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Pat Thomson, Liam Maloy & Christine Hall

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'The way I know is by looking back': English primary school children's views of making progress in arts subjects

Pat Thomson , Liam Maloy  and Christine Hall 

Faculty of Social Science, The University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

ABSTRACT

Educators are concerned that children make progress in their learning. While there are both policy and professional debates about how progress should be monitored and assessed, the views of children are rarely considered. Grounded in the 'voiced' research tradition, this paper reports on 158 focus group interviews with upper primary school students in purposefully selected arts rich schools in England. Children were asked about what they thought progress in arts subjects was, and how it was achieved. No children talked about grades or marks and only a handful mentioned rewards schemes. Their own evaluations and those of significant others, teachers, friends and family were very important. Children saw progress as supported and shaped by teacher pacing, scaffolding and feedback. Their own commitment to practice, use of feedback, persistence and self-belief were also highly significant. We suggest that these children's understandings have implications for the work that arts teachers do, and in particular for the ways in which children use feedback and develop their own criteria for self-evaluation.

KEYWORDS

Primary; arts education; progress; formative assessment; pupil voice

Teachers worry about whether children are learning, what they are learning and how well they are learning. Policy makers worry about this too and use a range of measures to assess the progress of pupil cohorts, teachers and schools. Most teachers, schools and school systems are concerned with two types of measures: (1) attainment, learning assessed at fixed points in time against designated standards expressed as scores or grades, and (2) progress, keeping track of children's learning through time by comparing current scores or grades with those in the past (OECD 2013). Both progress and attainment are measured via children's performance in specifically designed tasks and/or by examining behaviours and artefacts generated as part of routine classroom activities. In schools, progress is tracked through formative assessment, while attainment is more likely to involve summative and standardised measures (OECD 2021). The evaluation of learning is always more than tests and exams; teachers in particular make judgments about learning and teaching through a range of summative and formative assessments (Cristodolou 2017).

There is no professional consensus about attainment or assessment. There are long-standing debates about what to assess and how. Nevertheless, all national governments select specific assessment, attainment and progress measurement tools. In England where this research is situated, the

CONTACT Pat Thomson  patricia.thomson@nottingham.ac.uk

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national curriculum is officially described as a progression model. The national inspection agency Ofsted says 'By progress, we mean that children know more, remember more and can do more of what was intended in the curriculum'.¹ Ofsted expect that schools and teachers will be able to demonstrate a clear intention for their interpretation of the curriculum, and will be able to explain the choice, sequencing and pacing of content, as well as tasks set and the formative and summative assessment for each subject. This approach to progress has been critiqued for assuming regular and linear staged development (e.g. Sikorski and Hammer 2010), but it is the model which underpins accountability measure in England (Roberts 2022).

The arts lend themselves to performance and artefact-based assessment practices in which progress can be measured through comparison of 'distance travelled'. But there are differences in view about the criteria applied to artefacts and performances to explicate the learning involved. While the English KS2 national curriculum clearly states targets for primary key stage arts learning,² it is largely left to schools, professional organisations and advisors to develop these targets into assessment criteria, often in the form of tables of outcomes.³

Much of the arts assessment practice that is developed by schools and professional associations meets the national curriculum but adds practices derived from cognate arts disciplines. The arts have their own particular forms of signature formative assessment practices – crits in art, notes in drama and dance – and secondary arts teachers use versions of these in their regular classroom pedagogies (Thomson and Hall 2023). Critical reflection and evaluation is integral to arts practice. Arts educators hold as highly important the practice of pupils developing their own self-assessment practices. Formative assessment approaches in the arts are thus intended to support pupil-artists to build their own evaluative practices of what they do, how they are doing and how well. Primary school teachers with formal training in the arts are strongly committed to supporting children to understand their own development as artists, so the use of feedback and analysis of artefacts such as sketchbooks and recordings, are common.

