

**Art on the Inside: How
Do Prison Art Teachers
Maintain Their
Professional Practice as
Artists?**

**An evaluation by Sophie Nickeas
August 2016**

Abstract

Art teachers in any educational setting take on a dual purpose; to train, teach and impart knowledge as an educator as well as developing as a professional artist. At times working in a prison and developing your skills as an artist whilst operating in such a closed and inhibited environment can seem like an impossible task. This evaluation asks the question: how do prison art teachers actively seek out opportunity for development and advancement in their specialist field? It empowers the voice of eight prison art teachers as artists working within a broad context of custodial settings including young offender's institutes, adult male prisons and a private women's prison. Participants consider the impact of activities and continued professional development supported by the prison or direct employer upon their practice and professional standing. They also discuss the impact of such practice and development upon the learner and the profile of the arts within their respective institutions.



'I visit art exhibitions in London in my own time & will bring in [to the prison] literature and posters etc. I am able to engage with the learner in creative debate about the artwork I have seen'

Art Teacher 1, Sussex

Introduction

Art has a long tradition within prison. It is largely associated with the element of time and hours spent in order to occupy and stimulate the mind and physical inactivity of the incarcerated person. Self-expression and the wantonness to be heard, remembered and viewed as an individual with purpose (so as not to be defined by one's crime) can often be achieved through creativity and art seems to be a natural rite of passage. Art is a popular pastime in prison and is offered in the education departments of many prisons as an accredited pathway. As in the case of many adult prisons, funding for education lies in the qualifications offered and achieved. Art provision and its standing within an establishment varies dramatically given this focus on funding.

One education manager in one of London's many old Victorian prisons once informed me that they saw little vocational relevance in the arts and

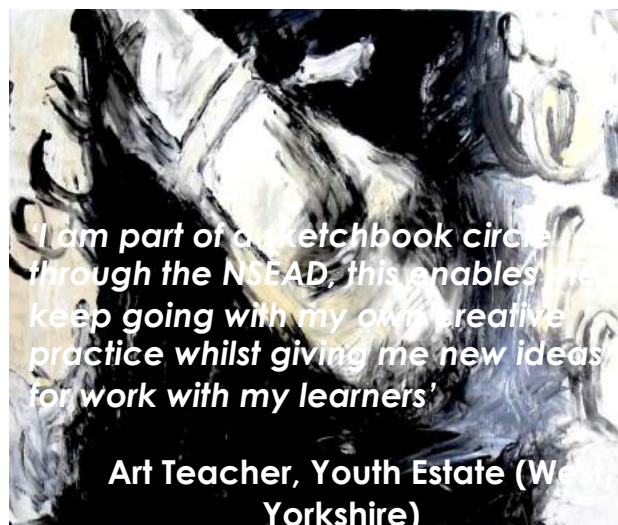
subsequently had removed art from the provision completely. However, those working in prisons teaching art know the value and power of the arts, that's essentially the driving force-along with many other teachers-that keeps them in the role; this and the end result of the creation of some of the most prolific artwork. This can be seen each year at the annual Koestler Awards Exhibition at the south Bank Centre London, a celebration of visual, literary, film and musical artistry from prisons the breath of the UK. There is enough evidence packed into the carefully curated prestigious exhibition with the support of some of the most successful artists in the art world to suggest that art does have its place in prison and that the benefits to the individual are unprecedented.

Of course, all of this celebration and public applause and appreciation is only possible due to the promotion and dedication shown by the prison art teachers who often provide the platform for such showcases such at the Koestler Awards. These professional and talented people are only too familiar with the arduous task of attempting to promote oneself as a credible artist.

In a number of classrooms or space on a wing somewhere artists are providing their expertise and encouraging a generation of artists that provoke the attention of the wider general public, the 'prison artists'. These teachers are dual professionals and there is a real need for them to be seen as professional artists. Every art teacher has their specialism and their expertise in specific areas, however, as the demands of the job take hold this can become secondary to the restrictions of the role. Suddenly finding

time to engage in art making and the development of skills can be extremely difficult. This study considers how the art teacher as an artist approaches this dilemma with the view that continued professional artistic development will inevitably have a profound effect on the learners as a byproduct of development of skill or knowledge.

As someone who began their teaching career as a prison art teacher I understand first hand the difficulty of juggling work, family life, study and other commitments with the development of one's artistic skills set as a practitioner as well as a teacher. I often started projects and never finished them. With people still asking if I 'get time' to make artwork it always prompts me to think about what I am actively engaging in to practice the skills I wanted to develop in others through my teaching. I made the most of grabbing a few opportunities here and there to draw with my learners but they were not sufficient practices for me to continue with my professional development as an artist.



What the literature says

In the UK, we have a long tradition of using the arts in education, not just for developing art-form skills, but also as a generic teaching method. And yet, artists are often reluctant to develop teaching skills which should help them work in the dramatically difficult environment that is prison (Clarke 2014).

