

The future of arts education in England

Context

Following discussions with SSAT members who expressed concerns that arts subjects risk being devalued and squeezed out of the curriculum, SSAT invited a group of policymakers and shapers, school leaders, and arts practitioners to discuss the future of arts education in England.

This paper provides a summary of the discussion held on 19 January 2016. The chair, SSAT's director of policy and public affairs Bill Watkin, opened the debate in the context of the Department for Education's consultation on the implementation of the Ebacc; which ran from November 2015 to the end of January 2016. SSAT, like many of its member schools, has voiced concerns that a near-compulsory Ebacc will lead to a narrowing of the KS4 curriculum; with the arts, technologies and vocational subjects most at risk.

Discussions on the future of the arts in England, against the backdrop of current educational reforms, were introduced by the Oscar-winning film director and educational philanthropist Lord Puttnam, and Olivier Award-winning theatre director and former drama teacher Lyndsey Turner, currently an associate director at the National Theatre. The full list of attendees were:

Mike Bettles, *Deputy Headteacher, Heathfield Community School*
Rebecca Boyle Suh, *Executive Chairman, Artis*
Nick Corston, *Founder, STEAM Co*
Ella Frears, *London Laureate*
Richard Freeman, *Director, always possible*
Darren Henley OBE, *Chief Executive, Arts Council England*
Dame Sue John DBE, *Chair, The Brilliant Club*
Lesley King, *Chair of Governors, Ormiston Venture Academy*
Dr Tim Leunig, *Chief Analyst, The Department for Education*
Mark Londesborough, *Programme Manager, The RSA*
Catherine McCormack, *Headteacher, South Wirral Grammar School*
Tom Middlehurst, *Head of Public Affairs, SSAT*
Ian Middleton HMI, *National Lead for Art, Craft and Design, Ofsted*
Fiona Millar, *Chair, National Youth Arts Trust*
Graham Moore, *Director, humanutopia*
Sally Phoenix, *Head of Drama, Royal Ballet School*
Kathryn Pugh, *Headteacher, The St Marylebone C.E. School*
The Lord Puttnam Kt CBE
Dr Sophie Ratcliffe, *Fellow, Lady Margaret Hall, The University of Oxford*
Martin Robinson, *Author, Trivium 21c*
Lyndsey Turner, *Associate Director, The National Theatre*
Bill Watkin, *Director of Policy and Public Affairs, SSAT*
Patrick Watson, *Managing Director, Montrose Public Affairs*
Sue Williamson, *Chief Executive, SSAT*

Introduction

Lord Puttnam introduced discussions by reminiscing about his first job in an advertising agency, where he initially felt he wasn't in the same league as his colleagues. His employer, however, reminded David that he had hired him 'to amaze me' – and so David strived to do this every day. In this, David came to understand that creativity relies on resilience. Lord Puttnam comments that his most-retweeted slide from his presentations is one depicting creativity as a muscle; with resilience as the single most important factor in its growth.

There is, says Lord Puttnam, broad political consensus that the arts have value. The prime minister recently commented that too many young people leave school culturally disadvantaged. The chancellor, George Osborne, recently spoke of the importance of the arts to the British economy, citing the fact that 1.8 million people work in the arts, compared to the 1.2 million people who worked in the mining industry at its peak. In the Labour party, former shadow secretary of state for education, Tristram Hunt, talks about the arts as a vehicle to bring people from all walks of life together. This rhetoric, argues Lord Puttnam, is a far cry from the dominant dialogues of the 1980s, when the phrase 'creative industries' was a dirty term, even within the art world. Politicians and the wider society now recognise the value of the arts as an industry. So, as well as a dedication to the intrinsic value of art as a thing of beauty that is essential to the personal development and fulfilment of all, the arts play a vital role in the economy and the nation's health.

In articulating the importance of the arts, Lord Puttnam is irritated that you have to explicitly state that you still think literacy and numeracy are important – the two are not mutually exclusive.

After all, why wouldn't we want young people who are literate, numerate but also brilliant at something they love – that makes them 'glow'?

Lyndsey Turner, responding, commented that whilst the economic argument for the arts is important, it is still worth questioning the chancellor's commitment to an inclusive, broad spectrum of arts, citing his recognition of 'everything from Spectre to Billy Elliot'; the irony was not lost that both are multi-million pound box office hits. What about, says Turner, the lawyers and plumbers and office workers who don't go into the arts as a career, but enjoy and benefit of studying the arts at school? School is vital as a vehicle for cultural entitlement. Study of the arts is a right, not a privilege, says Turner.