This paper reports some of the results of an arts pedagogical approach which supports reflection. We focus on the views of KS2 children (aged 9–11) in arts-rich primary schools who we invited to talk about their progress in arts subjects. We begin by signposting our approach to soliciting the views of children, and then outline our research project. We report children's views of progress and how it is supported. We conclude by drawing out key implications of children's accounts, arguing that children's views are largely congruent with the assessment for learning literatures and have important pedagogical implications.

Children and/in research

As critical researchers concerned with redressing the material realities of inequitable hierarchies of knowledge (Scott 2010), we situate our work in the sociologies of childhood (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Qvortrup et al. 1994). These literatures start from the understandings that children are beings as well as becomings, and they have a right to offer, and are capable of offering, their interpretations of their worlds and experiences (Hallett and Prout 2003). The burgeoning literatures on children and research, often called 'student/pupil voice' (Brasof and Levitan 2022; Czerniawski and Kidd 2011) or 'student/youth participation' (Holdsworth 2000), seek to redress adultist practice and research, demonstrating that children's views and meaning-making about their life experiences can be surprising, challenging, disruptive and generative.

Researchers adopting a children's 'voiced research' methodology (Smyth and Hattam 2001) hold that it is important to elicit children's experiences, perspectives and understandings. Rather than critically interrogate or romanticise their words, researchers aim to recognise children's distinctive meaning-makings, to see their words as indicative of the ways in which they make sense of their experiences (Murray 2019; Wall and Robinson 2022). Working to 'see like children' can produce work with pedagogical heft (Thomson et al. 2019; Thomson, Hall, and Jones 2010). Some education arts researchers have been interested in children's perspectives e.g.:

- how children's own views of music and their musical interests and knowledges can inform classroom music programmes (Burnard 2002; Green 2005).
- the connections between students' self-efficacy beliefs and tendencies to think creatively (Catterall and Peppler 2007).
- how teachers and teaching benefit from hearing children's views on learning in art and design (Hallam, Hewitt, and Buxton 2014; Tan and Gibson 2020) – children appreciate the opportunity to self-direct their learning (Hatzigianni et al. 2020).
- that children and young people value their arts education and attribute a number of cognitive, social, cultural and aesthetic benefits to their arts learning (Barrett, Everett, and Smigiel 2012; Gibson 2008; Thomson and Maloy 2020).

Our research builds on these insights.

There is also a very substantive body of research about academic progress, how to measure it, its inequitable (re)production and how it can be best supported (Ariel and Ziol-Guest 2008; Dann 2016; Tymms, Merrell, and Henderson 2000). Of particular relevance to this paper are the debates about the value of extrinsic versus intrinsic rewards and /or the use of both (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 2001; Kohn 1999), the importance and limitations of formative feedback (Smith and Gorard 2005; William 2018) and the potential value of autonomy, (Bozack et al. 2008; Kupers et al. 2015), self-belief and sense of self-efficacy (Dweck 2002) in learning, progress and attainment. There is however only a little research on children's perceptions and opinions of assessment, e.g.:

- children's views of their academic ability and progress are strongly influenced by their parents (McGrath and Repetti 2000) as well as their actual performance as measured by teachers (Herbert and Stipek 2005).
- children understand the purposes of tests, but generally do not enjoy or particularly value them (Doddington et al. 2001; Duffield et al. 2000). Students find the assessment of learning less meaningful than the points where they recognise that they are learning or have learnt (Bourke and Loveridge 2014).

To date we have found no research which specifically examines children's views of progress or progress in the arts.

The RAPS research

The Researching Arts in Primary Schools (RAPS, <https://artsprimary.com>) is a primary counterpart to our previous secondary school project, TALE (<https://researchtale.net>). RAPS aims to explore the ecologies of the arts rich primary school, focusing particularly on what benefits are offered to children and how these are produced. The RAPS research uses a comparative two-year case study design. Each case study uses multiple data sources (Bassey 1999) and consists of interviews with school leaders, arts specialists and children; survey of generalist teachers about their involvement in arts teaching; survey of all Year 5 children about their in and out of school arts participation; school documents and extensive photographic documentation. There is also a comparative element between the public data available on RAPS schools and others in their identified 'family' (like schools).⁴ This paper draws only on focus groups with children.