“Once artists decide to communicate their skills to others, they inevitably draw on pedagogical strategies. This is especially true of delivering artistic interventions to prisoners, whose literacy and communication levels are generally very poor”

(Alan Clarke, European projects manager for The College of Teachers 2014)

There is a long tradition of the arts being used within custody to occupy, motivate and engage learners. Engagement in the arts with the possibility of fresh vision, or at least a glimpse of a different life, often provokes, inspires and delights (BIS & MoJ 2011:19). Often, art in prison is best seen as a hobby to keep people occupied and at worst as a waste of time (Neimane 2013). There are more than eighty Research reports and evaluations accessible through the National Alliance for the Arts in Criminal Justice's evidence library website alone however, few studies concern the development of prison arts teachers as dual professionals.

In her 2014 evaluation of an artist in residence programme at

HMP Grendon Caulfield states that the incarcerated participants benefitted greatly as a result of the notoriety and professional status of the artist. The Coates (2016) review into the quality of prisoner education recommended that there should not be restrictions on funding for the arts. This would be mutually beneficial for art teachers and learners.

“ I have also found that the parallel careers of artist and teacher can benefit each other: teaching is one way that an artist can stabilise an otherwise uneven income while staying focused on their subject area; and maintaining an artistic practice gives the teacher some authority in giving practical demonstrations and first-hand advice on the professional aspects of art, such as presentation and reception of artworks, study and work opportunities etc. ”

(Prison art teacher, Not Shut Up Magazine 2013)

“ Teaching art isn't for everyone, and teaching art to prison inmates probably appeals to an even more select group ”

(Prison art teacher, The Huffington Post 2011)

Continued personal development has a significant impact on teachers' developing professional knowledge and reflection, widening their teaching repertoires and increasing confidence (Furey et al. 2003).

Education providers are under increasing pressure to achieve results with all of their learners; and everyone from policymakers to practitioners recognise the pivotal importance of good teaching (Danielson 2007). Excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence on achievement (Hattie 2007:4) Teachers must learn to teach in ways that develop higher-order thinking and performance. To develop the sophisticated teaching required for this mission, education systems must offer more effective professional learning than has traditionally been available. (Darling-Hammond & Richardson 2009:46).

Connections between art practice and teaching are complex, diverse, difficult to articulate, challenging to implement and do not easily lend themselves to simple impact measurement. Museum and gallery educators and art teachers acknowledge that educational visits aim to, and are successful in, stimulating interest and disseminating information about collections and exhibitions to learners (Robins & Wollard 2003:9). Research indicates that in these sessions museum and gallery educators prioritised enabling teachers to make relevant connections between the exhibits and the personal realities of their students.

Teacher learning is understood as normative and lifelong, built of and through experiences in social contexts: as learners in classrooms and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programmes, and as members of communities of practice in the schools where they teach.

Professional development emerges from a process of reshaping teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices rather than simply imposing new theories, methods, or materials on teachers (Johnson & Golombek 2002:2).

“For teachers to change their classroom practice in any radical way (which is what the museum environment in effect demands), involves both modifying their classroom persona and embarking on a learning task of enormous magnitude. The experience of disorientation and alienation is profound; and unless teachers are given considerable psychological and practical support over a long period, they will revert to their old familiar practice.”

(Eraut 1994:112)

The participants

The sample group consisted of a group of eight art teachers working in five different custodial settings in England. Seven of the participants work for the same education provider operating within public sector prisons whilst the eight individual works within the private sector. In June 2015 all participants were given the same questionnaire to complete.

The participants have taught in prisons for varying lengths of time and all consider themselves to be arts practitioners. Within the group art teachers described themselves as graphic designers, illustrators and print makers. They all engage in some form of artistic practice outside of work and are advocates of professional development creatively and in a broader sense.

Art teacher questionnaire

1. Have you attended/completed any CPD in the last year that had contributed to your professional development as an artist/art teacher?
2. If not, had you tried to initiate anything with your employer?
3. Do you feel the establishment you work in values and understands the work you do with offenders?
4. What artistic activities (if any) do you engage in outside of work? How do they support or enhance your teaching delivery?
5. Does your employer grant you time offsite to visit galleries, exhibitions or training events of an arts nature? What was the last thing that you attended of that nature?
6. In your opinion and experience, what is (or what would be) the impact/benefit of your CPD (specifically arts based) to your learners?

