

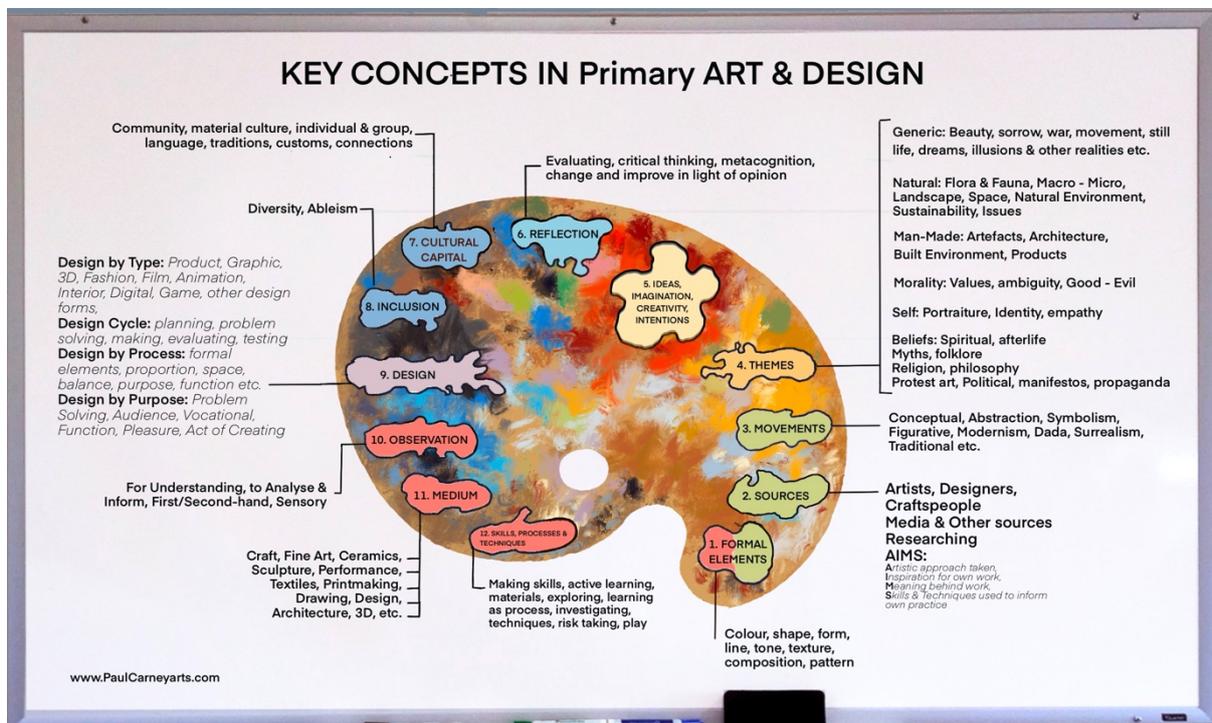
KEY CONCEPTS in Primary Art & Design

'Concepts must be linked to the contents or facts that give them meaning' Prof Michael Young

What are key concepts?

Key concepts are groups or categories of concrete or abstract ideas and things to create a deeper, shared understanding.

In my Progression Guide I used a metaphor that progression targets are like a Christmas tree and the art activities you do are the baubles and tinsel on that tree. Well, key concepts are the roots, they are what the tree is standing up in, they keep it upright and stable and anchor it to the ground.



Some Key Concepts relate to the [NSEAD](#) progression targets: KNOWLEDGE - MAKING - IDEAS - EVALUATION

Key Concept 1: Formal Elements

The formal elements of art are *Line - Shape - Tone - Colour - Pattern - Texture - Form - Composition*

They are the building blocks of any work of art. When we analyse any work of art we analyse these elements to see how they combine to create the overall effect of the artwork. Formal elements can be both practical and theoretical, and it isn't necessary to be able to do both to understand them. More information on the formal elements can be found at [arty factory](#)

Key Concept 2: Sources

A source in art & design could be an artist, designer, or craftsperson whose work influences or inspires the pupil. But a source can also be a newspaper headline, a current issue, a photograph or poem, book or text that inspires visual thinking. Pupils should be able to

identify and use sources to inform & inspire their artwork. More information on art sources at [Obelisk art history](#), [Google Arts](#), [Tate](#), [Wikiart](#)

Key Concept 3: Movements & Periods

Art movements are significant groups or periods in art that have significantly influenced visual culture. Pupils should build their knowledge of the techniques, materials & processes that artists use, and the many ways they employ them. They learn about the history of art across the ages, making connections between Ancient, Traditional, Modern and Contemporary art forms. More information on art movements and periods at [Obelisk art history](#), [Google Arts](#), [Tate](#), [Wikiart](#)

Key Concept 4: Themes in Art

A theme in art is the central topic, subject matter or message within the artwork. Some themes are universal and timeless: beauty, death, landscape, portraiture, or mother and child. Some are spiritual, some mythical, others more abstract. A list of themes in art can be found [here](#).