In order to fulfil its aims, RAPS uses a purposeful selection of schools which will generate theoretical development as well as detailed and diverse exemplars (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). We began the project with a list of 186 primary schools which had formal recognition for their arts education via Arts Mark or other awards, and/or a recommendation from Arts Council England regional youth arts organisations. We invited the 186 schools to participate in an online survey about their curriculum offer, asking how many arts subjects they offered, to whom and how often, specialist staffing and partnerships with arts organisations (criteria drawn from our own work as well as

that of Cairns et al. 2020). 77 schools responded. The survey confirmed that arts rich primary schools offer Art and Design and Music to all children all year long, every year. They also offer other arts subjects such as Drama and Dance, employ at least one arts specialist teacher, offer a range of extra-curricular arts activities, and sustain partnerships with a number of arts organisations.

From the survey responses and an examination of public documentation, and over six full day research team meetings, we selected 40 schools for further study. The forty RAPS schools are distributed around England. There were six schools in London, four in Birmingham and two each in Newcastle, Plymouth, Bradford, Ipswich, Liverpool, the Kent coast and the Cornwall peninsular (see artsprimary.com for a list of locations and schools, all of whom are un-anonymised per the project ethical protocols). There were village schools and schools in regional cities and towns, local authority schools, stand-alone academies and schools in academy trusts. There were three faith schools, 16 with nurseries and two junior schools. Schools range in size from 60 to 680 and 17 of them had greater than the national average percentage of children in receipt of Free School Meals.

Because RAPS was caught in the Covid19 pandemic, our research design changed. By the time we were ready to visit schools, we were only able to ask for a day of their time each year rather than the six we had initially planned. We were unable to work with children as co-researchers. However, we did spend half a day in the first year talking with children in focus groups. We typically talked with five groups of children, one each from years 4, 5 and 6, a group of children who did extra-curricular arts activities, and a group of children with leadership responsibilities in the school (often called arts ambassadors, or arts councillors). A total of 158 focus groups were conducted (965 children). The groups ranged from three to twenty children.

While this is a large number, the data is partial and specific, viz:

- Selection of children

Children were selected for focus group participation by their school's arts lead. While the focus groups were generally similar to their school population, these were not 'representative' groups, although the leadership group clearly had a formal representative role in the school. It is likely that teachers chose children who were articulate and who they knew were enthusiastic about the arts.

- Comparability of data

Focus groups can be very inconsistent, making comparison difficult. We used semi-structured interviews which allowed for consistency and comparability as well as a conversational approach (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2018). One team member conducted all children's focus group interviews. In line with our research aim to understand the benefits and workings of arts rich schools, children were asked questions about the arts subjects they did at school and what happened in them, their memorable arts projects, their views of the arts and what they thought was 'good arts', and whether they did arts activities out of school. We did not ask children about individual arts subjects but they often gave examples, usually from Music or Art.

- Ethical concerns

Our university approved ethical protocols included the customary parental consent and guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality but we also explained the research and asked for each child's verbal consent at the start of each recorded conversation. We were mindful of Lundy's (2007) formulation of the conditions under which children exercise their right to speak and be heard – space, voice, audience and influence. We had little control over physical space, but all of the groups were allowed time to talk, and we ensured that everyone did get the opportunity to speak at least once. However, for safeguarding reasons, and despite us having appropriate clearances, the

arts lead was usually present during the discussions, albeit seated at a distance and usually doing some other kind of work. Teacher presence may have added to the tendency for focus groups to silence some members and to produce group think.

- Potential exclusions

Focus groups have the advantage of producing multiple perspectives, often sparked by interaction (Krueger and Casey 2014). Researchers can promote participation by ensuring turn-taking and making clear that a diversity of views is valuable. Research groups with children are particularly complex; the researcher must carefully explain the purposes of the research and word questions inclusively, recognising the various social cultural and linguistic competencies of children in the group (Greig, Taylor, and McKay 2013). Accordingly, in addition to child-friendly questions, we also often focused on concrete examples and artefacts in the school.