Sample dynamics

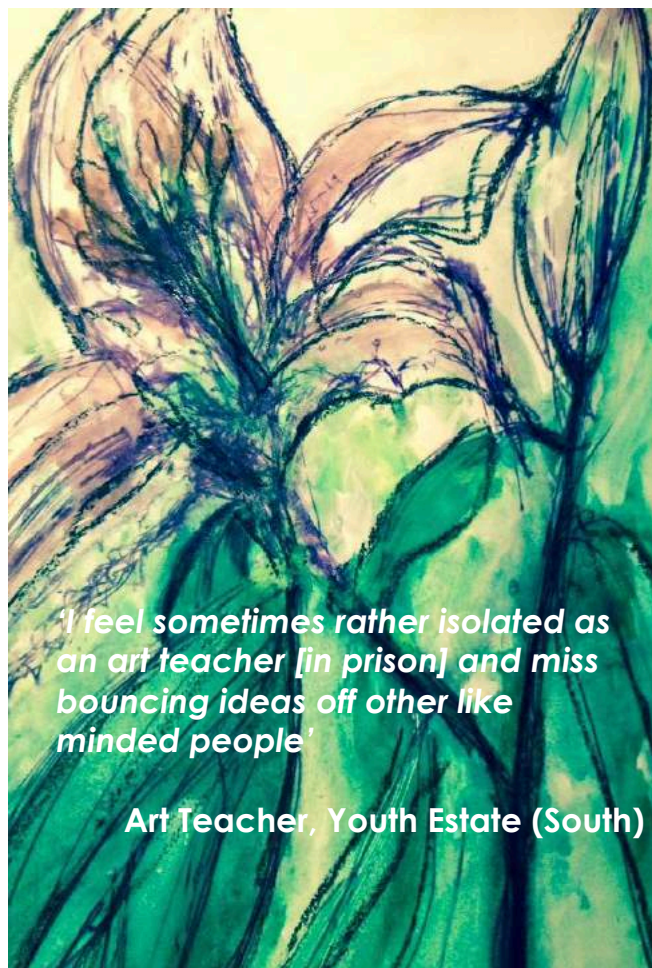
Participant	Type of establishment	Region	Length of service
Art and ESOL teacher	Cat B men's prison	Sussex	2.5 years
Art teacher	Cat B men's prison	Surrey	14 years
Art teacher	Private closed women's prison	Greater London	5 years
Art teacher	Cat B men's prison	Sussex	16 years
Art teacher	Cat B men's prison	Sussex	9 years
Art teacher	Male young offender's institute (15-18 yrs)	Kent	3 years
Curriculum leader for the arts	Cat B men's prison	Sussex	6 years
Art teacher	Male young offender's institute (15-18 yrs)	West Yorkshire	9 months

Findings

All of the art teacher participants stated that they had attended CPD of some nature over the past year, however most had been heavily concentrated on mandatory training such as health and safety or risk assessment in the workplace. There was also a big focus on CPD in terms of the promotion and embedding of English and maths and in some instances employability skills in line with national strategy and initiative. Some art teachers felt as if CPD in their own specialist area was often overlooked and there is a lack of opportunity to develop artistic skills within the workplace. That being said six of the eight participants said that they felt that their respective institutions valued art and its place through an appreciation of the artwork produced by many of the learners.

Main findings:

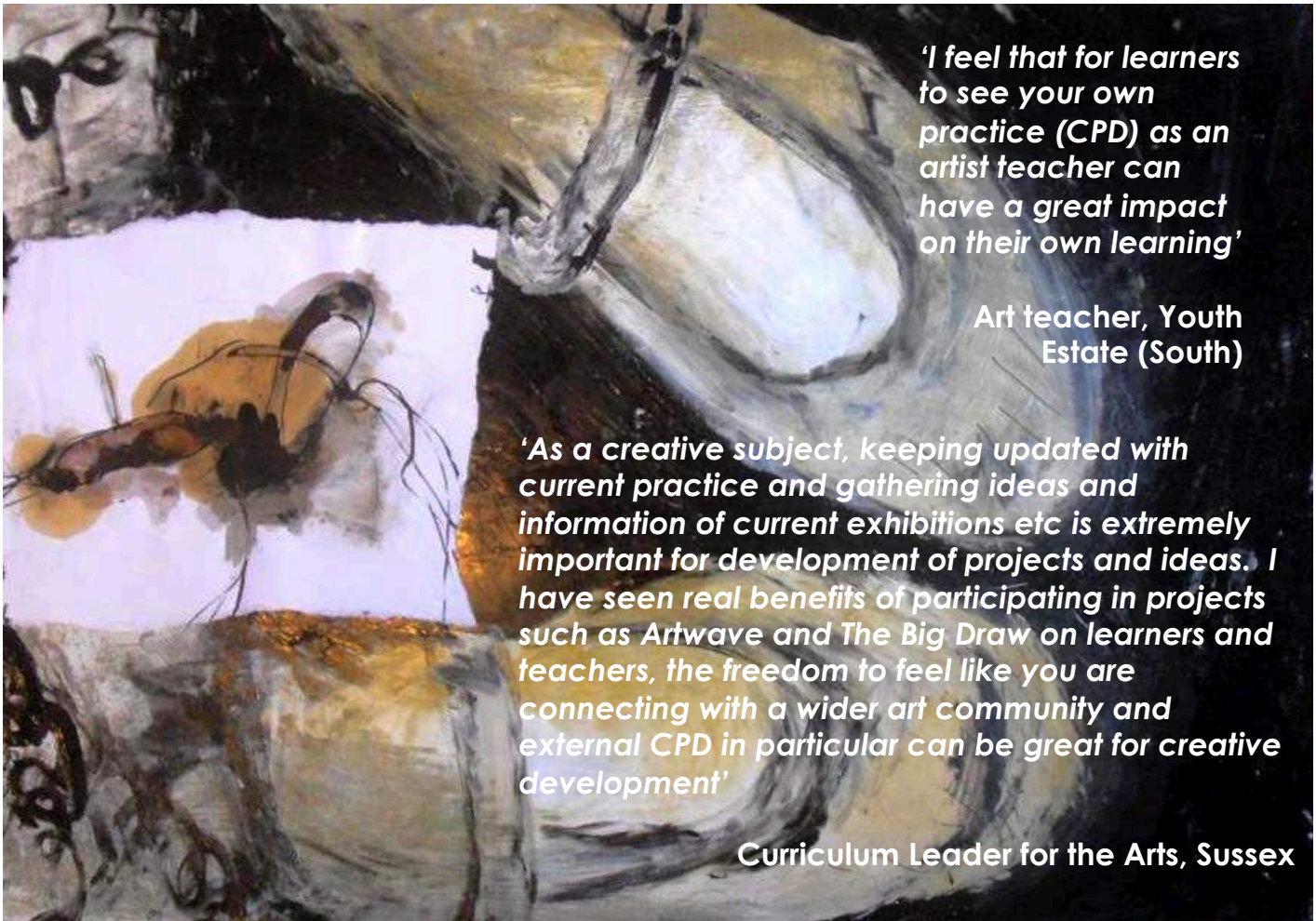
- teachers often felt that their CPD was too generic and not necessarily tailored towards art and design.
- Most CPD engaged in of an artistic nature was self-initiated, often taking place outside of working hours. This often involved teachers visiting galleries and exhibitions at weekends.
- Most teachers were able to attend the Koestler Awards annual exhibition at the South Bank Centre.
- Some teachers felt that their establishment supported them and their contribution to the prison in terms of art and design through appreciation and a celebration of artwork created.
- Other teachers felt that art was not held with as much regard in other establishments and often felt isolated.



I feel sometimes rather isolated as an art teacher [in prison] and miss bouncing ideas off other like minded people'

Art Teacher, Youth Estate (South)

- Some teachers actively looked for opportunity to develop themselves as an artist by volunteering, joining artists' groups and facilitating projects, however little activity was carried out in the working environment as any part of an enrichment project or workplace CPD.
- all teachers recognised the need to keep their practice updated and current, all desired to learn or develop new skills.
- Most teachers saw the benefit in attending places of interest, galleries and exhibitions as a way of connecting their learners to the outside world through acquired knowledge and sharing of information.
- All teachers wanted to enrich the lives of their learners through art.



'I feel that for learners to see your own practice (CPD) as an artist teacher can have a great impact on their own learning'

Art teacher, Youth Estate (South)