Key Concept 5: Creativity, Ideas, Imagination & Intentions

An idea is a thought or conception that is the product of mental activity. Imagination is seeing the impossible, the unreal or dreamlike. Creativity is using ideas and imagination to create new and valuable forms.

All of these disciplines require the teacher to provide opportunities for them to occur. They need space in the planning of art activities for the unknown to happen, for independent choices and decisions to be made, and above all for young minds to have the opportunity and understanding to shape potential thoughts into tangible outcomes. More information on idea generation at [Bartel Art](#)

Key Concept 6: Reflection

“Reflection is part of learning and thinking. We reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflecting, and the term ‘reflective learning’ emphasises the intention to learn from current or prior experience” (Moon 2004)

More information on what reflection is and how to promote it in class by [Raymond Yang at the art of education University](#)

Key Concept 7: Cultural Capital

[Cultural Learning Alliance website](#): 'Cultural Capital is a social justice issue: research shows that children with an arts deficit are disadvantaged educationally and economically while those who do participate in the arts are more resilient, healthier, do better in school, are more likely to vote, to go to university, to get a job and to keep it. Participation in the arts fuels social mobility.'

Key Concept 8: Inclusion & Diversity

Taken from the website [ALLFIE The Alliance for Inclusive Education](#): Inclusive education – also called inclusion – is education that includes everyone, with non-disabled and Disabled people (including those with “special educational needs”) learning together in mainstream schools, colleges and universities. This means the system must adapt to include Disabled people – they should not have to adapt to the system.

Key Concept 9: Design

Design is development of thoughts, concepts and ideas to create objects and artefacts to fulfil aesthetic, functional, economic, or socio-political considerations. and is expected to interact with a certain environment. For more information on design, visit the [Design Museum](#)

When teaching design, we should consider:

- **Design by Type:** *Product, Graphic, 3D, Fashion, Film, Animation, Interior, Digital, Game, other design forms.*
- **The Design Cycle:** *planning, problem solving, making, evaluating, testing.*
- **Design by Process:** *formal elements, proportion, space, balance, purpose, function etc.*
- **Design by Purpose:** *Problem Solving, Audience, Vocational, Function, Pleasure, Act of Creating.*

Key Concept 10: Observation: Observation is crucial in this respect, to develop the artists' eye and become better at seeing things which are often unseen. More information on observation in art at [Artsy](#)

Key Concept 11: Medium: To make art, artists work in various mediums to realise their intentions. The choice of medium moulds and shapes the kind of art we make. More information on mediums and disciplines in art at [Obelisk](#) or [Google arts](#)

Key Concept 12: Skills, Processes & Techniques: When making art we learn through, and from the material we are working with as part of an active process. Whilst this does require tutelage, much of it is unspoken, tacit or intuitive. Learning through making is often a long process that can take a lifetime, and so requires the learner to be open to receiving guidance and constructive critical advice, overcome frustration, develop their understanding, be reflective and self-directed. More information on the skills & processes of making art at [Marvin Bartel's website](#)

Why should I bother teaching key concepts?

The truth is you don't have to. It is not mandatory to do so, but it is, I believe, best practice. We are teaching in a knowledge driven educational environment and, if you follow the research, then there is almost unanimous agreement that key concepts are important to teach students how the knowledge you are delivering comes together to form understanding.

Knowledge pays off when it is conceptual and when the facts are related to one another, and that is not true of list learning.

Daniel T. Willingham

Does this mean extra work?

