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## The Arts in School: what has befallen them, and why they remain vital

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**ABSTRACT** This article re-states the importance of the arts and humanities for education, highlights the declining provision for them in schools, and argues that a fundamental re-think of the purposes of education is required to re-establish creativity at the heart of formal learning.

Ever since Nicky Morgan's deliberations about the value, or otherwise, of the arts, this government has been trying to row back. In November 2014 Morgan, then Secretary of State for Education, said:

[In the past] if you didn't know what you wanted to do, and let's be honest – it takes a pretty confident 16-year-old to have their whole life mapped out ahead of them – then the arts and humanities were what you chose. Because they were useful for all kinds of jobs. Of course now we know that couldn't be further from the truth.[1]

Although she was speaking at an event promoting STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects, and was suggesting that pupils should study STEM subjects to open up many opportunities in life, of course her words were interpreted as suggesting, in the words of the *Daily Telegraph* headline, that pupils are 'held back' by an overemphasis on the arts.

Morgan was quickly forced to clarify her remarks, describing the arts as 'the birthright of every child' and explaining her view that 'a young person's education cannot be complete unless it includes the arts'. Other government ministers have followed, including Nick Gibb, who told the Music and Drama Education Expo early in 2017: 'It is important that all pupils are taught about and have the opportunity to participate in the arts.'[2]

However, the impact of government policy in classrooms seems to suggest that the minister doth protest too much... Figures for GCSE entries in 2016 show a 6% decline in the number of Art and Design pupils compared with 2015. In a NSEAD (National Society for Education in Art and Design) survey nationally, 89% of primary teachers in state schools indicated that the time allocated for Art and Design has reduced in the last five years.

We've seen reductions in teachers entering training for arts subjects too: in the two years to 2018, new trainee numbers in drama, art and design and music have fallen from 1238 to 990, a decrease of 20%. This is a vicious circle of course, as fewer pupils studying the subjects leads to fewer people with skills to teach the subject, and therefore fewer opportunities for pupils to study the subjects in depth.

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) calculated that 53.5% of pupils took one or more arts GCSEs in 2016 – a ten-year low – meaning that almost half of all pupils take no arts subjects (Hutchinson, 2016).

There are many reasons why pupils don't take arts subjects at GCSE and beyond. But it can't help if pupils don't get enough experience of the arts before they make their choices. For many children, it is the arts subjects that they miss out on when the time comes for 'interventions': when you're in danger of missing your targets for English and maths, additional classes often take place during arts lessons. Sadly, those pupils are often the ones who would thrive in more creative subjects, and for some of them, arts lessons might be the reason why they engage with school at all. A worrying new development, highlighted in a recent survey of ATL (Association of Teachers and Lecturers) members (and by Ofsted [see Turner, 2017]), is the three-year GCSE course, brought about because of the increased content in some new GCSE specifications. This means that pupils are making GCSE choices before the end of Year 8 – when almost half of them will drop arts subjects altogether. Even those who want to carry on with creative pursuits will find it difficult: in order to accommodate the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), many schools are putting arts subjects into a single-options 'basket', meaning that pupils can choose only one.

A report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (Last 2017) suggests that pupils often opt out of arts subjects in part because of a perception (by pupils themselves, or more often by their parents) that there is little value in pursuing the arts. It can also often seem less clear cut what success looks like ('what do I have to do to get an A?'), and in this education climate where exam success has become the reason to learn anything, pupils fear failure. Funding too is a major problem facing schools: less money means cutting down on many of the extracurricular activities that primary schools do, like whole-class instrument teaching, bringing in 'artists-in-residence' or taking part in inter-school workshops and trips out; it can mean fewer resources – and the arts are particularly resource heavy; and it can mean bigger classes – meaning less access to the equipment that is available, less time to take part in practical activity. It is often those pupils who are least likely to have access to cultural and creative

activity outside school who will miss out on those activities in less well-funded schools.

Why is this important? Even if it were true (and it isn't) that arts subjects are not useful for future employment, schools aren't solely about ensuring that children get good jobs. Even Nick Gibb is clear that a shared cultural heritage is important for a well-rounded humanity: focusing on the historical development of music and listening to the work of great composers and knowing about the historical development of art through a greater emphasis on teaching about great artists and designers are both components of the National Curriculum. He's also clear that children and young people should be taught techniques of drawing, drama and playing a musical instrument, for example.

