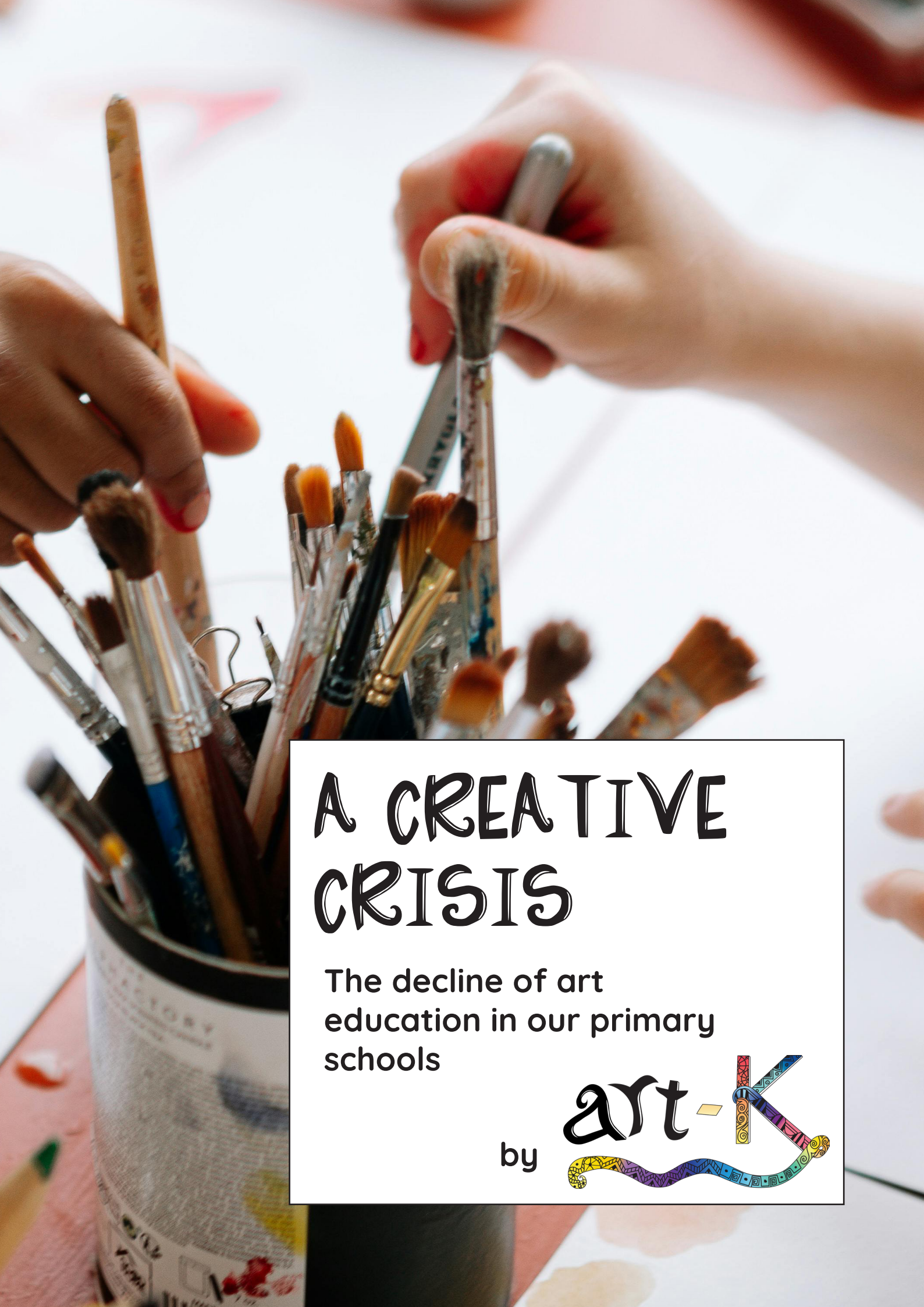


A CREATIVE CRISIS

The decline of art education in our primary schools

by art-K

FOREWORD

Throughout my career working with children, young people and educators in arts education, I have witnessed a concerning decline in creative learning within our primary schools. The evidence comes from multiple sources. Our members report it, young people experience it, and now, this report documents it. Art and design education is being neglected across many schools, with direct consequences for children's motor skills and wellbeing.