Our data analysis must be read in the light of these selections and exclusions.

We have of course understood children's points of view through an adult lens. We analysed focus group transcripts drawing out semantic themes, looking for children's meaning-making, rather than searching for 'latent' explanations of their words (Braun and Clarke 2006, 83–84). Our process involved familiarisation, reading every transcript, generating and naming themes, then reviewing and dis/aggregating themes (Braun and Clarke 2021). As we worked with the verbatim focus group transcripts, we kept foremost in our minds Brasof and Levitan's (2022) distinction between children seen as a data source and students seen as expert respondents in research controlled by adults. We aimed for the latter and have thus extensively quoted children in this paper. We kept in mind Brasof and Levitan's emphasis on intersubjectivity – whether researchers and children understand each other – and reflexivity – how conceptions of youth, the influence of the researchers' own childhoods and schooling experiences impact on interpretation of students' voices. Our goal has been to work against stereotypical interpretations of children's views and present a range of possibilities, rather than certainties.

Data were analysed by focus group by two of the research team. We could not separate out individual children but have looked for collective views. Themes can be taken as views expressed in most of the focus groups. We have used quotations that exemplify analytic patterns, as is usual in qualitative research (Silverman 2019). Where there were small or individual responses that we thought were important, we say so.

Children's views of progress

Like their teachers, the national curriculum and Ofsted, children most often saw progress through a comparative lens. The time period children used for comparison purposes varied from a single lesson to their full primary school experience. You could see you had made progress by comparing where you were now to where you had been: *The way I know is by looking back – evaluating*. Children suggested that you could compare artefacts from one period to another. *If you lay all your art out, you can just see it improving*. Looking back was easier in visual art – *Look through your past art book, flip through the pages and see –* than in performing arts where you might have to consciously document what you were doing – *Record something you're doing and then practice more and then after you can watch it again and see how much you've progressed*.

No children referred to marks, grades, descriptive assessments or termly report cards. Only a handful of children referred to school awards as confirmation of their progress and attainment. *If people get better at things, they could either get Star of the Week or get Superstar Learner; We might get sent for a Brilliance award*. The vast majority of children talked of their own evaluation, and told us that their sense of making progress was affirmed by people that were important to them – *Some people tell us that we're getting quite good. Teacher, friends, parents, siblings*. Having external support for your own sense of progress helped to build trust in your own judgment – *You know*

you've got better when your teacher tells you and then you feel it yourself, you know that it's not just your opinion. A few children felt that they could not make judgments about the quality of their work or progress by themselves You can't really know by yourself, but if someone says 'that's better than before, you've tried really hard and it looks great'. Others disagreed– You don't always need your friend's opinion. You know when you've got better at something not someone else. Not your Mum or Dad, it's you because you know you've done it.

Children referred to the emotional qualities of self-evaluation of progress – the feelings that they had when they did something that 'sounds quite good' or 'looks like an artist' – *It appeals to you more; You feel great about yourself; You feel proud.* Children were clear that the feelings associated with learning and keeping going until you could do something well were important. Being unable to put the feeling into words wasn't necessarily seen as a problem – as one child put it, *You need to let your heart tell you that you're doing good or not.*

It was clear that nearly all of the children we talked with had various and growing senses of what Eisner (2002) called 'connoisseurship': a set of criteria for what makes for good and great art which can be translated into words. However, some children had a generalised sense of improvement that they found hard to explain: *When I started to play the ukulele it didn't sound good, but now it actually sounds quite good; My artwork has improved quite a bit ... it looks like an artist.* The children's reports of 'sounding good and looking good' demonstrated that they were acquiring connoisseur practices. Some children were simply less prepared or able to put their criteria into words than others. We expect that these children will become more articulate about their own evaluations and interpretations as their arts education continues. They will learn to make their tacit evaluative criteria explicit particularly if their teachers make this the subject of focused classroom discussion (e.g. see Chapman, Wright, and Pascoe 2019).

