and ethnicities. In particular, it emphasises both our similarities and differences as people regarding the concept of home, encouraging respect and understanding of each other.

The Role and responsibility of the Teacher

Much of the responsibility of exploring and normalising diversity within the classroom is with the teacher - their approach, resources, displays. As previously mentioned, the teacher's positionality, perspective, culture, and values will shape the children's experience in the classroom. These fall under the 'hidden curriculum' which can be described as the "unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons, values and perspectives arise in a school environment" and it "relates to the important messages that are conveyed to all those who enter the school, whether as teacher, visitor, parent, or child, by the physical and social environment of the school" (NCCA, 2015, p. 18). It is important to note what the child is and is not exposed to within the classroom, as "what is absent can be as important as what is present" (NCCA, 2005, p 4.). For example, a teacher could choose similar male, white, European artists' work to use in the classroom to look at and respond to. These lessons will meet criteria regarding lesson content; however, the Eurocentric perspective of the teacher could be sending a message to the
children that these particular artists are better than female Asian artists, for example. The lack of representation reaffirms the idea that those people that are different to them are a negative 'other', highlighting the need to normalise diversity within classrooms.

Individual differences may exist among teachers and their relationship with the VA. Perhaps they differ in their approaches, their confidence in teaching it or their experiences in using the VA as means to explore other directly related or unrelated topics. The status of Art education within a country, culture or community may also affect how it is valued within an education system, how it is utilized, how it is funded, how well teachers are supported in this regard and how often it may be taught. Teachers have a responsibility to organise authentic activities that are challenging, enjoyable and diverse as "learners will usually only take risks in a supportive and conducive but challenging environment, one in which they have some control over their decision-making in learning (Ewing, 2011, p. 33).
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology implemented to address the research question. It will define the research design - why it was chosen, its advantages, its challenges and its limitations. An overview of the research methodology is discussed as well as descriptions of the different stages of the research and analysis process. The research sample and the sample criteria will be discussed giving brief descriptions of the participants' background (see Table 1). The researcher will assess the reliability and validity of the data while also acknowledging their positionality and its implications for this research. Ethical concerns will be examined and key authors in the field of educational research will be referred to throughout this chapter.

Design and method of Data Collection

This research aimed to obtain a more accurate representation of the status of the VA within the Irish primary school classroom today in relation to exploring topics such as diversity and other cultures. From examining the approaches to which it is taught, the general attitudes towards the subject, and the personal experiences of teachers, we can observe the extent of which the VA can be the means to explore other cultures and ethnicities. We can see how and if diverse experiences are being normalised in some classrooms and whether attention is being brought to our multi-cultural society.

After the literature review was conducted, the qualitative method emerged as the appropriate tool for carrying out this research. It can be defined as "research using 'unstructured' forms of data collection" and "employing verbal descriptions and explanations" rather than quantitative measurement and statistical analysis"(Hammersley, 2003, p. 1). It was established
that the VA are viewed and valued differently depending on the person, group or society. The same could be said regarding diversity, inclusion and representation. This type of research demands qualitative data i.e. "words as data" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 3). Because this research primarily depends on participant experience, opinion and perspective, the qualitative research paradigm needs to be acknowledged. At its centre is the notion that one does not assume there is "only one correct version of reality or knowledge" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 4). Taking this into account, interviews were chosen as the method of data collection. The chosen sample took part in one on one, semi-structured interviews via the video-calling app Zoom (face-to-face interviews were not feasible during lockdown).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process in this research was based on Clarke & Braun's phases of analysis as explained in their article, Using thematic analysis in Psychology (2006, p. 87). The first step involved the researcher familiarising themselves with the data to note patterns and meanings, i.e. similar or contrasting points of view between participants. The second step was coding, which involved noting the main features from the data in a structured and systematic way. This lengthy process involved transcribing and ensuring no data was missed. Thirdly, the search for themes commenced where similarities within each participants data were noted and involved "collating data relevant to each code" (p. 87)—for example, gathering data that fell under the theme of 'personal experience and responsibility of teachers'. Creating several mind-maps helped here in order to note the themes and subthemes. After this step, themes would be reviewed and refined to ensure that they were the most relevant to this particular research and had sufficient data to support them. The next step involved formally naming and defining each theme. The final and most crucial step in this process is 'producing the report'. Why are these themes important, and how will they be helpful to us in order to find the extent of teacher's use
of the VA to explore other cultures and ethnicities? This is where we can question the significance of these results to potential readers and compare and contrast them to the literature and research previously explored within the field.

**Background and Rationale for the choice in Research Design**

As previously mentioned, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research methodology due to the qualitative nature of the research question and to ensure each participant's unique point-of-view, experiences would be reflected within the data, and it would give them opportunities to elaborate and expand on particular themes. Interviews were deemed to yield the best results as rather than another method such as questionnaires; interviews create an adequate space that accommodates the discussion of experience, opinions and different perspectives. The experience and implementation of the VA and inclusion/diversity can contrast significantly from person to person; therefore quantitative methods may not have given us the same quality of data that one would get via qualitative methods. Any conclusions made from this research would be grounded in real-life experiences of teachers and professional practitioners in the VA in Ireland today.

