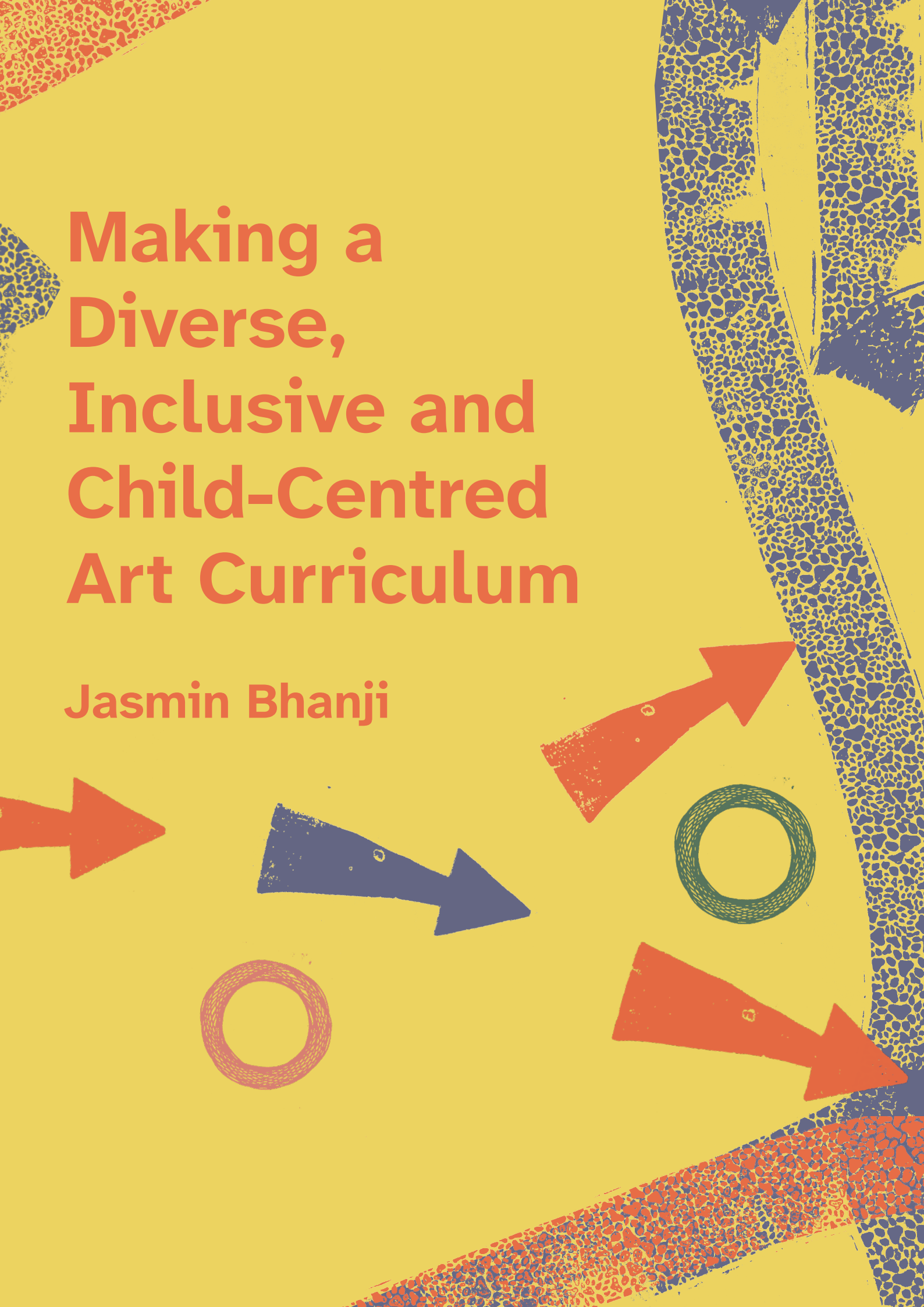
Making a Diverse, Inclusive and Child-Centred Art Curriculum

Jasmin Bhanji



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Diversity can be more than what we put into the curriculum. It is also what we make possible *within* it.