Many of the children's words resonated with popular pedagogical literatures – children saw progress as continuing. They had what some of today's teachers would call a 'growth mindset' (Dweck 2017) – *Each time you look back at your work, it looks better and better.* No arts work was ever finished, there was always room for doing more – *You can always improve it some sort of way.* Other children talked about habits associated with creative practice (Spencer, Lucas, and Claxton 2012): patience, persistence and focus were important – *I'm more focused now than I was but I still can't get very focused.* And like teachers, children also had a sense of their own physical and mental development. As they got older they could do more. *We have done some of the same things in other years and we still do them in year 5 but they make it even harder or you use more materials.* Progress was associated with bodies being stronger as well with accumulation of knowledge and skills:

Our hands probably wouldn't have been as mobile in Year 3 as they are now. Our hands are now much more developed; Your brain, it rapidly develops ... and you can control the way you sketch. It will get better each year.

If you kept learning and growing, you progressed. *As you get older you improve.* Nevertheless, children told us that some possessed talent that went beyond development and formal instruction – *Some people are just really good at it from when they're born.*

Many children told us about mastery – the command of a subject or skill set. Children saw mastery as both product and process. Mastery meant doing more difficult, challenging and ambitious things – *doing bigger pieces of music or bigger pieces of art or bigger pieces of drama.* Mastery was also strongly associated with a sense of control and efficacy. Making progress meant being able to realise your vision of what you were doing – *It starts to look more like you want it to look.* What you were doing was also less difficult – *It feels more natural; you get more fluent; It was easy.* Because the work had become do-able, the children felt more capable – *We feel more confident and able to trust ourselves.* Children felt their work did not exhibit as many signs of learning – *I haven't made as many mistakes.* Feeling and being more capable also meant being less reliant on teachers. Children drew on their own prior learning – *You know what specific techniques you are going to use and you have a clear image of what it's gonna be when you finish.* Once – *you know more stuff in your head, and you already know what's going to happen* – then – *you could be doing*

it instead of thinking about it. You could – Fix your mistakes – and – You could go onto harder things, you could experiment.

Children equated progress with being able to make the work your own – *Have a general idea of what you're doing but then change it in your own unique way.* Children valued – *not doing the same as the person next to me or what the teacher showed me.* They were no longer so reliant on the teacher – *You can tell yourself because it's your art.* And once you believed in yourself and what you knew, you could share your skills and knowledge – *If you get better you start helping other people get better.* The children's focus on independence is strongly resonant with arts educators' goals for children to learn independently and to become an artist (Hay 2023; Thomson and Hall 2022; 2021). And indeed, children drew parallels between their own practice and that of established artists. *Famous artists, their pictures look horrible at the beginning and then they make a few changes. They make it look better.* Independence and confidence extended to carrying on with an arts practice outside of class. Many of the children told us that they had *improved so much from all the lessons we've had and it's inspired me to do some stuff at home and it's made me really proud of myself.*

Children very often had specific criteria in mind to denote progress. In Art, progress was strongly skills-related *My art is neat, like an artist's and filled with really good techniques.* Becoming more skilled was haptic, you were able to work with the embodied pull of materials and making – *You get better at controlling the force when you're trying to sketch.* Children also felt that progress was having their own agenda and ideas – *If you don't need a subject [a picture or reference] to draw on, that means you're getting better at art because you're getting better at using your imagination.* Sometimes children also referred to a more polished final product – *My art looks more like its popping off the page. Before it looked like a cartoon.* Many children referred to their desire to make things look more life-like – *I'm a lot better at drawing hands now than I was in year three; it just starts to look more realistic.* But another noted that – *it depends what you want to focus on, how realistic or fantasy ... It might be better because it's more abstract.*

Progress in music was strongly cumulative – *At the first lesson you could just make a couple of drum beats and in the next lesson you make a few more and it just keeps progressing until you can make a whole song.* Working bit by bit on a piece of music always involved embodied memory – *The first time I ever played the cornet I wasn't very good at it, but after two days I could start to memorise the notes.* Progress also meant being able to attempt and conquer more varied and difficult pieces – *You're increasing on your songs. You're getting better at knowing the notes or the music.* Progress in Dance and Drama was associated with performing more assuredly and conquering nerves – *Before when I did the Nativity, every time I spoke my voice was very, very shaky. Now in Year 6 I did Shakespeare and I definitely have improved a lot.*

We suspect that many arts educators will feel reassured by the children's view of what counts as progress. The combination of skills, knowledge, sense of self-belief and agency and increasing independence in learning are what is commonly held to be important (Hall and Thomson 2017). The children's views of how to make progress are perhaps even more strongly resonant with arts education goals.