With one in five primary teachers saying that they spend no time teaching art and design, this report proves there is a divide between those that have, and those that have not had access to experiential and tactile knowledge. The impact reaches far beyond the art classroom into fundamental learning abilities that underpin literacy, numeracy, and cognitive development.

When three quarters of teachers observe deteriorating fine motor skills among their pupils, we are witnessing the erosion of abilities that previous generations took for granted. Children arriving at school unable to hold a pencil correctly or manipulate scissors effectively face barriers that extend across the entire curriculum. These are not merely artistic deficits; they represent a breakdown in the developmental foundations upon which all learning depends.

I have always championed the collective power of working together to make change through the arts. I firmly believe that when educators, artists, and communities unite around shared purpose, we can transform young lives. This report reinforces what we have long understood: art and design education is not a luxury or an add-on, but an essential component of every child's learning journey.

The research reveals not just statistical decline, but human cost. When schools marginalise creative subjects, they deny children access to forms of expression, problem-solving, and skill development that cannot be replicated elsewhere in the curriculum. They also perpetuate educational inequality, creating divisions between those who receive rich, rounded education and those who do not.

To ensure every child has access to the explicit skills and knowledge learned in and through our subject, we support art-K in calling on the Government to address the art and design learning learning gap. The evidence is clear, the need is urgent, and the time for action is now.

Michele Gregson is General Secretary of the National Society for Education in Art and Design (NSEAD).

Introduction

The ability to hold a pencil, draw a simple shape, or manipulate scissors may seem like basic childhood milestones, yet these fundamental skills are increasingly absent from among younger children in primary school classrooms. A comprehensive survey commissioned by art-K and conducted by YouGov among 569 primary school teachers reveals an alarming decline in children's fine motor abilities, with profound implications for their academic development, wellbeing, and future prospects.

Art education has traditionally served as more than creative expression. It is the foundation upon which children develop the precise hand-eye coordination essential for writing, mathematical problem-solving and countless daily tasks. Yet as this research demonstrates, art education in our primary schools is experiencing neglect, with consequences extending far beyond the creative curriculum.

As artificial intelligence inevitably transforms our creative industries, real human creativity and artistic skill will become increasingly valuable. However, while technology advances, our youngest learners appear to be losing touch with the most basic creative competencies. This is creating an issue that demands immediate attention from educators, policymakers and parents alike.

This research, conducted by YouGov among a representative sample of 569 primary school teachers between February and March 2025, reveals the scale of challenges facing art education in our primary schools.

Fine motor skills are deteriorating across primary schools

The survey's most alarming finding reveals that 77% of primary school teachers have seen a drop in pupils' ability to perform precise movements since early 2020. This includes tasks such as holding a pencil correctly, drawing basic shapes, writing legibly and using scissors effectively.

This decline represents more than a temporary setback. Teachers describe children arriving at school without the foundational motor skills that previous cohorts had already developed.

In other words, skills that educators once assumed children would possess are now absent, creating barriers to learning across all subjects.

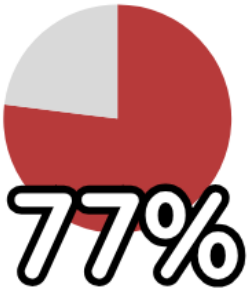
Art education faces systematic neglect at multiple levels

Perhaps most concerning is the widespread deprioritisation of art education itself. The survey found that 76% of teachers agreed that art education is not prioritised in their schools, while almost one in five (18%) reported spending no time at all teaching art in an average week.

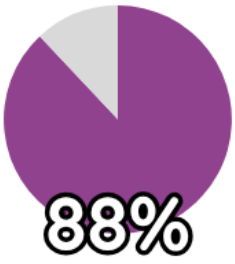
This neglect operates at both institutional and curricular levels. Almost half (46%) of primary teachers think that art and design education isn't sufficiently prioritised in the curriculum itself, while a third (32%) believe their school does not provide enough time to deliver even the required art and design curriculum.