**Validity and Reliability of this Research**

The validity and reliability of this research are at its foundation. Firstly, regarding the coding method; the themes discussed were taken and developed directly from the data. These are identified as the most prominent features of the data as opposed to being only the opinions or perspectives of a small minority of participants. Secondly, much time and consideration were put into the interview questions, choosing the sample and creating information letters to keep all parties involved informed regarding the research. The technique of a pilot interview was used to improve upon the interview structure, layout, and the researcher's interview skills.
The literature review has only referred to and backed up ideas with reliable academic literature sources to ensure the validity of this research. The researcher also acknowledges the notion of bias and positionality regarding carrying out any research project. As Braun and Clarke explain, it is mandatory to recognise that the researcher brings their subjectivity to the table throughout the process - their perspective, their understanding, their view of the world, their passions and politics, however as Braun and Clarke recall the opinion of Silverman (2000), this can be "seen as a strength rather than a weakness" (2013, p. 5). The researcher has taken into account their positionality regarding the VA while carrying out this study. They have taken the necessary precautions to ensure their passion for the arts does not interfere with accurate data analysis and the formation of valid conclusions. The researcher notes the importance of entering a field with 'open eyes' and without pre-conceived ideas, "like an explorer who can only understand a completely different culture if they don't view and judge it by the perspectives and values of their own culture" (Braun & Clarke, p. 3, 2013).

**The Research Sample**

The chosen candidates came in contact with the researcher during school placement, work experience or at university. Each of these candidates were identified as being qualified school teachers, educators or 'professional practitioners' of the VA. The aim was to capture the voice of these different perspectives, therefore two sets of interview questions were used to cater for this. Please see table 1 to make note of each participant's background. During the research process, the pilot interview technique was implemented to refine research questions, question structure, and question order. Sampson refers to the many benefits of implementing a pilot interview with both small and large scale research projects explaining that it can "improve the quality of ethnographic and qualitative research studies" and it would benefit "future
research design" (2004, p. 400). Only minor changes were made from the pilot interview, e.g. giving more examples or context where appropriate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Set of Interview Questions</th>
<th>Background / Experience</th>
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</table>
| Participant A | Professional Practitioner | • BA  
• Masters in Fine art  
• University lecturer in the area of the Visual Arts.  
• Trains future primary school teachers |
| Participant B | Professional Practitioner | • BA (honours) Contemporary Applied Art - ceramics, glass and textiles  
• Masters in Fine Art with specialism in mixed media sculpture, drawing and installation  
• Primary School Teacher for 20 years  
• Has teaching experience in Oregon, USA. |
| Participant C | Primary School Teacher | • Primary School Teacher  
• University lecturer in the area of Irish |
| Participant D | Primary School Teacher | • Primary School Teacher  
• University lecturer in the area of Drama and Integrated Arts |
| Participant E | Primary School Teacher | • Primary School Teacher (B. Ed)  
• Currently teaching permanently in a Catholic Girls School  
• Their primary teaching experience is in 6th class and 3rd class. |
| Participant F | Primary School Teacher | • Primary School Teacher (Higher Diploma)  
• Currently teaching in a Catholic Girls School for the previous 2 years.  
• Their primary teaching experience is in the infant classes. |
| Participant G | Primary School Teacher | • Primary School Teacher (Higher diploma)  
• Currently on Maternity leave from her permanent teaching position at a Catholic Girls school for the last 8 years.  
• Their primary teaching experience is with 5th and 4th class. |
| Participant H | Primary School Teacher | • Primary School Teacher (B.Ed)  
• Currently teaching at a Church of Ireland school (co-ed).  
• Primary teaching experience with infant classes. |

Table 1. Research Sample Participant Profiles
**Evaluation of the choice in Method and Limitations of this Research**

It is essential to recognise that due to the size and nature of the sample, it would be misleading to make any generalisations from the data collected. The researcher recognises that a small sample cannot make any general conclusions on behalf of a larger population of people, teachers, or the status of the VA in Ireland. However, the researcher recognises the concept of transferability and that because this research and the data put forward is valid and reliable, it is the reader who makes an informed decision to decide whether the data is worthwhile. As a small scale study, this work does not make claims to represent all Irish teachers, yet it does lead to a deeper understanding of teacher perspectives regarding the VA and the diverse Irish classroom. Rather than concluding with detailed data, this study will give more generalized conclusions and recommendations.

As previously mentioned, when organising and selecting participants for this project (purposive type sampling), particular criteria had to be taken into account. The researcher must acknowledge that the chosen sample was not entirely 'balanced'. Although the entire sample consisted of educators, only two participants out of the eight total are professional practitioners in the area of the VA. Another limitation within the sample is that most of the primary school teachers involved (six out of seven) have primarily taught and had long-term experience in schools in Dublin. Perhaps having teaching experiences within rural areas rather than solely urban, the data could have yielded different results. Before and after the pilot interview, the questions were reflected upon and altered to prevent any positionality coming across from the researcher. Many of the interview questions were kept open-ended. The researcher kept any responses or follow up questions unbiased, without being presumptuous or insinuating.
Ethical Considerations

To ensure this study was ethically sound, each participant was sent an information letter (see appendix A) and a consent form (see appendix B) to sign and send back to the researcher to give informed consent formally. Regarding the possibility of an ethical issue arising, the possibility of psychological harm that may come to a participant resulting from participating in this particular research is unlikely. However, in the information letter provided to each participant, they were told that if an uncomfortable situation may arise, they have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time. This information letter outlined the study, what was expected of them, why they were chosen, the ethical considerations involved, what will happen with the study results, and how their information will be recorded, stored and protected. The method of recording through zoom and on an external device and storing data on the researchers personal, password guarded computer ensured that their confidentiality was secure throughout the process. As visible in appendix C and D, an opening statement was read out to each participant at the start of their interview, reiterating their right to refuse to answer questions or to withdraw from the study at any time.