In fact, the arts and creative industries provide an annual £84 billion contribution to the UK economy and 1.7 million British jobs, according to the HEPI report. Many jobs combine arts with other subjects – computer game design is a key growth area which requires creative skills and imagination alongside technical skills. But there is more to it than that. In an ongoing research project that we're undertaking with the organisation 'Education and Employers' and the Edge Foundation, it is becoming clear that one of the skills that employers are looking for in school leavers is that of confidence – and opportunities in the arts are great for confidence building. Obviously, the opportunity to stand up in front of peers and others in performance demands confidence, but we shouldn't overlook the confidence required to play with a medium or a technique in art and to come up with an original piece of work; to risk failure, to make mistakes, to come back and try again ('resilience' in current government parlance) are all key skills developed by those who undertake artistic endeavours. These are also skills that underpin innovation, particularly the ability to bring together ideas from different disciplines to create something unique. While it's important to build on cultural heritage, to understand the history and to develop the technical skills of your chosen art, it's also vital to experience the thrill of creation. And it's hard to do that in an environment with too few resources, too little time and too few teachers with the depth of skill and knowledge to support learning.

So what do we need in order to provide a deep creative education for children and young people? I think it goes beyond making sure that the creative subjects are valued, perhaps as part of the EBacc or through other accountability measures. It goes beyond funding schools properly so that every pupil has opportunities for trips, workshops and extended participation in theatre or drawing or music. It goes beyond making sure that all primary teachers are confident in supporting and teaching creative endeavour, and making sure there are sufficient teachers trained and employed in the arts in secondary schools. I think it needs a fundamental rethink of the purposes of education – to put creativity, confidence in the practical and the embodied, and risk at the heart of learning.

We need to integrate the arts into science, technology, engineering and maths, to develop 'STEAM', but not just because it's right to give more – or all

– pupils opportunities to engage in all those subjects. We need to think beyond traditional subject boundaries. I think of *The Hive* at Kew Gardens: described as a feat of engineering, it incorporates geometry, sound and light, and is inspired by scientific research into the health of honeybees – interdisciplinarity at its most creative and most beautiful.

This requires a kind of curriculum that goes far beyond the subject timetabling that often replaces deep curriculum planning in secondary schools. It needs a move to project or topic thinking in primary schools that is completely different from the kind of planning I was taught as a primary trainee – less ‘how do I cover all the subjects in this topic?’ and more ‘how do I combine elements of the different disciplines to create something new?’

The implications of this for teacher training and development are huge. This kind of planning and teaching requires a great depth of subject understanding, and a new pedagogy, to challenge and motivate pupils. I think we have a fledgling model in our best early years practice.

Young children don’t learn in discrete subjects – not until we adults start to force that on them. In the best early years provision, children are engaged in play that extends across a range of areas of learning. They play with cars in ways that engage their whole bodies and their imagination – ‘I am a garage mechanic’. They use technical language, as offered by experienced adults within the play, they work together to build a garage, they experiment with forces and speed, they tell stories about the people whose cars they are fixing. They take photos of the cars they’re selling and create adverts. Knowledgeable teachers extend the play, showing them different ways of taking photos, setting up backgrounds and lighting, asking questions that further develop stories, offering bigger, heavier cars and steeper, longer ramps – taking the children in new directions that engage them in a range of subject disciplines.

We’ve become so accustomed to the idea that learning must be subject-based – probably so that you can sit an exam at the end that tells us how much you’ve learnt – that even early years practice is fast becoming about sitting children down to do phonics and number work. And yet, if we want our young people to thrive in a multi-disciplinary, ever-connected world, we need to teach them the skills and the knowledge they need to help them make the best of it.

When it comes to it, we need a curriculum with more space. Time management books often focus on the use of ‘white space’ – leaving gaps in your day, in your plans, time to reflect and regroup. These days, the curriculum is packed so full of content, and practice so focused on demonstrating progress, that pupils have no time. The three-year GCSE is an attempt by schools to create some of the flexibility that pupils need, but a better curriculum would set out the key concepts, knowledge and skills, leaving space for pupils to reflect, to make connections and to create.

We’d need to rethink tests and exams too. We’d probably not do away with exams that were subject specific. But we could also develop assessments that were more like the real world – developing and presenting ideas to real audiences, for example, combining knowledge and practical skill, and engaging

the whole person, not just the writing hand. This would need a different form of accountability, that didn't rely on data from tests, but was instead an improvement partnership, engaged in professional dialogue based on real understanding and knowledge of learning.

The problem with the creative subjects is that they are obvious in their messiness, and governments can't work out how to put them in their neat, ordered frameworks. Incidentally, this is also the problem with children! Education shouldn't be a neat, contained package, delivered uniformly so everyone comes out the same.

What we need is a creative revolution, reminding us all that learning at its best is messy and playful, and can be so while retaining depth and rigour. Learning should ultimately take us beyond what we think we know into new and unexplored territory. And it does that by embedding creativity into everything we teach and learn.

### Notes

- [1] Speech delivered on 10 November 2014 at the launch of the 'Your Life' campaign. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-speaks-at-launch-of-your-life-campaign>
- [2] Speech delivered at the Music and Drama Education Exposition on 10 February 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-importance-of-high-quality-arts-education>

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