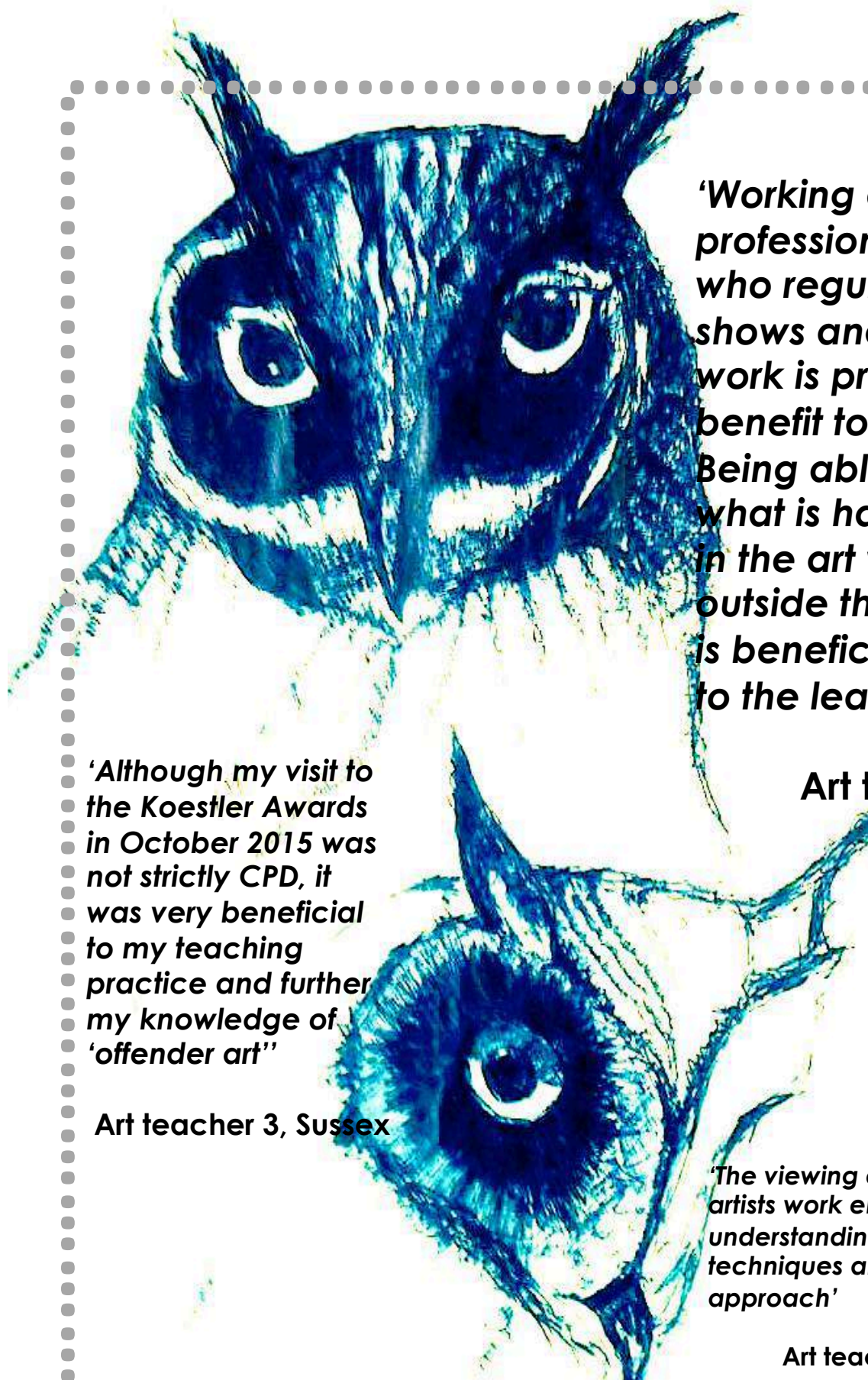
'As a creative subject, keeping updated with current practice and gathering ideas and information of current exhibitions etc is extremely important for development of projects and ideas. I have seen real benefits of participating in projects such as Artwave and The Big Draw on learners and teachers, the freedom to feel like you are connecting with a wider art community and external CPD in particular can be great for creative development'

Curriculum Leader for the Arts, Sussex

- Most of the teachers found time outside of work to engage in their own artwork even if it was few and far between and this was largely accredited to an enjoyable pastime and the wanting to remain as an 'artist' in their own right.
- Reaching a wider audience was important for some teachers, especially the appreciation and acclaim received from prestigious visitors and viewers of the artwork in prison, essentially this added value to the arts provision at the establishment and gave notoriety to both the learners and the teacher.
- Teachers appreciated being asked to complete commissions for other departments within their establishments and felt that this was a good platform

for showcasing their learners work and raising the profile of art.

- Teachers often brought in exhibition material, literature and postcards as a way of sharing the experience with their learners.
- Some teachers were more actively involved in the work of Koestler and had close working links that allowed them to promote the awards to greater effect in terms of wider participation.
- Some teachers felt that their CPD requests were not always taken seriously in terms of arts practice and development suggesting that other subjects were often viewed as being more important for additional enquiry and enrichment.



'Working as a professional artist who regularly shows and sells work is probably of benefit to learners. Being able to see what is happening in the art world outside the prison is beneficial I hope to the learners'