The Interview Process

The interview process was designed with both the professional practitioner and the primary school teacher in mind. Therefore, two sets of interview questions were created. The teachers' set of questions focused more on the implementation of the VA curriculum, their attitudes towards the VA and a realistic image of some classrooms today when it comes to diversity and other cultures (see appendix A). On the other hand, the professional practitioners' set of questions focused on the VA abilities and capabilities when learning about other cultures, their insight into the current state of art education in Ireland today and the general attitudes they have noted towards the VA in our society (see appendix D). Both sets of questions were
semi-structured and split into three sections: personal experience of the VA, professional experience of diversity and the VA and intercultural education. This allowed the interviews to have some structure and focus while simultaneously allowing their different perspectives and experiences to emerge.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research is being carried out in an interpretive manner, acknowledging that our understanding regarding this research question is shaped by our own human experience and our different social contexts. This research is done by the process of qualitative data collection and analysis and semi-structured interviews being the tool and means for data collection. The data sample consists of practising and non-practising primary school teachers and professional practitioners in the field of the VA. The possibility of bias and positionality of the researcher has been acknowledged and addressed, and steps have been taken to keep the validity and reliability of this research intact.
Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

Introduction

The main objective of this research was to explore teachers' use of the VA as a lens to explore issues of diversity within an Irish classroom setting. The main findings from this research will be presented thematically to the reader while also referring to the key literature discussed in previous chapters.

Themes and Subthemes

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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Subtheme(s)</th>
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<td>• Population in Ireland</td>
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<td>Theme #5</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• The Hidden Curriculum</td>
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Table 2. Themes and Subthemes of the Data
**Theme # 1: Diversity in the Irish Classroom today**

As previously established, the population of Ireland has become increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural over the last decade. This research involved asking teachers whether this is evident to them within their classrooms to which there were mixed reactions. Participant D felt that Ireland has not become more diverse, as diversity "has always been there", explicitly noting socio-economic backgrounds. Five out of the eight participants felt that the population has become more diverse in general but not hugely or significantly. Looking back at Bryan's study, it was found that Ireland became increasingly diverse from the Celtic tiger in the late 90s and early 2000s, and the actual figures from the United Nations show that the levels of immigration have significantly increased since 2017 with 258 million international migrants worldwide (2017, p. 4). Interestingly, one participant felt that there had been little to no change (Participant C), and one felt that is utterly dependent on the school area (Participant F).

Participant B and H brought up that there is more diversity to be seen in the student population than in the school staff. In the same way, a researcher must be aware of their positionality and bias, so must a teacher, as "their understanding, their view of the world, their passions and politics" or limited experience in some areas may influence their teaching (Braun & Clarke, 2000, p. 5). This is particularly important regarding the homogeneity of the school staff. Participant H, G, and E felt that this question ultimately depended on the school's location, Participant G explaining that it can often be within "new developing areas with new builds". However, seeing as the country's population is becoming more diverse with different cultures in our communities, should teachers and schools not be going out of their way to introduce, acknowledge and celebrate them? Should more emphasis be made on the hidden curriculum as well as the curriculum itself? As discussed in the literature review, making diverse experiences an immersive and normal everyday occurrence, rather than stand-alone lessons, will instil a mutual understanding and respect for those that are different to us. It will also give us access
to a wealth of knowledge we might otherwise not have got. Even approaching this from a VA perspective, in the words of Participant A, "There are so many different approaches to colour, to texture, to architecture. We are missing out on learning from each other. There is this whole font of knowledge that we are not getting". A whole-school approach should be taken. For example, Participant E mentioned the multicultural week celebrated every year at her school where the families come in to talk about their culture, and Participant H mentioned a school cookery book compiled of student family recipes from their cultures.

It would seem that the main factor prohibiting diverse VA experiences in the Irish classroom would be the homogenous-type cycle that several participants have referred to. The cycle in question consists of a repeated norm involving the representation and inclusion of the dominant ethnicity, culture or religion. This can be seen in many forms, such as narrow online searches with search engines, not including diverse representations in resources or using non-inclusive language. As previously explored, we can see how if one does not authentically experience visual art, they may not teach it with a focus on the experiential aspect. We can note from these findings that if one does not experience diverse representation, they may be less inclined to include those that are different to them in general, unless they intervene and research to keep themselves informed. If this is the case with a teacher, they may be less confident to approach a lesson scenario where other cultures, religions or ethnicities are explored. These findings have emphasised the concept of teacher responsibility when it comes to diversity in the classroom. It is crucial to not only recognise and celebrate the different cultures and ethnicities within the classroom but also to immerse and normalise diversity into every school day. Examples given by some participants for exploring and acknowledging diversity are through literacy, inclusive language, stories and recognising the important days of the year for different cultures and religions. It is critical to recognise that not every teacher in Ireland will
implement all of these things. Each teacher, school and their policies will be a factor affecting this and whether the cycle of homogenous non-inclusion continues.