The time allocation data reveals stark reality. Only 12% of teachers manage to provide more than 60 minutes of art education weekly. This occurs despite teachers' recognition of art's importance. Seven in ten (71%) acknowledge a direct relationship between art activities, handwriting development, and

---



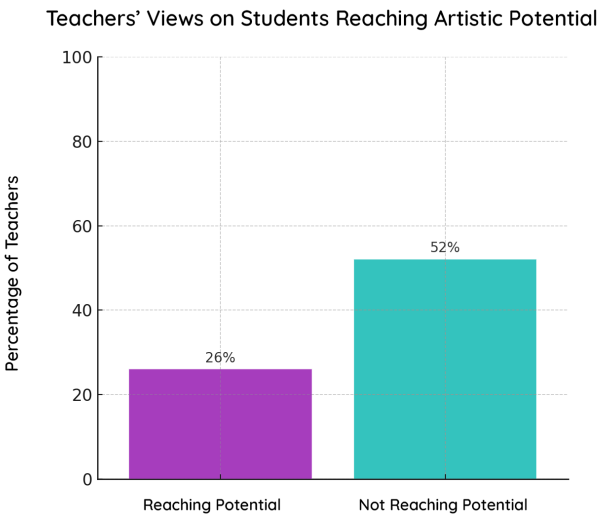
of primary teachers report declining fine motor skills.



of primary teachers spend less than an hour doing Art and Design a week.

Students fail to reach their artistic potential

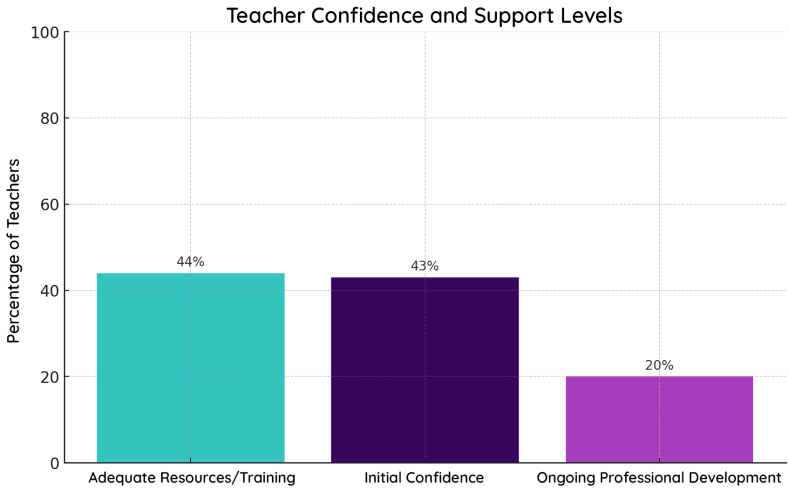
Only a quarter (26%) of primary teachers believe students are reaching their artistic potential within the current curriculum. More telling still, over half (52%) actively disagreed with this statement, demonstrating that this is not merely neutral assessment but active concern about missed opportunities.



This represents substantial waste of talent, with long-term effects for both individual development and the UK's creative industries. Four in five teachers (81%) agree that improving art education would boost students' wellbeing, yet the current system fails to deliver these outcomes for the majority of pupils.

Teachers lack adequate preparation and support

The survey identified substantial gaps in teacher preparation and ongoing support. Less than half (44%) feel they have access to appropriate resources and training to successfully teach art, while a similar proportion (43%) reported insufficient confidence from their initial teacher training.



Only one in five teachers (20%) believe they have adequate professional development opportunities in art education. This creates a cycle where teachers, lacking confidence and skills, further reduce art provision, perpetuating the decline rather than addressing its root causes.

Limited parental support appears evident

Just 28% of teachers agreed that parents value art and design teaching at school, suggesting a disconnect between educational research demonstrating art's importance and parental perceptions. In other words, reduced emphasis may lead to reduced appreciation, which further justifies reduced provision and creates a feedback loop of declining support.

WHY EVERY CHILD DESERVES ACCESS TO QUALITY ART EDUCATION
By Kathryn Harper, Founder of art-K

When I started art-K in 2000, combining my creative background with experience in paediatric speech and language therapy, I believed passionately in the power of structured art education. Twenty-five years later, this survey confirms what we have been observing across our studios.

Behind the statistics lies a child struggling to hold a pencil correctly. Another lacks the fine motor coordination that previous generations developed naturally. These are not merely artistic skills, they are building blocks upon which all learning depends.

In my work with thousands of children, I have witnessed the direct connection between artistic development and broader learning outcomes. A six-year-old learning to control a paintbrush with precision simultaneously develops neural pathways required for legible handwriting. Mixing colours to create the perfect shade engages the same problem-solving processes later applied to mathematical equations.