A diverse curriculum can offer children more ways to encounter art, artists, materials, ideas and ways of making. It can make room for different kinds of knowledge and experience, while allowing children to find their own way into artistic practice.

There is no single model for doing this. Every school has its own community, history, relationships, resources and ways of working. This publication is an invitation to explore what diversification might look like in your context.

WHICH artists and practitioners children encounter

WHERE ideas and knowledge come from

HOW we notice and value

WHOSE knowledge and experience can enter the room

WHAT children start with and what they do next

WHICH materials and processes children work with

Making choices for a diverse curriculum



Who is in the room, and is the curriculum accessible to them?

Every child arrives in the classroom with an interior world of experiences, relationships, histories, interests and ways of seeing the world that is entirely their own.

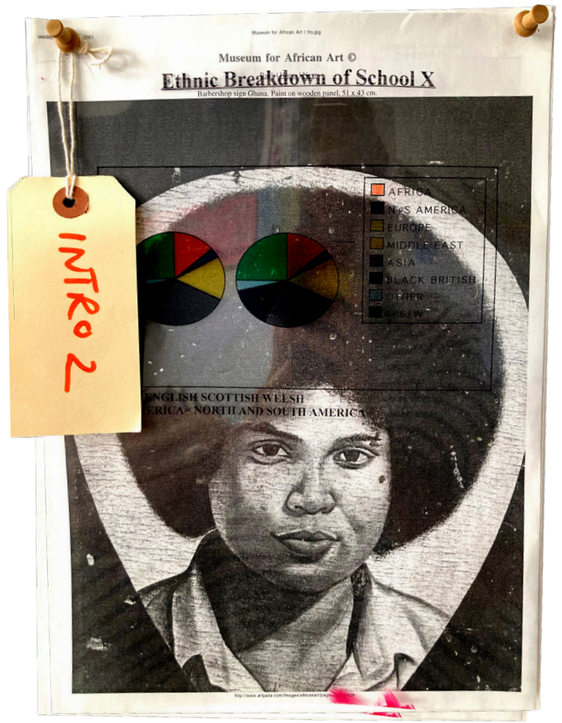
We cannot know everything about them, nor can we make assumptions about what an individual child might identify with. Instead, we can create a culture of openness: a classroom where different ways of being, making, thinking and seeing are valued.

This means making choices about what we give time, attention and space to in the curriculum.

Choosing artists is one way of doing this. Looking beyond a familiar sequence of artists and drawing on contemporary practices can broaden not only who children encounter, but also the kinds of art, materials and ideas we value.

When children encounter artists and practices that resonate with aspects of their own lives, they may find more ways into learning in art and more permission to bring aspects of themselves into their making. At the same time, encountering unfamiliar practices can open up possibilities beyond their existing experience.

The aim is not to find an artist to represent every child. It is to create a curriculum with enough room for many different ways of being, making and seeing.



There are many choices to make in an art curriculum. How we divide our time between materials, ideas, processes and artists shapes the breadth and depth of children's experiences. (Photo credit: Smithsonian Museum)

What do we value?

Making things connects us to people, places and histories. The things people make can hold cultural, historical and personal significance.

When children encounter things that people have made and cared about, they can begin to notice the meanings attached to them. They might discover where a material comes from, how it has been used, why a particular process matters to a place or people, or how ideas and techniques have travelled and changed. They can also begin to recognise that creativity is not confined to drawing and painting, or to the idea of the individual artist working alone.

What do we choose to draw children's attention to in art?

The things we value in an art curriculum carry messages about whose material knowledge, histories and ways of making are considered significant. Diversifying the curriculum means widening this field of attention: making space for materials and practices that may not traditionally have been valued as art, and considering what they might allow us to see, ask and understand.