Children's views of how to make progress in the arts

For these children, formal instruction was integral to making progress, usually through a combination of instruction and the teacher modelling – *teachers draw it for you and you try to copy.* Copying is not a simple process, it involves careful observation and/or listening, developing coordination, controlling movement and refining hand-eye working. Teachers structured and scaffolded procedural knowledges – *In the Goldberg Variations, we learned a tiny bit of music each week and eventually it builds up.* Arts subject teachers often had routines that helped children consolidate their learning –

With Austin's butterfly, we will do several sketches and compare them to each other. Austin kept getting compliments and ideas from his peers and we do that with our partners, we explain to them what is good and what they could change and then do another sketch, and then try to improve it. We've done it two or three times in a lesson.

Children saw repetition and coverage as important – *The teachers try to go over it as much as they can to actually get it into our brains.* One child new to their arts rich school attested to the difference specialised instruction in arts subjects could make – *I used to be really bad at drawing but now that I've joined this school and we've had art classes, I've got better.*

Informal learning was also mentioned. We were told about learning from friends and family members – *Getting advice from friends or older siblings might help you to have better drawings.* YouTube was mentioned in relation to acquiring specific techniques – *you put on a tutorial.* But some children were sceptical about video tutorials as a method of learning – *If I searched for how to get better at painting on YouTube, it would come up how to do it in five seconds, how to do it in one hour. That's not really possible.* Some children referred to Googling for inspiration – *You can go on the laptop and search up a picture and just draw it.* Others got their inspiration from peers – *Taking inspiration from other people and then trying to do my own version.* Children also mentioned the importance of experiential learning with arts professionals – *We went to the People's Theatre and we had a workshop.* The learning with the arts organisation was as much about becoming an actor/artist as substantive skills. *The knowledge that I've done those things and that I've worked on it makes me feel like I have grown as an actor.*

Children were clear about the importance of formative feedback from teachers – *Feedback on your acting. That's how you get better.* Feedback is integral to arts disciplines. Research, including our own, shows that while arts teachers do use whole class instruction particularly at the start of themes or projects or extended lessons, their pedagogy is equally about circulating around the class attending to each child's work (Hetland et al. 2007). It was therefore unsurprising that the children we interviewed saw feedback as a key to making progress. Children explained the principles underpinning useful feedback. Useful teacher feedback was.

- constructive and critical – *They give you like positive things and things you could work on*
- geared to instilling the notion of continuing improvement – *Mr C normally says 'Great piece of work, but maybe next time try and use a bit less of this or a bit more of ...'*
- specific – *We have a proper dance teacher who comes in and helps us ensure that if we don't get it right the first time they'll try to give us the corrections on how to do it properly*
- often offered via personalised demonstration – *Having people like (arts lead, drama specialist) and (dance teacher) being able to show me how to make it better.*
- designed to inculcate artist habits – *She tells people if they finish too quickly then they haven't done it properly and she comes and tells them to add more things.*

Children also saw the benefit of seeking feedback when they were stuck – *Ask the teacher and they can try and show you.* They also observed that when feedback was given it was important to take it in and act on it. *You pay attention to the advice your teacher gives you. If you listen and pay attention you will have a deeper understanding of what's going on.* However, teacher help was not always distributed evenly – *Some people don't need extra help because they've already cracked it.* This child did not perhaps see that everyone could benefit from feedback, even those who were apparently successful.

