

Macmillan Academy is an 11-18 City Academy based in Middlesbrough. It is a larger than average school with 1478 students.

## What the school hoped to achieve

When we embarked on the project I wanted to investigate what might happen when a handling collection is used to explore the issues of race relations, and how cross curricular links could enhance the experience of students.

## How was the learning organised?

This was a cross-curricular project involving Art and History, inspired by the new National Curriculum and its focus on collaborative work. The initial idea for the project emerged from a Masters' Degree project being undertaken by Allison Woodroffe-Charlton (Artist Teacher), who wanted to encourage students to explore contemporary art as a vehicle for exploring historical/contextual issues.

### The project consisted of four stages.

During the first stage, students explored an overview of race relations throughout history, drawing their own conclusions about the key issues. They then were introduced to the concept of 'interpretations' through the exploration of the handling collection, which consisted of artefacts and images from a range of historical and contemporary artists. The first challenge was to put the objects in to chronological order based on contextual understanding of different historical periods, as well as knowledge of artistic techniques and art history.

In the second stage, students looked in more depth at the context of items in the handling collection and created their own context cards to explain the different pieces.

For the third stage, students were challenged to create something to represent race relations in a chosen period of History. They were encouraged to respond as creatively as possible. Outcomes included; a slave story (which was concluded on a facemask), a dream-catcher, poems, collages, paintings and a video installation.

For the final stage, students were able to interpret and respond to the work of an artist/teacher, who herself is influenced by elements of the handling collection. The students were given an opportunity to view and explore the collection in relation to her work. They were then introduced to additional contemporary artists such as Graham Dolphin and Gordon Cheung. In response to their learning both in History and Art, the students created work that represented them and the society in which they lived. The students took advantage of the Artist Teacher and responded to her work. They did this by collecting imagery that was important to them and contemporary society. A number of outcomes were created using tracing techniques and utilising found and existing imagery. Most of the students chose to work on flat surfaces.

## The successes of the project

There were clear gains in the use of Art in the context of the History classroom. The use of artefacts and images provoked immense discussion and students were relaxed about giving their views and suggesting ideas, understanding that personal interpretation was the key rather than 'right or wrong' answers. The teaching of contextual material helped the students when it came to creating their own artwork as they were more aware of viewer responses and how their work would be interpreted by others.

Having only done basic background research, students were able to decode complex historical and contemporary artworks. For example, one group of students produced a piece of text in response to the artist teacher's work which was accurate and highly sophisticated. They relished the opportunity to take this further and to create a concept for their own work.

The cross curricular links were most powerful for the gifted and talented students within the group. Although all students reported that they had enjoyed the opportunity to work in a different way, the gifted and talented excelled. Working on 'interpretations' is challenging for gifted students and this was compounded by the use of artwork with which they were initially unfamiliar. The unpicking of the artwork and artefacts with only contextual historical knowledge was a very difficult task but students relished the independence and the ability to think for themselves. This greater freedom was reflected in the range of items produced by them. Two exceptionally talented artists in the group chose to create a canvas and a collage as a response whereas a talented filmmaker made a short movie. There were also stories, poems, diaries and artefacts made.

**Allison Woodroffe-Charlton** is a teacher at Macmillan Academy in Teeside