We could begin an enquiry by inviting children to bring their own memories, objects, sounds, stories and experiences into the classroom, without assuming what those things mean to them. We can also introduce them to things beyond their own experience, creating opportunities to share, encounter, connect and make new meanings together.



Art history is not fixed. Like a collage, it can be rearranged and added to, bringing in different people, places, stories and times. What are you curious about? What might the children be curious about?
(Photo credit: Sarah Bonnell School from 'Changing the Narrative' artwork, Year 10 students, 2022)

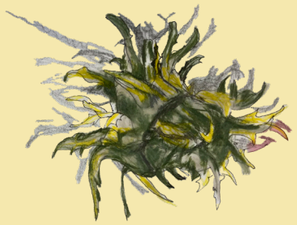


Turkish hazel trees (*Corylus colurna*) and our visiting common swifts (*Apus apus*) offer a way to pay close attention to our immediate school environment. Their presence in our cities' streets invites questions about animal migration, climate, plant collecting, urban environments and tree planting, including the ability of the natural world to tolerate pollution and drought. They also offer opportunities to explore their complex shapes, textures and movement through observing, drawing and handling.

Here, Now and Us

If we cannot know everything about the worlds that children carry with them, we can pay attention to the world we share: *this place, these people, this time, this moment.*









‘Here, Now and Us’ is an invitation to begin here.

What is particular about this school, this neighbourhood and this community?

What do we notice, hear, remember, collect, encounter and care about together? Local places, histories, environments, objects, stories and everyday experiences can become starting points for sharing, making and thinking.

This is not about asking children to represent where they ‘come from’, or assuming that a child’s background tells us what they will be interested in. It is about creating opportunities to notice and make meaning from the world around us, together.

How can we diversify curriculum structure to give children greater agency within a shared enquiry?



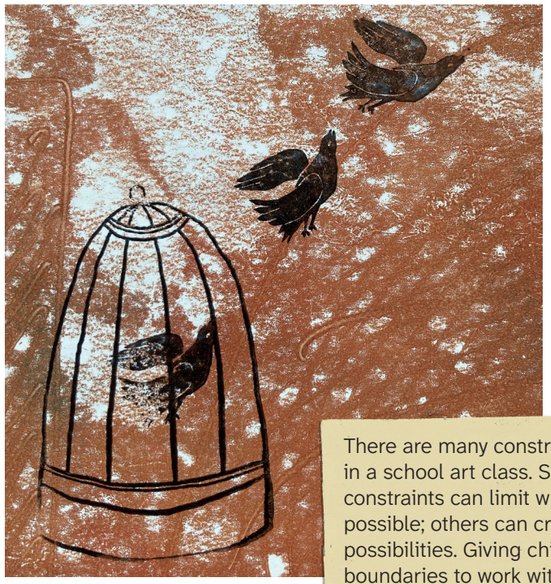
Diversifying the curriculum can mean diversifying what children are able to do, decide and make within a shared enquiry, better reflecting the creative processes artists use and the processes children will encounter at later key stages.

How can we give a project enough structure to support exploration without deciding in advance what children will make?

A shared enquiry can have clear parameters: a material, a technique or process, a question, an action or set of conditions. These give children somewhere to begin and something to investigate, without dictating the outcome.

Within those parameters, children can make meaningful decisions about:

- what to select, collect or use
- what to combine, repeat, alter or leave out
- where to begin and how to proceed
- what to follow, develop or change
- how to respond to what they discover
- what their work might become



There are many constraints in a school art class. Some constraints can limit what is possible; others can create possibilities. Giving children boundaries to work within can create the freedom to experiment, make decisions and discover.

In this way, we can structure the conditions for *making* art, rather than determine the final result.

Whose stories and histories do we tell through art?

How might we broaden the histories, places and voices that children encounter, while recognising the plurality already present in our classrooms?

Look beyond the familiar artists and art movements.

Artists can be encountered through processes, ideas or questions they have in common, rather than only through the progression of art movements. A contemporary artist might help us connect an older practice, material, idea or history to the present.