Practice is integral to arts learning. The children we interviewed had internalised the notion of practice. – *You practice loads.* Almost without exception, children told us that there was no progress in arts subjects without practice – *Practice makes perfect. Not maybe perfect but it makes it better.* Practice had to be both regular and frequent – *I practice twenty minutes a day.* Practice was done both at school and at home – *doing it when you have free time at home.* Practising at home could strengthen school arts learning:

Because we are quite passionate about art, we do it a lot at home, so we've got a lot of old books where we used to just draw and paint and just be creative in them. And I know that that's definitely helped me a lot to get better.

The children saw the purpose of practice as improving skills, which in Music was often connected with memorisation:

When you take your instrument home and practise it, you can remember your chords better; If you don't do a lot of art, then you can't really practise it ... and you kind of forget.

Practice at home was a sociable way of sharing a common interest and expertise:

When I joined the choir in year one/two, I think I became a better singer because then I started singing at home with my family and my friends.

Practice was associated with motivation – *When someone actually wants to do it they practise because they really want to, not just have to.* Maintaining practice schedules took commitment – *You need to be dedicated to practise every day* – a message their teachers regularly reinforced – *Keep practising, and if it doesn't turn out good the teacher always says to just try again.* Practising often meant working through difficult periods when you just couldn't do what you wanted – *You keep trying and trying and trying until you get it right.* Getting things right was not simply a matter of repeating the same mistakes. One child told us that improvement required self-evaluation:

You can't get better at something just by doing it over and over again. You have to think about what you are doing and just process it and then you can actually go, 'ah yes, I need to work on that'. So then you do that, and then 'oh, I need to do something else'. Those little changes can change everything.

That the connection between feedback and practice was made in only one group may be significant.

Having dedication and commitment was not the only dispositional quality associated with progress. Children saw that progress was associated how hard they worked – *If you didn't put effort into it, it probably won't be as good as you could make it.* Working hard meant trying to do your very best and not settling for good enough – *If you don't try hard and try your best, you won't really do well because you're not giving your full potential.* Doing your best and making an effort meant working slowly – *Try taking it slow until you get that right, and then you could try a little bit faster until it improves.* Children associated slow work with refining and polishing – *We spend more time on it, which means you don't just rush it as much and we actually take time doing it, trying to make it good.* Being slow and careful meant being persistent and patient – *If you make a mistake, just try again and don't get angry or you'll start making more mistakes.* While we had several reports of projects that required multiple iterations – *We did these LS Lowry perspective drawings that took quite a while and we had numerous attempts* – one child told us that the pacing of art projects had become too fast for them to improve as they wanted:

Often, once we finish one piece of art, we move on to the next bit. I don't think we get enough time to do multiple pieces of the same art and try and keep improving on it. I think it would be better if we can have a bit more time on that. We are always chopping and changing.

No other focus group mentioned pace negatively.

Children associated their sense of agency and efficacy with arts processes, as well as an outcome of them. Self-belief was crucial to improvement:

If you're not happy with it and you keep saying that you're bad at things, you're not going to improve, because you're just adding negative thoughts ... But if you keep saying I'm going to get better, then you're going to be good and things and get a really good piece of art.

Self-belief developed over time, supported by feedback and practice:

I don't think I believed in myself the first time I started singing, I thought I was terrible, but then I actually got a chance to sing in a school play and then everybody came to me afterwards and they all said that I did an

amazing job. And then I started to believe in myself. And then I started to progress over the years because of that motivation and because I kept on practising, and I was working on high notes and low notes and stuff like that. So then I ended up getting a lot better at singing.

Self-belief and practice were also insufficient – *Practice, but always make sure that you're enjoying what you're doing.* Enjoyment was part of making progress, if you liked what you were doing, then you were more likely to feel that you were improving – *If you don't enjoy what you're doing, then it you're not going to feel like you're getting anywhere.* Enjoyment helped you to not give up when things got difficult:

Just don't give up and put as much effort as you can into it. I used to not really like art, and so I didn't try, but then I started to like it, so I put more effort into it, and I gradually got better.

Keeping on going was not always easy:

You get stressed when you feel you're doing something wrong. But once you just stop and think about it, and then you do it right for once and you keep on doing it right, then you just know that you've gotten better.