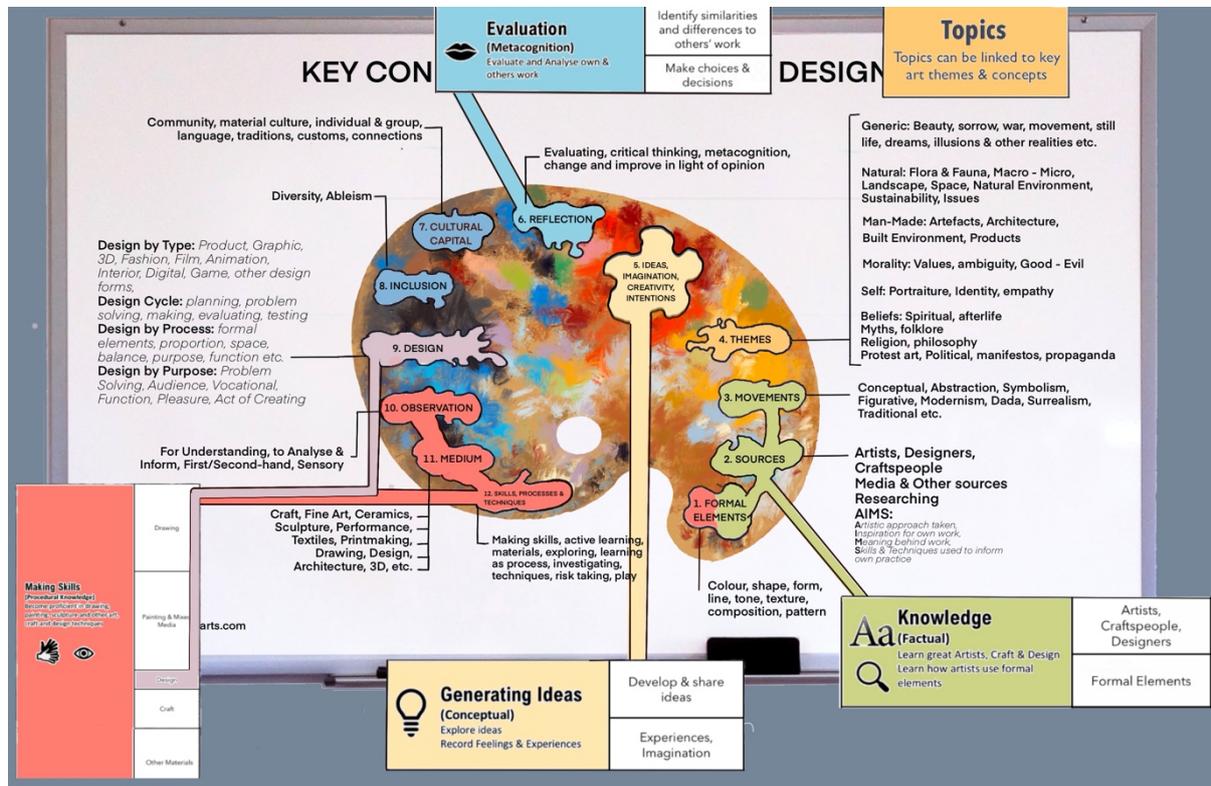
Maybe a little, but not much. If you have a progression plan for art, as most schools do now, all you need to do is to study it and group the learning targets according to the key concepts I'm suggesting. You don't have to cover them all, they aren't compulsory, but it will help you and the students see where and how the knowledge you are teaching is linked to deeper understanding.

How do key concepts work?

If you compare to key concepts in science, you may teach about nutrition. Over the course of a key stage, you might study nutrition in different ways, the life cycle, plant nutrition, animal nutrition etc. If you constantly refer children back to the key concept of nutrition, they can see how all these different processes link together and see that, whilst very different from organism to organism, they all share common purposes.

KEY CONCEPTS IN PRIMARY ART & DESIGN

Similarly in art, the same themes crop up time and time again; Michelangelo's David is as much a commentary on beauty as contemporary artist Cindy Sherman's grotesque selfies. By linking several ways in which the same theme has been tackled over time, we are teaching deeper understanding of art.



The illustration shows how the previous progression targets dovetail in with the Key Concepts model. You aren't inventing anything new, simply strengthening what you have already.

How do I use key concepts in my teaching?

Just try to relate your activity to the diagram I've created and see which of them best fit. You would still plan art activities in the same way as before. You would still need to link your same progression targets as you have been doing. None of that changes with key concepts. The only purpose of key concepts to highlight to the pupils what the key concept is and why it is relevant to what they are doing. So, if you are making a clay thumb pot, you could contextualise it to the historical development of thumb pot making or the wider field of clay and ceramics. You might even investigate how physically impaired people make thumb pots or how small pots are used in cultural rituals. If you are doing a drawing, you should link it to an artist the children can learn from, but maybe even what the style of drawing is they are doing, what other styles of drawing there are or what the purpose of the drawing is and how it might affect it. Hopefully you can see that what key concepts do is to move away from teaching superficial content and move towards deeper understanding.