Locate art and design in its particular time and place.

Artistic practices emerge from specific histories, cultures and conditions. Taking time to understand where, when and why something was made can be enriching, helping us to understand art in relation to the people and circumstances that produced it.

Explore what artists do and make, as well as when and where they lived and worked.

What interested them? Why might they have made the work they did? How do they use form, texture, sound, space, materials or processes to explore ideas?

Use contemporary art as a way into the world.

Contemporary artists work with questions of place, identity, history, technology, environment, memory and everyday life.

Recognise that art history is plural, ongoing and connected to the lived experiences of children in our classrooms.



Whose art histories do children encounter?

What role do artists play in an enquiry?

An art project need not start with an artist or technique. We can start with what we want children to investigate: a question, material, action or idea.

When we lead with an enquiry, there is more space for children's different interests, experiences and responses to shape what happens. Artists can then be introduced as one of many possible voices within the enquiry.

The artist can help broaden, strengthen or deepen the enquiry without determining the technique, activity or final outcome.

Instead of:

Artist
↓
Technique
↓
Outcome

We could try:

Question/enquiry
↓
Material
↓
Process
↓
Exploration
↓
Artist / context
↓
Response/reflection

Tavares Strachan's ENOCH (2015–17) offers one example of how an artist can open up an enquiry

Strachan brought together ancient Egyptian funerary traditions, space exploration, science and technology, and the largely forgotten story of Robert Henry Lawrence Jr., the first African American selected for a national space programme.

He made a gold canopic jar containing Lawrence's bust and sent it into space on a rocket to orbit the Earth.

There is something immediately intriguing about the work: an ancient-looking object, containing the image of a modern astronaut, sent into space. It invites so many questions to explore together.



- What is this object doing in space?
- Why combine an ancient form with a modern astronaut?
- What happens when something from one time or place meets another?
- Who is remembered, and who is forgotten?
- What would you send into space to remember someone?

A contemporary artist can give teachers and children something to investigate together, rather than something to explain and reproduce. The artist can act as our companion, guide or partner in the enquiry, rather than someone to emulate or copy.

What can it do? Building diverse material knowledge

Materials can be active partners in learning. What if sometimes we let materials take the lead?

We can slow down and spend some time really exploring and enjoying the qualities of a certain material.

- What happens if we investigate one material for a whole lesson/week/term and just see what happens?
- What possibilities can we discover before deciding what to make?
- What surprises us?
- What can the material do that we hadn't anticipated?



For example, with clay, we could ask: What can clay do? How big or small can it go? What can clay not do? What happens when we get it very wet or dry it out? What happens when we impress, join, tear, layer, bind, wrap or repair it?



Artists often take materials from outside the art world and use them in unexpected ways.

You might sometimes choose materials that nobody in the room has completely mastered. This can level the playing field. The teacher doesn't always need to know what will happen. Children don't need to know the 'right' way to use the material. Everyone can investigate, experiment and discover together.

We can also broaden the materials our students encounter. Materials could include things such as: conventional art materials alongside materials borrowed from everyday life, nature, the home, industry and elsewhere.

Shifting the language

Instead of beginning with what children will make, we can begin with what they might do - from the noun to the verb.