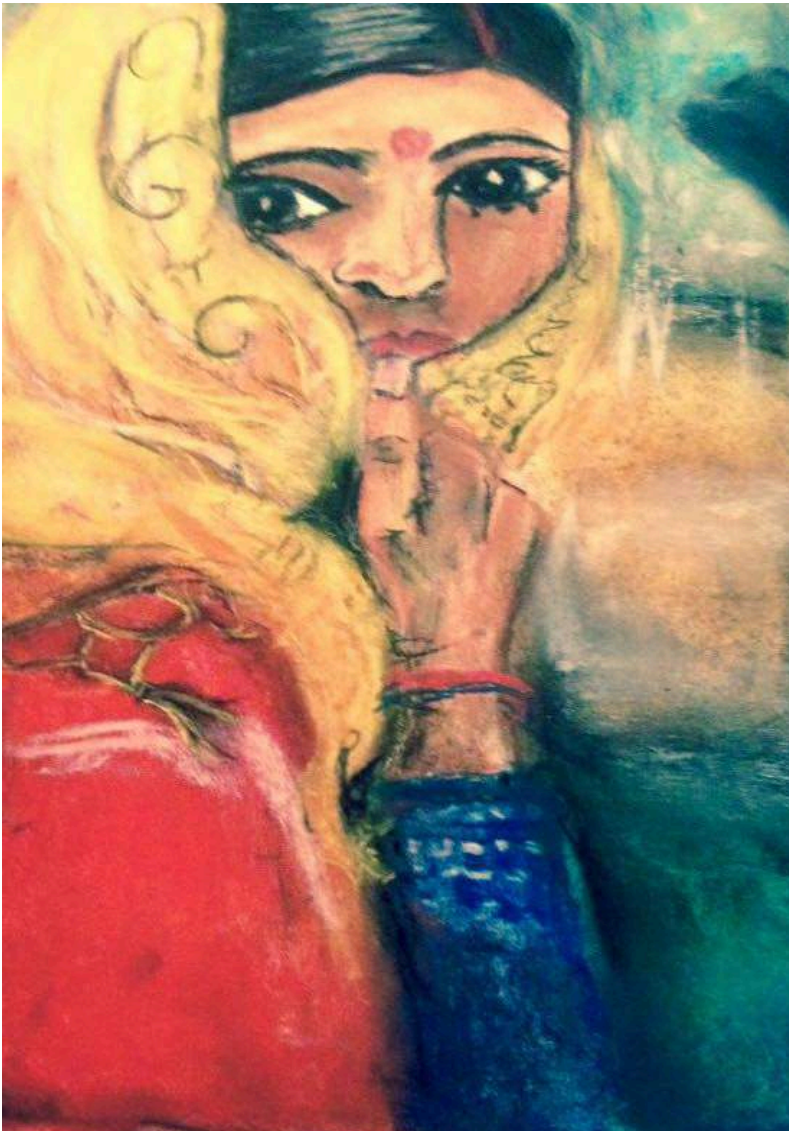
**Art teacher 2,
Sussex**

'Although my visit to the Koestler Awards in October 2015 was not strictly CPD, it was very beneficial to my teaching practice and further my knowledge of 'offender art''

Art teacher 3, Sussex

'The viewing of a variety of artists work enhanced my understanding of their techniques and approach'

Art teacher 3, Sussex



'In previous jobs, I have found on-site CPD very helpful. This has been provided by other teachers in the establishment or by external providers. I feel that it's a shame we do not have anything similar here. There are fairly regular training events for Maths and English tutors, but nothing for art teachers. Having spent my whole career so far working at least three days a week as a teacher, I still feel that there's a lot to learn as an artist.'

I create art in my own time, mostly for personal reasons rather than professional. I visit exhibitions 5/6 times a year and I run a blog which showcases the work of well known and indie artists. Both of these activities help my delivery at work, particularly with theory and art history discussions'

Art Teacher 1, Sussex

Recommendations

- Art teachers should be able to attend galleries, exhibitions and places of creative interest as part of their routine CPD throughout the year. This enrichment exercise would not only benefit the teacher but the learners also through a generation of ideas and discussion.
- An online platform through the medium of Moodle or other staff intranet based forum would promote resource sharing, ideas transfer and