**Theme #2: The Status of the Visual Arts in Ireland**

As previously discussed in the literature review chapter, art culture contributes to a country or society's identity. Seven participants out of the eight total mentioned how their parents' values or upbringing affected their attitude towards the arts, many claiming that their primary VA education was very limited, templated and not emphasised as a curricular area. The VA were often seen as a hobby or leisure activity, Participant D, B, E and F specifically mentioning art classes outside of school, art summer camps and art with 'the girl guides'. Participant A made the point that many people view visual art in one context and one context alone - as an aesthetically pleasing 'thing' that "you put on your wall to make your dining room look pretty". She was emphasising the need to recognise visual art for both its experience and its appreciation, i.e. visual art for its own sake. This factor affects potential diverse VA experiences for children in the classroom - the value that society places on the VA. As the literature review and participants have asserted, the VA have an endless amount of benefits. However, the value we place on certain things is deeply rooted in social norms and understandings of our society, e.g. what we deem to be important, what we deem to be a worthy academic subject or what we deem to be a successful career. These opinions and subliminal messages can affect us as people, therefore as teachers, and appear in how we teach in the classroom. It is important to note that all participants in the sample grew up in Ireland; therefore, the status of art culture in Ireland may affect their thinking. Some participants fed into the idea of 'being good or being bad at art', describing themselves "as someone who is not artistic" (Participant H) and "I was never good at art" (Participant F). The researcher has noted that this idea comes up among students during teacher training and everyday teaching in the
classroom. This is interesting considering Dewey believed every person can be an artist and experience art, as previously mentioned (Goldblatt, 2006, p.17). Both professional practitioners (Participant A and B) made the same comment that we are all innately artistic. Throughout history, Ireland has produced a wealth of phenomenal artists in all areas of the arts. Participant B was questioning why is this not reflected among our funding, education system and values:

As an artist, you are constantly, constantly fighting for funding which is really surprising because Ireland is artistic by culture, history - we have a huge majority of people who come out as artists, poets, playwrights and theatre, dancers, ballet and TV. Why are the VA so often viewed in a limited aesthetic context only when it has been shown that they have far more to offer us? Despite Sowden's noted benefits of the arts, the artistic potential of Irish people mentioned by participant B and the 'innate artist' in every one of us mentioned by Participant A, it seems that Sowden's view of "an implicit assumption" that "knowledge should come before creativity" rings true in Irish Society (2015, p. 3).

Theme #3: The Teachers' Personal Experience and Responsibility

From the interview findings, it was notable how both the teachers' personal experience of both diversity and the VA may be a factor that affects their teaching. Participant H acknowledged how their upbringing in the countryside, their lack of knowledge around other world religions and cultures during their time in primary school contributed to their need to research and inform themselves as they got older. Participant E, G and H described the lack of representation among the homogenous school staff and the students in their school growing up. Participant H mentioned a fear she had as a newly-qualified teacher, which was to unknowingly insult or offend someone different to them, whether it be a different culture, ethnicity or religion. The researcher has also recognised this, in their experience, to be a common fear amongst student-teachers and newly-qualified teachers. Therefore, one could question whether
a teacher's personal experience of diversity, whether limited or rich, would affect how they implement and normalise inclusion and representation. If we are not informed on a topic, would we be likely to teach it confidently? Unless teachers acknowledge their responsibility to keep themselves informed, this fear and lack of knowledge could prevent particular topics, cultures or ethnicities from being included and overall contribute to the idea of 'otherness' and "indirect discrimination" (NCCA, 2005, p. 16). This links with Devine's point that if we only consider our own ethnic norm, we are "positioning those outside the ethnic norm as 'other and on the margins of Irish Society" (2005, p. 50).

Many of the participants' experience of visual art as a child consisted of templates, no creative freedom and a notable subliminal message of the arts not being valued, linking to the notion that the arts have "taken a back seat in educational curricula" (Heilig et al., 2010, p. 136). However, the participants who had particularly fond memories with the VA mentioned tactile experiences with clay, having creative freedom and taking part in lengthier activities or projects over several weeks, e.g. designing and building sets for the school play. This could link with the idea that authentic VA lessons are all about the experience and process rather than the product. As Dewey believed, these experiences can be transformative and expand our perceptions (Goldblatt, 2006, p. 17). When discussing VA lessons with the sample, a prominent feature of the data was the use and reliance on the online platform Pinterest, online search engines, or the repetition of previous art lessons in order to source art lesson ideas. This perhaps highlights the lack of confidence in teaching the VA regarding teacher training or highlights the need for more direction and guidance within the NCCA Curriculum. It is also important to note that all primary teachers involved, when questioned, agreed that Covid 19 negatively impacted the implementation of VA lessons during in-school and remote learning, specifically when it came to sharing materials, cleaning materials, displaying artwork and the most
important aspects of the art experience such as reflecting, appraising and displaying art. We can also relate this to the significance of testing, assessment and the literacy and numeracy strategy. Several participants mentioned that certain subjects were being prioritised again due to the school closures during the pandemic. Participant G said how "particularly after COVID, there was a lot done on wellbeing and SPHE", and Participant F explained how "when we get back to school the main priority will be English, Maths and a bit of Irish". This links to Heilig et al. and their view that children are once again "systematically denied exposure to subjects not covered by the tests" (2010, p. 136). Overall, some participants, such as F, H, B and E, felt that art is valued far more now in schools than when they attended school. Participant B commented, "I do think it is changing regarding the teachers that are training today, they value the VA more so compared to when I was training".