Lyndsey went on to dismiss the notion that the arts are soft subjects, or a 'doss'. Indeed, they are sophisticated, complex and rigorous subjects. A problem with recognising their sophistication lies in the fact that arts are about the process more than the ultimate product; this makes them hard to measure in value and therefore vulnerable in a high-stakes accountability system.

There is a joy and a beauty in the process of the arts. Arts classrooms are places in which creativity can flourish in unique ways; and where unexpected outcomes can arise. There is no science experiment done in school to which a science teacher does not know the outcome (unless something goes terribly wrong). In contrast, the arts allow us to imagine 'a world beyond'.

Policy and educational reforms

Some attendees commented that whilst Progress 8 was a sensible and helpful performance measure, which challenges more students by encouraging the study of at least three Ebacc subjects as well as English and maths, the notion of Ebacc targets themselves and performance measures is damaging.

Kathryn Pugh, headteacher of a high-performing school in London, suggests that the esteem given to the Ebacc by messages prior to the launch of Progress 8, and then the additional introduction of the EBacc measure after the introduction of Progress 8 holds a lot of weight in schools.

Whilst teachers are concerned about the impact of the Ebacc performance measure, we must be mindful to ensure that we don't overstate the risk to the arts. We need more hard evidence on how new accountability measures will change behaviours and practices. However, it is true that many headteachers are opposed to the Ebacc because it removes flexibility and makes it harder to offer a broad range of arts subjects. There is also some dispute over which arts subjects are in decline in schools and which are holding their ground with ministers and anti-Ebacc lobbyists disputing figures. We therefore need more empirical evidence and greater transparency to inform policy and practice.

A representative from the Department for Education reminded attendees that the compulsory Ebacc was in the Conservatives' manifesto, and that they were elected to government with a mandate to implement their manifesto pledges.

Furthermore, this government has articulated its commitment to the arts, and the schools regulator Ofsted requires all schools to have a 'broad and balanced curriculum' at all stages of education.

However, some suggested that too often educational policy is dictated by people with limited understanding of what happens in schools today, and that the full implications of policy are not always thought through. People also questioned whether the electorate had really voted for the Ebacc as a key manifesto pledge. Chair of governors of an academy in the east of England, Lesley King, questioned the government's commitment to arts education; suggesting that the supply of arts teachers undermines this, and decrying the fact that around 40% of the UK film industry is privately educated.

Attendees were reminded that the government does respond to the public's and the profession's views, as Michael Gove did when he stepped back from his plans for the Ebacc Certificates during his term in office. It should be remembered that the arts sector, in particular, has a loud voice in society, and is well-placed to enact change.

Lord Puttnam called on the government to allocate funding for the purchase of copyright on established classic works, such as *Westside Story* (which he said all schools should perform), so that all schools have access to a library of works from which they can draw.

The value of the arts

There was broad agreement during the discussions that the arts have immense value both to individual human flourishing and to wider society.

School leaders Mike Bettles and Kathryn Pugh both agreed that their schools' academic success in literacy and numeracy was not in spite of the arts, but because of it. Likewise headteacher Catherine McCormack suggests that arts are important for students' future job prospects, and recounts that her boys' football team all appreciate how their study of the arts, particularly dance, makes them better footballers!

McCormack went on to describe the arts as the 'guardian of the now'; the bastion of society and an important window into our own, and other, worlds.

Darren Henley, chief executive of Arts Council England, said whilst it is good that the prime minister and chancellor recognise the economic value of the arts, we need the secretary of state for education and her department to say this as well.

If we are to value the arts alongside humanities, sciences, literacy and numeracy, we need to do so both in word and deed. Rebecca Boyle Suh, chief executive of an arts charity, suggested that offering free arts provision actually undervalued the arts. Literacy and numeracy programmes are not free; if we believe something is important we should be willing to pay for it. It was agreed that investment in the arts at school was an investment in British society.

However, we must be mindful not to discuss the arts and the creative industries as interchangeable; they are not the same, suggests Richard Freeman. Furthermore, whilst the economic value of the arts may be a useful argument, we must persuade politicians, parents, universities and employers of the intrinsic value of the arts. Dr Ratcliffe commented that although her university does officially recognise arts subjects in their admissions process, some staff in some universities do have prejudices against arts subjects; more must be done to explain the impact of studying arts on students' capacity to learn. The government now has the ability to link subjects studied at school to future earnings, though there was a concern from arts practitioners that this could further undermine inherently valuable subjects, including the arts.