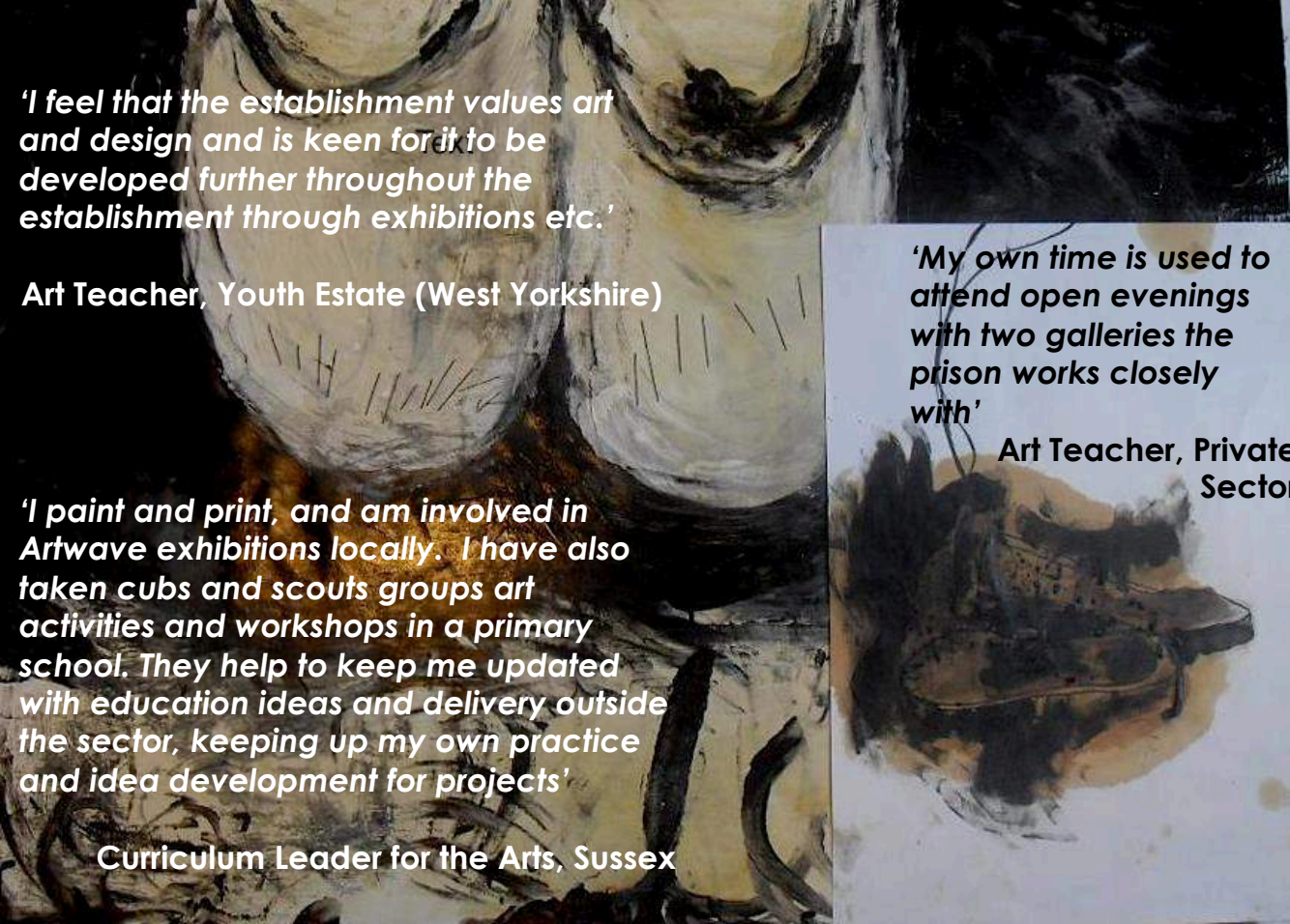
support amongst art teachers and practitioners working within the same organisation but at different sites. Closer working with colleagues teaching in similar fields with other custodial settings would help with sharing experiences and advice regarding working in confined and restricted environments in terms of security implications and equipment and materials.

- The formulation of a professional body of prison art teachers could be

explored as a way of driving the sharing of best practice and creating additional CPD opportunities for practitioners, especially when connecting with colleagues working for different companies and education providers.

- CPD of a creative and artistic developmental nature should be included within an art teacher's annual appraisal.
- More should be made of art teachers own work and ability to produce work of a highly skilled and professional nature through joint working with learners and their establishments. This may typically include the exhibition and showcasing of artwork and projects undertaken.

- Line managers and the wider leadership team of respective employers should recognise and understand the wider benefits and signification of creative CPD and support as part of a national strategy.
- Art teachers should initiate more discussion with line managers and colleagues outside of their immediate curriculum area in order to educate and promote their specialist artistic skills set and talents. This would inform and highlight to others that art teachers have a dual professional standing within their establishment.



'I feel that the establishment values art and design and is keen for it to be developed further throughout the establishment through exhibitions etc.'

Art Teacher, Youth Estate (West Yorkshire)

'I paint and print, and am involved in Artwave exhibitions locally. I have also taken cubs and scouts groups art activities and workshops in a primary school. They help to keep me updated with education ideas and delivery outside the sector, keeping up my own practice and idea development for projects'

Curriculum Leader for the Arts, Sussex

'My own time is used to attend open evenings with two galleries the prison works closely with'

Art Teacher, Private Sector



Discussion

There are plenty of CPD programmes for prison teachers. The leaders of offender learning providers as major FE colleges are powerhouses in the development of staff and upskilling in the generic areas such as lesson planning, assessment and behaviour management strategies but there is little in place to develop creative skills and interests for many art teachers. It is often assumed that a prison art teacher will develop their artistic skills in their own time.

'I recently produced a wall-chart detailing jobs in art and routes into them. The large number of categories that rapidly filled it graphically illustrated the undoubted economic significance of the arts to the UK economy. Every pound invested in culture in the UK generates a four pound return. My biggest challenge was fitting all the categories in, and the list was not exhaustive, partly because new categories are appearing, such as those utilising new technologies'.

Prison art tutor, Not Shut Up Magazine
2014

The artist teachers taking part in this study showed that they have passion and love for their discipline, the job they do and their learners. They all believe that their own personal development would support their learners and essentially make them better practitioners. Visiting galleries and exhibitions is important, most schools, colleges and Universities engage in such enrichment activities and facilitators get just as much out of it as the learners. Ideas are generated and project briefs formed from such outings and events. As the learners are unable to attend for obvious reasons the teacher is required to pass on knowledge and enthusiasm via their own interpretations and understanding.