**Theme #4: Teacher Training Programmes**

Another critical area discussed during research interviews was teacher training in the area of the VA. When it came to the modules themselves, including assessment and time allocated for lectures, there were mixed opinions. Firstly, it can be noted that all teaching programmes attended by the primary school teacher participants the VA module was done over ten weeks with approximately one, two-hour lecture per week, involved portfolio work as assessment. Interestingly, Participant F felt that this module needed more guidance regarding how to teach within the strands. In contrast, Participant C, D, E, and G felt the course was sufficient, mentioning that its most prominent asset was that it was very immersive, in that one learns how the children would learn. Participant E and A both made the point that it is all about the experience and process of doing the art for its own sake rather than how to get a certain product. The amount of teacher training in the VA was not deemed sufficient by the two
professional practitioners in the sample. Participant A, who teaches the programme at university, explains:

Overall, I think it is good; it highlights the senses. It could be revised or revisited, especially regarding diversity and contemporary art. It is a physical and tactile process that you are teaching, you can't rush it, the process is the outcome.

Similarly, Participant B makes the same point regarding contemporary art, suggesting that bringing professional artists into the college would be hugely beneficial and enjoyable for student-teachers.

It was also interesting to discuss the extent of intercultural education regarding teacher training. All teaching programmes now have modules that address inclusivity, diversity, ethnicity and multiculturalism; however, this module was not always there. Participant B mentions:

I grew up very much in Catholic, Caucasian Ireland with no understanding of other cultures. I didn't get introduced to [other cultures] during teacher training, so unless you are actively seeking it out, the information could be completely new to you. You wouldn't even think of introducing any other culture if it is not relevant in your world.

As discussed in the literature review, Ireland's education system differs significantly to others. Participant B, being the only participant ever to teach abroad, insisted that, "Many teachers don't stay in Ireland [once they qualify]. When you go abroad, you will find that your teacher education is lacking". This participant's own teaching experience in Oregon, USA, was different in that the VA were "very much encouraged over there". They explained how their classroom assistant "was a professional artist. Their experience was that the "emphasis was not solely on reading, writing and maths - it gave light to multiple intelligences", a concept that may not be considered to be at the forefront of the Irish education system when it comes to the
previously mentioned testing and assessments. One could argue that some skills and abilities of children may go unnoticed and unrewarded due to the exam-focused nature of our school system. Participant B, H, E, G and A have pointed out that the VA are a medium for which children who struggle with the core subjects experience success, help others at something, and build their confidence.

Every participant of this sample was unanimous in their agreement that the arts do offer physical and psychological benefits and offer scope to other learning opportunities and life skills. Participant E and D emphasised the therapeutic aspect of art and how an art lesson can give a child a 'time-out' to relax, reflect and be mindful, which links in with Ewing's view that art education benefits our social and attitudinal behaviour (2011, p. 14-15). Participant F said that the physical elements of art, i.e. using scissors, using a paintbrush, helped her identify the children in the infant classes who needed additional help, which would relate to their writing abilities. Participant H emphasised the experience of success with art, how easy it is to integrate, and its universal appeal of catering to our senses. This highlights the sense of achievement from being creative in art and how it can "contribute to a sense of personal identity and self-esteem" (NCCA, 1999, p. 4). Participant G emphasised how the arts can be an experience of self-expression and creative freedom and offer the experience of trial and error to children. Participant C noted how doing art gives children an opportunity to reflect, give feedback, offer new ways of thinking, and deal with constructive criticism. These both link directly with the Irish curriculum's aim to "value the child's confidence and self-esteem through valuing self-expression" (NCCA, 1999, p. 4).
Theme #5: The NCCA Curriculum (1999) and 'The Hidden Curriculum'

It was brought up by Participants H and E that there is a need to revisit and revise the VA curriculum (NCCA, 1999). When questioning the effectiveness of diverse VA lessons, it is necessary to go to the foundation from which it is built - the curriculum itself. Many participants felt that the need to adapt the curriculum i.e., adapt specifically for the children in their class and generally adapt regarding content. Participant F insists that "you will need to adapt lessons for your class and you can make anything really inclusive, you just have to be mindful of the kids that are sitting in front of you". Similarly, Participant H shares their opinion that:

I don't think it [the VA curriculum] is there and ready to go. There is no direction in it. When you go down the route of wanting to be culturally diverse, you need to have a certain level of confidence and where to start off. The last thing you want is to deliver a lesson with no meaning.