Instead of just ticking a box that says, 'I have covered the observation key concept', you need to join them up and connect different concepts to each other for deeper learning.

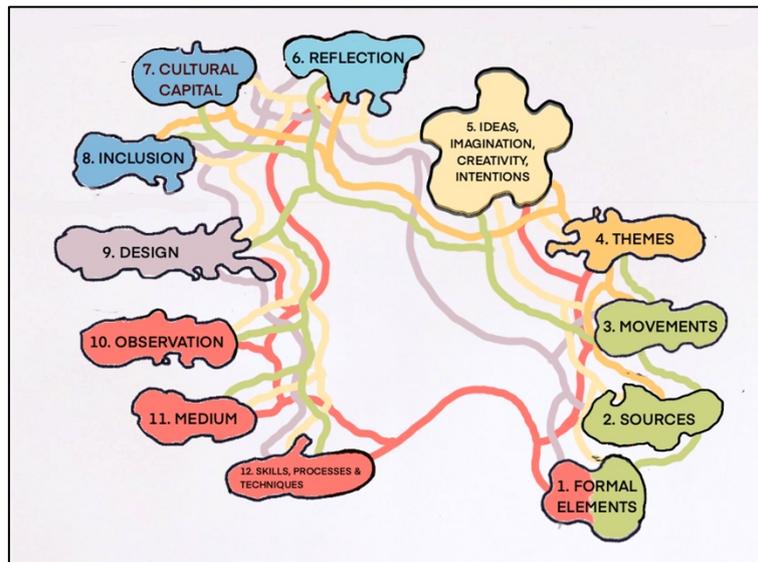
MAKING SKILLS link well with **ARTIST SOURCES**, but by incorporating some **IDEAS & IMAGINATION** into it, it becomes richer learning. You might even add some **INCLUSION**, **CULTURAL CAPITAL**, or **REFLECTION** to make it even deeper.

REFLECTION might be a starting point, not an end point. You might get children to reflect on how they feel about their prior attainment and think about how they need to improve.

DESIGN links well with **INCLUSION** - how can we redesign our world to make it more inclusive?

CULTURAL CAPITAL links well with **REFLECTION** - can it also link to **PROCESSES**, making art to reflect how we feel about it?

IMAGINATION is always a great place to start. 'What if?' 'Dreams,' imaginary places, the fantastic, the strange or surreal. But you'll probably need to link their ideas to **KNOWLEDGE** through surrealism, psychedelic art, or Op-Art, not to mention teaching **SKILLS** to raise attainment. In this way, our ideas become more concrete and realised.



Do key concepts relate to our topics?

Yes, very much so, especially artist themes, but the knowledge concepts do too. Take for example Ancient Greece, which is a common topic of study in primary schools. Ancient art is part of the **key knowledge concept - sources**. But, instead of simply referring to Greek art, you could show a deeper understanding of how artists through time have been inspired by Greek art.

For example, you might be used to showing the children Greek art and asking them to make art in a Greek style. This is ok, nothing wrong with it, but on its own it is a little superficial. However, if you want to enrich your students educational experience you could research how artists have been inspired by Greek art ever since. You only need to look on a few sites; Google Arts and Culture, the Tate and maybe Wikiart. Here is what I found: I've still included Ancient Greek art - a Greek amphora and the Discobolus thrower statue, but now I've found other artists that were inspired by Greek art, Henry Gibb's Aeneas fleeing

KEY CONCEPTS IN PRIMARY ART & DESIGN

Troy, Barbara Hepworth's Corinthos, Cy Twombly's abstract Bacchus, Chris Ofili's runner, and Edward Allington's Ideal Standard Forms based on Platonic solids. I have deliberately selected works from the ancient world, Traditional art (Gibb's), Modern art (Hepworth, Twombly) and Contemporary art (Allington, Ofili).



Using this method, children can see, not only the beauty of ancient art, but also how it has continued to inspire artists to this day. Any topic you are studying will almost certainly have been covered by art in some way, because art is so ubiquitous. A source for art might be a photograph in a newspaper, a TV programme, a piece of music, an issue, a political event, a book or a famous person