The consequences extend beyond the classroom. In an era where artificial intelligence can generate images instantly, human creativity becomes more important, not less. The UK's creative industries depend upon individuals nurtured from early age to think creatively and approach challenges with patience and perseverance that artistic practice develops.
We now appear to be failing to provide this foundation.

Art education provides a unique space for emotional expression and self-discovery. In our studios, I regularly witness children who struggle academically finding confidence through creative work. The non-competitive nature allows every child to succeed at their own level. This builds resilience supporting broader development.

In an age of increasing anxiety amongst young people, we are reducing access to one of the most effective tools for emotional development. Art offers children a language for feelings they cannot yet express in words.

The resource and training gaps create a concerning cycle. Teachers lacking confidence naturally reduce provision, further diminishing children's experiences. This perpetuates decline rather than addressing root causes.

This is where organisations like art-K can play an important supporting role. Our structured approach, with 1:7 teacher-student ratio and mixed-age learning environment, addresses many challenges schools face. We provide individual attention, high-quality materials, and expert instruction that time-pressed schools struggle to deliver.

However, I want to be absolutely clear, after-school provision cannot replace school-based art education. Our role is to augment, not substitute for, what should happen in every primary classroom. No child should depend upon their family's ability to pay for external classes to access quality creative education.

Many families view creative subjects as optional extras rather than essential components of school life. This perception has contributed to some schools marginalising art in favour of subjects perceived as more 'important'. We must challenge this false hierarchy.

The same fine motor skills developed through art directly support handwriting and mathematical problem-solving. Visual processing abilities honed through drawing improve reading comprehension. Patience required for artistic creation transfers to every academic discipline. Focus and concentration needed for detailed artistic work supports attention spans across all subjects.

Schools seeking improved academic outcomes should recognise that art education delivers precisely what they want to achieve elsewhere. The problem-solving inherent in creative projects develops critical thinking skills. Collaborative art activities build social competencies that support classroom behaviour and peer relationships.

Looking ahead, I see both serious challenges and genuine opportunities. The Government's recognition that culture and creativity have been "erased from many communities"* suggests political awareness exists. But awareness must translate into action. We need increased funding, better teacher training, protected curriculum time and accountability measures that value creative development alongside academic achievement.

For parents, I would stress that supporting your child's creative development is not about producing the next great artist. It is about ensuring they develop fundamental skills, confidence and ways of thinking that will serve them throughout their lives.

The question is not whether we can afford to invest in art education but whether we can afford not to.

** Lisa Nandy, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport at the launch of The Arts and Minds campaign (February 2025)*

Kathryn Harper, Founder of art-K

Conclusions

This research presents a concerning picture of creative education in primary schools. While teachers clearly understand art education's importance and recognise its connections to broader learning outcomes, pressures prevent adequate provision. The result is we risk seeing a generation leaving school without the creative competencies that previous generations were afforded the time to develop.

Teachers recognise art's value but need better training, resources, and institutional support.

Schools need policy frameworks protecting time for creative subjects rather than marginalising them for narrow accountability measures.

Parents require greater awareness of art education's importance for children's overall development.

The challenges are substantial but not insurmountable. With recognition of art education's fundamental importance, adequate resource allocation, and commitment to supporting both teachers and students, all of our primary schools can rebuild the creative foundations that will serve children throughout their lives. The evidence is overwhelming that action is necessary. The question is whether we will act with the urgency these results demand.

The promise of creative education remains compelling. But realising that promise requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders in children's development. In other words, while the current picture is concerning, there is a clear roadmap for the changes needed to support every child's creative potential.

About art-K

Founded in 2000, art-K is the leading art education provider for children & adults outside of school.

Today the company employs over 100 permanent art teachers and hundreds of art assistants, all with professional art training backgrounds. Its 56 studios teach over 7,000 students every week, creating a safe space where children can feel comfortable to explore their artistic skills.

The art-K programme was created with a deep understanding of child development, child engagement, visual skills and artistic techniques.

For more information on how art-K can help your school develop thriving initiatives that will help students achieve their artistic potential within the current curriculum, please visit:

www.art-k.co.uk/school-programme

Reach out to us for in-school training to upskill your art teaching delivery:

+44 7361 808 963
customersupport@art-k.co.uk

Find a Studio Near You