From these findings, we can assume that there is a definite responsibility with the class teacher regarding implementing diverse and inclusive lessons. However, Participant G felt that "the curriculum itself is perfect, it is set in place, it covers everything". In Contrast, Participant E insisted that there was not enough direction for teachers regarding finding resources, sourcing artists according to strand and finding appropriate artists for the right age level. They explain how "there is absolutely no section for artists, not even going into cultures". One could be critical of this comment as the curriculum's non-prescriptive nature is not limiting the creativity of the lesson or the quality visual art experience and makes it more versatile when it comes to adapting to a class of various cultures.
An important feature to recognise from analysing the data was that when the participants were asked about a previous VA lesson they taught that a child really responded to, many examples involved other cultures or their family heritage. Participant G shared an anecdote of a child in her class who was adopted from China, explaining how she asked her to help her teach an activity for the Chinese new year. They mentioned how:

She was able to explain with me about the art lesson at the top of the class. Her mum sent in a little note afterwards saying how much it meant to her and how it really boosted her daughter's confidence.

Similarly, Participant D, E and G all recalled how the technique of pointillism and learning about Aboriginal art of Australia is what stood out as the most enjoyable lessons for the children.

'Curariculum Overload'. 'Curriculum overload' also seemed to be a factor affecting the implementation of the VA. This point was confirmed by 6 out of 8 participants (G, E, F, H, A, D). Many elaborated on the intense pressure of the core subject areas and mentioned the Literacy and Numeracy strategy contributing to this pressure. As previously mentioned, Participant F also expressed their concern about catching up in these subjects once they return to school post-lockdown. Participant H made the point that when planning a timetable "they have great ambitions to fit everything in, but in reality, it never happens". This can also apply to student-teachers on placement. Unrealistic timetables contribute to the problem of certain subjects being prioritised over others. Participant G discussed how her visual art lessons are affected in that, "Sometimes the children might not get the product that you had hoped for them or the experience of the whole lesson because of this". Participant H refers to these timetables to be "like you're pretending. You spend your first couple of years panicking and then you come to the realisation that this is the same for every teacher; there is something wrong here". 
Participant G and E completely disagreed with the suggestion that the arts are being downgraded, asserting that no matter how busy they were or how many daily disruptions, the VA lesson would always get done that week. Perhaps these teachers recognise the value of the VA to a child's holistic development and how they offer a unique and "alternative means to view reality and expands the way we perceive the world" (Heilig et al., 2010, p. 137).

**Integration with the Visual Arts.** The topic of integration was also brought up within the interview questions. Interestingly, Participant B said, "as a primary teacher, I integrated art into absolutely everything" and that "any curricular based activity that involved VA made it more likely for them to participate". However, on the other hand, they argued that the VA could often be seen as an 'add on' meaning there is a difference between doing the art for it to be given to a parent and doing art for its valuable experience and appreciation. Participant B also made the point that cut and stick activities have their place regarding fine motor development, dexterity and grip; however, they should not be the sole focus of an art lesson.

Participant H made the point that "any integration needs to happen naturally" and not forced. Another feature of the data that stood out was the link between visual art and science. As previously discussed in the literature review, there was a push towards science due to the launch of Sputnik in 1957. Participant A used the example of the construction strand linking to science, explaining how we learn about constructing a central fugal system and building upright creations. This relates directly to the real world as they can learn about gravity, e.g. how a tree grows upright because its roots are as tall as its height. This natural linkage can allow them to learn in an organic and meaningful way. Participant B discusses kinetic sculpture and how "if it [your creation] moves or is 3D, I find, students interest in what they have created, is extended. It is more long-lasting".
Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions

**Teacher Experience and Influence.** From these findings, a main conclusion would be the need for primary school teachers to accept personal influence and responsibility within their classroom regarding the hidden curriculum as "what is absent [in the classroom] can be as important as what is present" (NCCA, 2005, p 4.). One's own experience of diversity can impact one's choices in the classroom, e.g. being more or less likely to include or normalise diverse representation or refer to other cultures in everyday life. However, as expressed by much of the sample, although having a narrow and limited experience of diversity as a child in primary school themselves, they do feel the need to go out of their way to break the homogenous cycle where they can. This is especially the case when there are children in their class of a different culture or ethnicity.

**Teacher Responsibility.** These findings also showed how one's own experience of the VA could impact how one is and how one teaches in the classroom, especially when it comes to confidence in teaching the subject. However, in the words of Gadsden, by not offering quality opportunities through the arts or to "reorder their ‘habits of mind’ –is to deny them the full experience of learning" (Ewing, 2011, p. 34). It is a teacher's responsibility to acknowledge life-long learning and the need to upskill on their professional development journey. The VA is a valuable subject area in which one should expand their teaching capabilities if they feel their confidence is lacking or teaching training is insufficient.

The two professional practitioners in the sample have stated that the VA are a fantastic medium for children to acknowledge and learn about difference and diversity. We need to teach the next generation to have tolerance and respect for those that are different to us, i.e. we need
to normalise diversity and other cultures and ethnicities in our communities. We need to look beyond our ethnic norm and our habits of thinking, and as Ewing explained, we can use the VA to challenge our habitual thinking (2011, p. 47). VA can be a fantastic, tactile medium of exposing this to children in an enjoyable, accessible and meaningful way. As outlined by some participants, the VA can be a way for children to experience success, actively learn, reflect and appreciate other perspectives. There is a need for inclusivity in a modern world where our communities are becoming increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural. The VA should be utilised to their full potential as they are a medium that "transcends class, race, and gender" (Heilig et al., 2010, p. 144). In a world where hate and racism are learned behaviours, we as teachers have to be mindful of any subliminal messages or attitudes being picked up in the classroom. This can be said for both discrimination and for how a subject like the VA is valued.