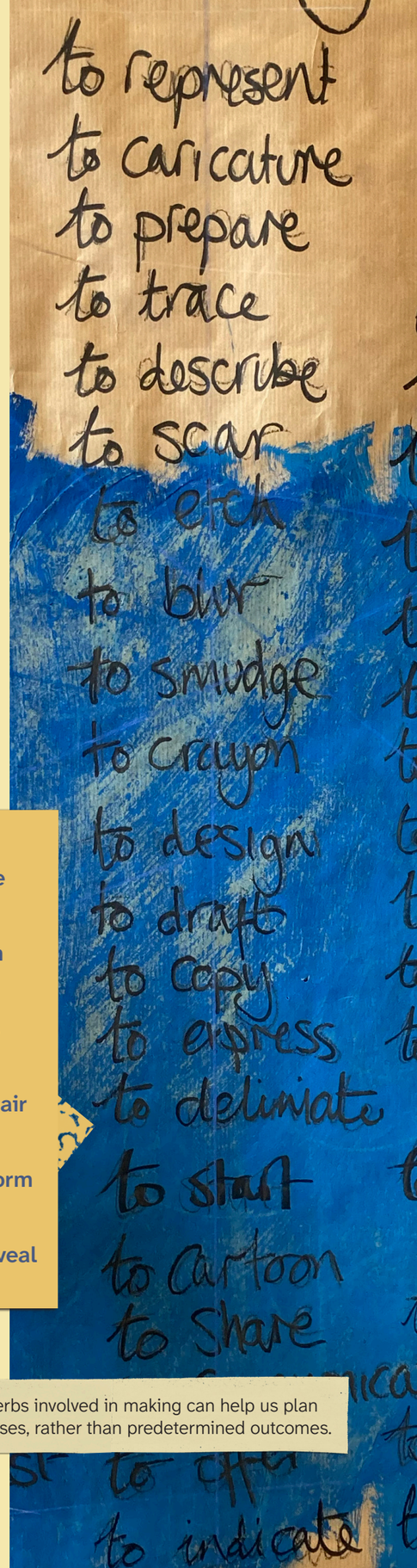
Let's centre the child as a producer and not just a consumer of culture.

When we centre actions rather than predetermined outcomes, children's decisions, responses and interests become part of what the work can become. What they choose to notice, combine, change or pursue becomes worthy of attention.

What are you actually going to do in art?

Instead of:	We might think of the actions that this might entail:
Make a collage	Gather → Layer → Observe
Make a sculpture	Assemble → Balance → Join
Make a print	Repeat → Transfer → Press
Make a textile piece	Bind → Stitch → Wrap → Repair
Copy this artist	Observe → Respond → Transform
	Exchange → Collaborate → Reveal

Actions in art: thinking about the verbs involved in making can help us plan lessons around actions and processes, rather than predetermined outcomes.



Making art together

Individual authorship, decision-making and achievement are often treated as the default model of artistic practice. This is a particular and culturally situated model of art-making. Collective and communal forms of making can offer different ways of working, learning and producing knowledge.

What might children learn from each other that they could not learn alone?

Making alongside other people has an important role in learning in art. Children watch one another, borrow ideas, demonstrate possibilities, solve problems together and discover things that they might not have found alone. Sometimes another child's way of working changes our own direction; sometimes we learn by seeing what someone else has tried or failed to do.

Collective making can also shift the emphasis away from individual performance and towards exchange, response and reciprocity. Making together does not mean that everyone has to produce the same thing, or that individual responses disappear. It can mean creating the conditions for children to influence, help and learn from one another while developing their own responses.

The art classroom can become a place where knowledge is made between us, not simply delivered by the teacher or produced independently by each child. Shared experiments, collaborative works, conversations, demonstrations and informal exchanges all contribute to what **children learn**.



Making art together creates opportunities for children to share ideas, learn from each other and influence what happens next.

Assessing what you value - creative behaviours

When we talk about diversifying the art curriculum, we often think about what **children encounter**: different artists, cultures, materials, histories and ways of making.

But there is another question to ask:

What kinds of artists are we making space for our **children to *be***?

Assessment forms a key part of the curriculum. What we choose to notice and assess tells children what matters. If we want children to understand that there is more than one way to develop as an artist, we need to notice more than their ability to produce a predetermined outcome with technical control.

We need to notice how they look, think, wonder, experiment, connect and respond.

Perhaps then we can encourage children to be:

- more attentive
- more observant
- more imaginative
- more connected
- more reflective

These behaviours don't describe one particular kind of artist.

They give children different ways into artistic development.

Reflecting back what we value

We could think about our assessment as caring about or valuing these creative behaviours. We can value experimentation, curiosity and discovery, by making these things visible in our reflection time.