Enjoyment supported commitment to the subject and immersion in artistic modes of being and doing:

I think it depends on how much you enjoy it and how far you want to go with it. If you're not enjoying it and you don't want to carry on with it, then you're not going to want to be good at it. If you're really enjoying it and you're immersed in it, you get a lot better, a lot quicker.

Enjoyment and mastery were strongly associated – *As you get better, you seem to like it more and more.* However, mastery was not always easily obtained, and enjoyment sometimes seemed far away – *It's hard to improve it when you're doing it at your best ability or you've never done it like that before.* But when things got tough, children reverted to their belief in the eventuality of progress. You could always get better if you kept at it – *Keep on trying then you'll be able to do it really easily.*

What then might we conclude from hearing children's views of progress and how it is achieved?

Arising from children's views of progress and progressing: towards a conclusion

Children saw progress as comparative and progressing as achieved through their own application, mastery, self-belief and enjoyment. Their words evidenced a key pedagogical belief – they knew they could continue to grow and learn through risk-taking, making mistakes, continuing to practice and improve. In contrast to children's views, Ofsted's account of progression in the arts is about knowing more, remembering more and doing more. Ofsted emphasise the visible, testable and performative qualities of arts learning. Children were also concerned with additional outcomes – feeling a sense of control, being recognised and appreciated, valuing the contributions of others.

Children seemed aware and appreciative of key teacher pedagogical practices that supported their progress:

- scaffolding – that allowed children to undertake challenging tasks through incremental steps
- feedback – giving timely personalised feedback geared to improvement, feedback based on diagnosis of individual children's current capacities and interests. Feedback from important others – friends and family – also helped
- an explicit focus on self-evaluation – ongoing affirmation of children's emerging judgments about what was 'good', in some cases using running records, portfolios and sketchbooks to assist in self reflection
- instilling key disciplinary dispositional norms such as daily practice, slow work, patience, sorting through mistakes
- pacing – giving the children enough time to learn techniques, practice and improve.

We note however that hardly any children talked about informed practice – incorporating teacher feedback into practice in order to avoid consolidating poor techniques or knowledge. As well, the children did not discuss sequencing or the nature of the tasks they were asked to do. It is possibly unrealistic to expect them to do so – perhaps the invisibility of sequencing is testament to the quality of arts teaching in these arts rich schools. However, we are sure that teachers in the RAPS schools will want to take up the question of informed practice with the children they teach. We also note the continuing pedagogical challenge of developing evaluative criteria against which progress can be judged.

The children's views on progress that we have reported here will inform the teachers in the RAPS schools. But they could also be of immediate benefit to primary school teachers wanting to develop their own teaching in the arts. Knowing that children see the value of feedback and of well-scaffolded ambitious tasks, and taking heart from the ways in which they see the intrinsic benefits of working hard to do your best, could be helpful for teachers thinking about how they might fulfil the national curriculum mandates for all children to engage in the arts. Understanding the importance of artefacts that allow children to look back and track their own progress may also be a significant addition to primary teaching repertoires. And, we suggest, schools might think about formalising children's discussions about their arts subject progress – discussions which take a long-term comparative view and which are designed to scaffold further reflection on how far children have come, and what they need to do to make more progress.

Notes

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-eif-inspections-and-the-eyfs/the-eyfs-inschools#:~:text=How%20will%20inspectors%20consider%20progress,EYFS%20learning%20and%20development%20requirements>.
2. E.g. see Art and Design https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239018/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_Art_and_design.pdf.
3. E.g. see NSEAD/Oak art and design frameworks <https://www.nsead.org/resources/primary-education/primary-art/>.
4. The family schools lists are compiled by the Education Endowment Foundation based on a range of attainment measures and test and demographic data. The list is currently unavailable but we accessed the relevant families for our 40 schools before the database was removed. See <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/support-for-schools/families-of-schools-database>.

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ORCID

Pat Thomson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4801-0000>

Liam Maloy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9862-4078>

Christine Hall  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6066-4800>

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