**Recommendations**

- Teachers need to go out of their way to educate themselves and keep themselves informed regarding other cultures, religions and ethnicities. Teachers need to be prepared for a child of any background to enter their class and for their culture and ethnicity to be included meaningfully. The hidden curriculum should be part of the everyday school environment, conversations and values. A whole-school approach would highlight its importance and ensure that every family and child is more than welcome. Education should be normalising diversity, preparing children to go out into the world and to live in diverse communities as a citizen of planet earth. Therefore, making diverse experiences an ordinary occurrence at school is beneficial to all.

- Life-long learning is important in every teacher's career. This brings us to the recommendation that VA CPD classes and courses should be encouraged so teachers can continue their training in the VA. This will support teachers in fully understanding
the life-changing benefits that visual art can bring to a child's life. Other steps can be taken, such as inviting local artists to the school, raising awareness about the art centre in their counties, arranging for an artist in residence at the school and embracing the local community's statues, sculptures and architecture. As previously mentioned, authentic visual art experiences need "quality resources, accomplished artists", "teachers and quality interactions"; therefore, funding is vital for educational settings, and any cuts to these should be disputed (Ewing, 2011, p. 19).

- Perhaps, alterations could be made to the NCCA VA curriculum. Much has changed in the art world and the world in general since 1999. More direction and guidance should be given regarding sourcing new resources and for choosing suitable artists, techniques or styles for particular age groups. The professional practitioners both felt that more attention needed to be given to contemporary art. Some of the same artists are being used every year in schools - white, European men for that matter. These changes may reduce the reliance on websites such as Pinterest or the unreliable, non-inclusive google searches.

- Regarding possible areas for further research, Participant B, E and H commented on the therapeutic aspect of the VA and how it can support children with additional needs. Participant B mentioned the tactile and 3D nature of the VA and its ability to help children with ADHD and those with dyslexia, including themself, to engage and succeed. With experience as a school completion coordinator, they also explained how "any curricular based activity that involved the VA made it more likely for them [children] to participate". Therefore, there is scope to explore how and if the VA are being utilised to support children with additional needs in primary schools in an Irish context.
Concluding Statement

The researcher wishes to conclude with a statement made by Participant B that highlights the unique capabilities of the VA:

I just think the VA can add something to a child's life and open their eyes to a beauty that is outside of the classroom and can make connections for them. It is something that feeds your soul; it gives you a place to go to that is peaceful and quiet in a time where, more often than not, we are putting children on screens. We get comfort from making, and making is art. It gives children the tools, which is what we do in primary school; we give children the tools to go out there into the world and be successful. The VA is another one of those tools. It should be in their toolbox, particularly now with the emphasis on mental health and wellbeing.
Reference List


Walling, D., (2001). Rethinking VA Education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(8), pp.626-631. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/003172170108200813?casa_token=j6dhdy_q0cAAAAA:eEvSDdiPnd2atgKX34uhVeJ5lyjo9YnyMm8g_kYEWfSSuvZhfXIiwigS_nxu3t3LvmKt77xira6Aw_vw5>. 
Appendix A: Information letter for Participants

Information Letter for Research

Title of Study:

"Teachers' use of the VA as a lens for exploring other cultures and issues of diversity within an Irish classroom setting"

Dear Sir / Madam,

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear or if you would like more information.

Who I am and what this Study is about

My name is Stephanie Frewen and I am currently undertaking the PME course at Marino Institute of Education to qualify as a primary school teacher.

The aim of this research is to obtain a more accurate representation of the status of the VA within the Irish primary school classroom today in relation to exploring topics such as diversity and other cultures. In examining the approaches to which it is taught, the general attitudes towards the subject as well as the experiences of teachers, we can observe how / if the VA can be the means of helping children to explore diversity and bring awareness to the multi-cultural society we live in.
What will taking part involve?

Taking part in this research, will involve taking part in short, one on one, semi-structured interviews via Zoom (no longer than twenty minutes). I plan to use audio recording within the zoom call as well as on a voice-recorder. Topics discussed will revolve around the teaching of the VA in primary school. Areas that will be discussed include lesson planning, choosing content and resources for lessons, displays, confidence in teaching the VA, the concept of the multicultural classroom and your general experiences and approaches towards the VA.

Why have you been invited to take part?

I have chosen to ask you to take part in my research as I wanted the participants to either be qualified primary school teachers with experience of teaching the VA and / or educators or professional practitioners in the field of the VA.

Do you have to take part?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you have the right to refuse participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time without any consequence whatsoever.

What are the Possible Risks and Benefits of taking part?

In taking part in this research, you will help give a more accurate representation of the status of the VA within the Irish classroom today. It will show the attitudes and experiences of Irish teachers within the area of the VA and how / if it can be the means of helping children to explore diversity and bring awareness to the multi-cultural society we live in. The possibility of psychological harm that may come to a participant as a result of participating in the research is very unlikely. However, if the situation may arise, you have the right to refuse
participation, refuse any question and withdraw at any time and your transcript will not be
used and will be destroyed.

**Will taking part be Confidential?**

Steps will be taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of every participant and any
individuals they talk about. All names will be changed within the dissertation to ensure
anonymity of its participants. Non-anonymised data in the form of signed consent forms and
audio recordings are collected and retained as part of the research process but are retained in
a safe place where only the researcher has access.