Try asking:

One joy / surprise

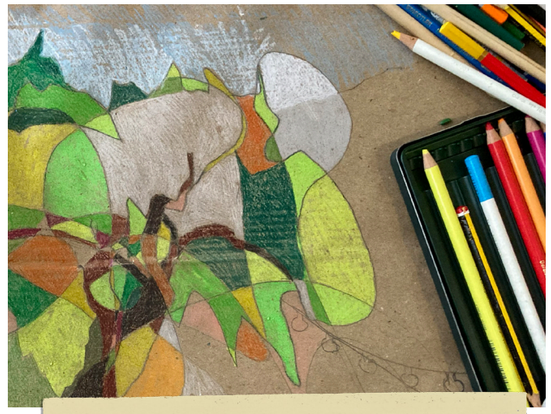
- What delighted or surprised you?
- What did someone else do or make that surprised you?
- What was funny?

See / think / wonder

- What did you notice?
- What are you wondering?
- What did someone else help you notice?

What changed?

- What did you discover that changed your idea?
- What did you change when something didn't go as planned?
- Did someone else's idea change yours?
- Did you change something because of what you saw someone else doing?



What we value is not just the finished artwork, but the choices, experiments, discoveries and changes that happen through making it.

These questions don't ask every child to respond in the same way.

They invite different kinds of knowledge to surface.

A child's answer might come through words, gesture, drawing, material choices, storytelling, demonstration or simply through what they do next.

When we broaden what we notice, we broaden what can count as learning.

Guiding children to reflect independently

The outcome shows us what we made. Observing and reflecting on the making process can show us how and what we learned.

Attention

Can I sustain my focus? → I can give something my attention. What I notice is worth noticing.

Observation

Can I notice? → I notice what I am doing and what other artists have done. My way of seeing has value.

Reflection

Can I articulate, reconsider and respond? → My thinking can change. I can make choices. I have agency.

Imagination

Can I generate possibilities? → I am capable of making something that did not exist before.

Contextualisation

Can I connect my thinking to people, places, cultures and ideas? → I belong to a much bigger story. My experiences and the experiences of others can meet: here and now, can meet there and then.

Change just one thing

Diversifying the curriculum can feel like a big task. You don't have to change everything at once. Start with one thing. Try it, notice what happens, and take it from there.

Change one noun into a verb

Instead of "print", try transferring / layering / repeating.

Introduce one unfamiliar material

Ask what it can do before deciding what children should make.

Write down one special thing about this place, these people, this time, this moment

That may form the basis for an art project in the future.

Ask one question about value

Why do we teach this material / artist / process in this way / who or what is missing?

Notice one creative behaviour

Notice a child persisting, changing direction, observing, collaborating, taking a risk or making a connection.

Start one scheme with an enquiry, not an artist

Choose the artist because their work helps the enquiry, rather than building the enquiry around the artist.

Remove one old scheme of work or project to make space for one new way of making.

Allow one change in direction in an art class

We might all follow something a child noticed happened in their work.

Remove one predetermined outcome

Give children a common process rather than an identical final product.

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What could a diverse art curriculum make possible?

Who gets to contribute?

Whose knowledge becomes visible?

Whose ways of making are recognised?

What kinds of artistic voices are given room to develop?

This project explored how to approach diversifying the art curriculum in primary settings, making it more inclusive and relevant to the school community. Working alongside teachers, artists and children, we considered how changes to curriculum and teaching practice might create more possibilities for participation, curiosity and creative agency.

Rather than offering a single model to follow, this publication brings together practical approaches, questions and challenges for teachers to try, adapt and develop in their own contexts.

It is an invitation to consider what might change when we look closely at how art is taught and what the curriculum makes possible.

About the Author

Jasmin Bhanji is an experienced artist educator working across schools, galleries, higher education and community settings. Education is at the centre of her practice, exploring how we learn with and through art, materials and making.

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