A lot can be learnt from visiting other establishments and sharing best practice with other art teachers. Some art teachers can often work in silos within an education department, away from teachers in other curriculum areas. Sharing ideas, experiences and success stories builds confidence and motivation in practitioners and they feel the support and encouragement from like minded individuals. This is often witnessed at the annual Koestler Trust Awards art teacher seminar which coincides with the exhibition at the South Bank centre in London. This is an opportunity for groups of art tutors from various establishments to meet and share best practice. They can critically reflect on projects throughout the year and come together in this unique meeting. All the participants reflected on these experiences in the response to the survey which demonstrates how significant this CPD event is.

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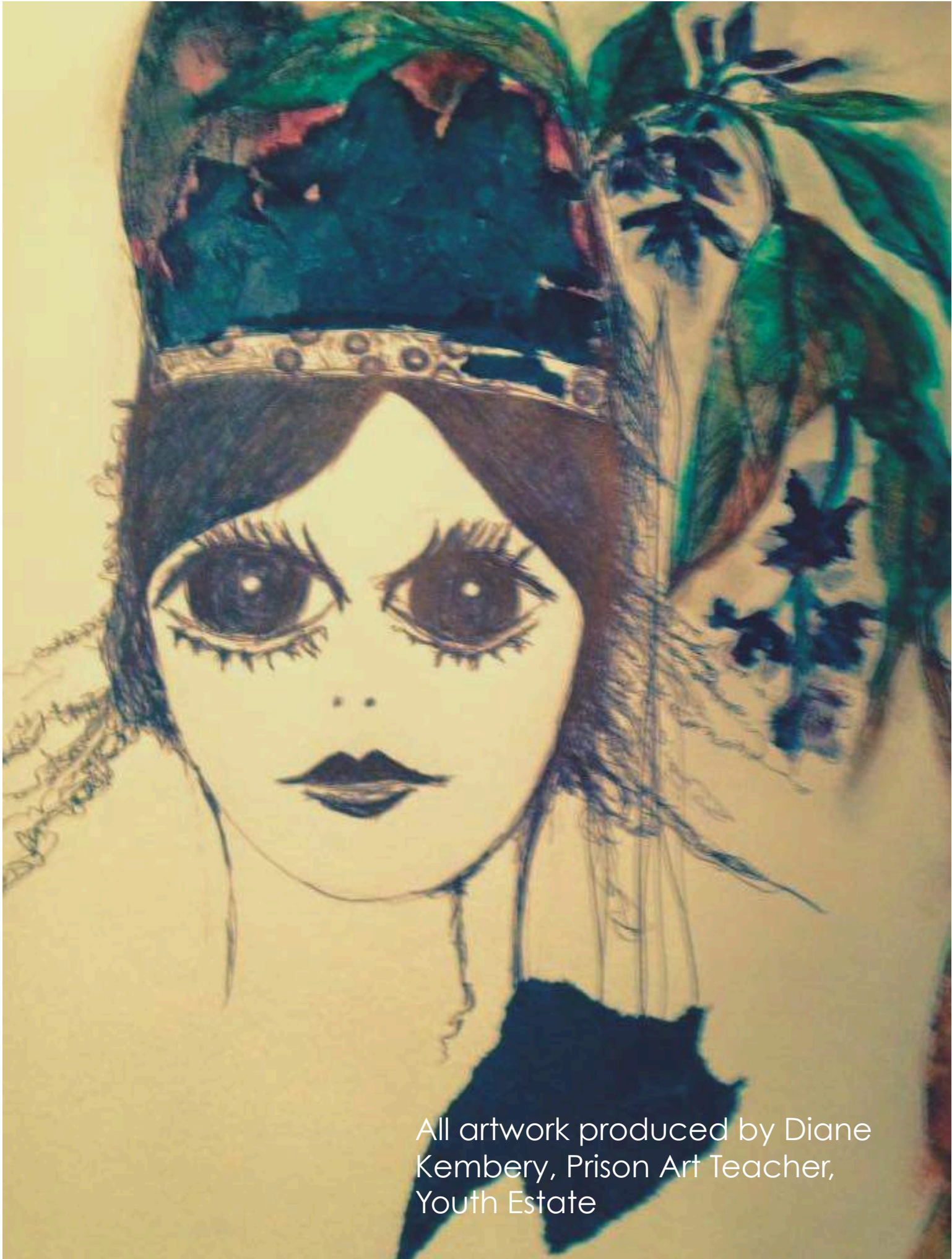
Thank
you!

About the author

I have been working in prisons both in the private and public sector since qualifying as an art teacher in 2011. Now in education management I train and mentor prison teaching staff. As a researcher I am concerned with the arts in prison and teacher retention and development in prison. I am also heavily interested in female imprisonment, rehabilitation and desistance studies, specifically with arts interventions which has formed the basis of my doctoral research.



Fish and Chips, clay and mod roc, 2012
Sophie Nickeas



All artwork produced by Diane Kembery, Prison Art Teacher, Youth Estate