Environmental Design Education in Schools

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Design education

Design education in schools has been a focus for argument and debate in the UK for over twenty years. The inclusion of design technology in the National Curriculum has given fresh impetus to this and has brought to the surface many issues that are still unresolved. It was initially developed as a means of changing the practice of craft teachers (woodwork and metalwork) in secondary schools. In the past, design education in secondary schools has tended to be identified with craft and technology, and in UK schools at least has concentrated on product design, focusing primarily on an exploration of materials and concentrating on production methods. In primary schools, science and technology has subsumed much of what we might recognise as design studies, often equated with 'problem-solving'. In the National Curriculum, which has recently been introduced, design has been identified both as a 'foundation' subject and as a cross-curricular concern for all pupils aged 5-16. Three areas of study are specified: artefacts; systems; and environment.

The overall objective, described in the report Design and Technology for ages 5 to 16 (DES, 1989) is the development of design and technological capability, defined as 'capability to operate effectively and creatively in the made world'. This is to be welcomed, stressing as it does that active nature of design studies. The report also states that the capability to investigate, design, make and appraise is as important as the acquisition of other types of knowledge. It might be useful to think of design as the translation of thought into action. However, teachers are not always clear about what is meant by 'design'. Bruce Archer offers a comprehensive definition:

Design is that area of human experience, skill and knowledge that reflects man’s concern with the appreciation and adaptation of his surroundings in the light of his material and spiritual needs. In particular, it relates to configuration, composition, meaning, value and purpose in man-made phenomena (Archer, 1975)
Environmental Design

In environmental design, experience of work in schools suggests the need for four distinct, but related, areas of study: aesthetic and design awareness; a feeling response to place; analytical and critical study; design activity. The work has been influenced by growing interest in environmental concerns and the development of critical studies. Much of the work has been spearheaded by art teachers, who have been able to develop a new approach to architecture of townscape studies, and geography teachers, who have promoted planning studies. This paper draws primarily on experience of art teachers and primary teachers who have developed art-based approaches, linking design and environmental concerns. Architecture studies in schools have traditionally been offered to a minority of pupils as an option within an art history course. The situation is now changing and there have been attempts to extend the notion of design and environmental education to encompass a much broader definition of architecture. A new consciousness about environmental quality has revealed that need to encourage a wider engagement in environmental concerns. Early efforts were influenced by the involvement of architects and planners in a working partnership with teachers. Two projects are of particular importance here: the 'Front Door' Project at Pimlico School (1974-76) in London and the Schools Council National curriculum development project. 'Art and the Built Environment' (1976-82).

Front Door'

The 'Front Door' Project brought together teachers and architects in a working partnership to develop a course of architecture and design studies based on an investigation of the local area. It was set up in response to the interim findings of the Royal College of Art study Design in General Education (RCA 1973) which revealed that design education in schools was confined to product and graphic design. This pilot scheme identified some of the possibilities of environmental design studies and demonstrated the value of inter-professional collaboration as a means of curriculum development. The pupils also had an important contribution to make — their detailed knowledge of the local area. Over a two year period, a framework for a programme of study was developed which spanned the seven years of secondary schooling. This was incorporated in art, design, community education and liberal studies courses.

The problem the ‘Front Door’ team set themselves was to find the best ways of engaging pupils of varying ages in an investigation of architecture and design, using the local neighbourhood as a focus and using art as a means of study. For eleven year olds, the work included consideration of the changing neighbourhood, places where people lived, worked or played. Twelve year olds studied shape, colour, pattern and texture, one group developing a study of decoration based on natural form. Thirteen year olds made a study of shops as a kind of ‘soft’ architecture, more liable to change than other bits of the built environment. This theme was echoed in slide programmes made by fourteen year olds, who explored the notion of shopkeepers as designers. Other themes were provision for play, words in town, transport and housing. For the older pupils, much of the observation and analytical work provided opportunities for valuable research necessary for their art examinations. They created collections of sketches, observational drawings and photographs from which they developed paintings, drawings and collages of subjects as diverse as street furniture, market stalls, power stations and gas holders.

‘Art and the Built Environment’

Where the 'Front Door' Project had concentrated on raising levels of visual awareness and emotional response, the ‘Art and the Built Environment’ Project developed the work further into critical study and design activity. Its aims were