**How will Information you provide be recorded, stored and protected?**

The interview will be recorded via *Zoom* as well as on a voice recorder on laptop as a backup.
The research data will be stored on the laptop which will be kept in a place in which only the
researcher can access. This laptop is secure- passwords are needed to access the laptop.
Signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained until after my degree has
been conferred. Under freedom of information legalisation you are entitled to access the
information you have provided at any time.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

Regarding the dissemination of the final research product, Marino Institute of Education will
retain the copy that I submitted and may make it accessible in their library in the future if
they so choose.
Who should you contact for further information?

If you have any further questions you can contact the researcher at sfrewnpme19@momail.mie.ie or the supervisor of the research at ___

I will greatly value your participation in this research study and your willingness to share your expertise and experiences is appreciated. Thank you.

Yours Sincerely,

Stephanie Frewen

(Researcher)
Appendix B: Informed Consent

Consent to take part in research

"Teachers' use of the VA as a lens for exploring issues of diversity and other cultures within an Irish classroom setting"

• I _______________voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

• I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

• I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

• I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

• I understand that participation involves…[outline briefly in simple terms what participation in your research will involve].

• I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

• I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.

• I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous.

• This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

• I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher's dissertation.

• I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in the researcher's home on a laptop that only she has access to until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
• I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for the duration of the research until results of their dissertation are confirmed.

• I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

• I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information. Names, degrees, affiliations and contact details of the researcher (and academic supervisor when relevant).

Signature of research participant

__________________________

Signature of participant Date

__________________________

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Stephanie Greven

Signature of researcher Date

29/10/20
Appendix C: Interview Questions Set A for Primary School Teachers

Introductory Statement
I have just begun recording our interview session. I would firstly like to welcome you and thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study. I would like to remind you that you can opt out at any time and can choose not to answer certain questions if you so wish. The interview will be split up into three sections: Personal experience of the VA, professional experience of diversity and the VA and intercultural education.

Personal Experience of the VA

1. Can you tell me about your own experience with the VA as a child in the classroom?
2. How much training did you receive in the area of VA in initial teacher education?
3. Research shows that the arts are often downgraded when it comes to prioritising subjects on a curriculum. What is your opinion or your experience of this?
   - Would you consider the curriculum to be 'overloaded'?
   - Do you ever feel pressure relating to the teaching of the core curricular subject areas?
4. Daily disruptions of life in school can affect teaching, does this affect the time you give to certain subjects?
   - Would you integrate other subjects with the VA often?
5. In relation to the impact of Covid-19, has the implementation of VA lessons been affected in any way?
Professional Experience of Diversity

6. Can you give an example of an artist or stimulus that a child really responded to?

   - When do you think VA lessons have increased pupil motivation? All pupils?

7. In your opinion does the VA Curriculum (1999) respond to the needs of all cultures and ethnicities?

   - Do you think it can cater for everyone but it is necessary to adapt it?

8. Diversity can be seen not only through the teaching in the classroom but also through the 'hidden curriculum', for example, diverse representation within children's literature available in the class library. In what way does the 'hidden curriculum' become visible in your classroom?

9. Can you describe your classroom to me in terms of their ethnicities and cultural backgrounds? And your school?

   - In your experience, has the Irish classroom become increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural within the last decade or in comparison to when you first began teaching?

The VA and Intercultural Education

10. Can you give an example of when or how you might bring in other cultures or ethnicities into your lessons?

    Would you ever do this in a VA lesson?

11. In your opinion or experience, are the VA beneficial to children and their development?

12. In your opinion, do the VA offer scope to other learning opportunities?
Appendix D: Interview Questions Set B for Educators in the VA or Professional Practitioners of the VA

Introductory Statement

I have just begun recording our interview session. I would firstly like to welcome you and thank you again for agreeing to participate in this research study. I would like to remind you that you can opt out at any time and can choose not to answer certain questions if you so wish. The interview will be split up into three sections: Personal experience of the VA, professional experience of diversity and the VA and intercultural education.

Personal Experience of the VA

1. Can you tell me about your own experience with the VA?
   - as a child?
   - in a professional context?
2. Research shows that the arts are often downgraded when it comes to prioritising subjects on a curriculum. What is your opinion or your experience of this?
3. Are you familiar with the initial teacher training that students receive in the VA?
   - Do you think this is sufficient?

Professional Experience of Diversity

4. In what way do you think VA can acknowledge the concept of difference and diversity?
5. Can you give an example of an artist or stimulus that a pupil has really responded to?
   - When do you think VA lessons have increased pupil motivation? All pupils?
6. In your experience, has the Irish learning setting become increasingly multi-ethnic and multicultural within the last decade or in comparison to when you first began teaching?

7. Do you think children are exposed to a diverse selection of Artists and visual art at school?

**The VA and Intercultural Education**

8. Can you give an example of when or how you might bring in other cultures or ethnicities into your lessons or lectures?

9. In your opinion or experience, are the VA beneficial to children and their development?

10. In your opinion, do the VA offer scope to other learning opportunities?

11. Creating and engaging with visual art can help us to appreciate and enjoy the aesthetic aspect of art, do you think children can gain other values, skills or lessons from it?