Arts provision in schools

There was a strong feeling that good arts education had to begin in primary schools, but a concern that there are too few arts specialists in the primary sector, especially in rural and remote areas. It was also suggested that there is not enough arts training on primary ITT courses, which further weakens early provision. However, Nick Corston said that he had first-hand experience of the impact of external arts provision and using celebrity artists to inspire creativity in primary schools and in local communities.

Lesley King, having previously facilitated networks of arts teachers, was concerned that too many arts teachers are isolated, practising in one- or two-person departments. We need to find ways to support individual arts teachers and share best practice in arts education.

As government ministers have pointed out, there are opportunities to include arts education beyond the formal, timetabled curriculum. Out of school clubs and extra-curricular activities can promote the arts. However, Darren Henley warns that such opportunities are more accessible to middle class families; many disadvantaged children rely on the formal school curriculum for arts provision.

Lyndsey Turner and Ella Frears, both practising artists, suggest that there is a disconnect between the study of arts at school and the real business of being an artist. It would make sense, and bring greater rigour, to arts subjects if they better reflected the discipline of the art being studied.

Attendees noted that there is a lot of good practice and exceptional arts provision in English schools, that we should celebrate. Rebecca Boyle Suh is 'optimistic' about the future of arts education in England, given the great things going on in our schools. Furthermore, we should be proud of, and take comfort in, the fact that the UK is looked to internationally for arts subjects.

Leadership

Dame Sue John, a former headteacher, is concerned that arts education might become the privilege of only successful, good or outstanding schools, suggesting that high-performing state schools and private schools have more breathing room to include the arts on the curriculum. If the headline performance measures become purely academic this will widen this gap and potentially lead to greater inequality. More vulnerable, less secure schools, often those serving more disadvantaged communities, are more likely to feel most acutely the pressure to focus on the headline performance measures in order to satisfy accountability drivers.

Ian Middleton, Ofsted's lead HMI for art, craft and design, acknowledged that weaker schools which are vulnerable may find it harder to develop their arts education due to other priorities. Middleton suggested that arts leaders in schools needs a strong network and a national platform, calling on SSAT and other similar organisations to strengthen these. Effective networking underpins the arts education communities that flourish. These include links between schools, cultural settings such as art galleries and creative practitioners. Middleton particularly praised the innovations in arts teaching and learning that specialist arts colleges promoted, some still doing so.

Dame Sue cited the London Challenge, of which she was a part, as an example of where the arts were used to raise standards, as a cultural pledge was included in the improvement plan. Likewise, there are examples such as Peter Hyman's School 21, which use the arts as a key vehicle for school improvement and social justice. It was noted that many school inspectors believe that pupils' creativity benefits from strong role models in education. Ofsted inspection reports about the arts have drawn attention to the impact of teachers who are creative in their teaching and who invest in their own cultural development; schools that have high quality exhibitions and performances; programmes whereby pupils work with creative practitioners.

We know, from past examples, that the arts can be an important vehicle for whole-school improvement and for social mobility. We need courageous headteachers and senior leaders who are willing to value the importance of the arts, and invest in them; which will come about through firm and clear assurances from the government.

Conclusion

There was universal agreement that the arts are important at all stages of education, and should be valued and protected. In bringing the discussions together, the chair Bill Watkin identified two useful actions: making connections and areas of further research.

We need to understand the link between studying the arts in schools and: social justice, performance in the academic curriculum, literacy and numeracy, character, relationships and behaviours to learning, employability, destinations, and the national economy.

Areas for further consideration, research, and discussion include:

- » The difficulty faced by vulnerable and remote schools in accessing 'live' artistic experiences.
- » The impact of poverty of exposure and experience on life chances.
- » The supply pipeline of expert arts teachers.
- » The way accountability measures drive behaviours (5ACEM, P8, Ebacc).
- » The need to 'slay the dragon' that Arts are soft subjects.
- » The impact of shrinking budgets on schools' ability to run trips to galleries, theatres, etc.
- » The difficulty in securing the next generation of leaders of the arts (not just leaders of schools).
- » The unintended consequence of the academy system and the fragmentation of the system which makes it harder for schools to come together in interest groups.
- » The need to strike a balance between arts as an entitlement and arts as an opportunity (eg in a small rural village primary school).
- » The need for the right messaging – from the Departments to schools, and schools to parents.