



NACE BLOG

What next for creative arts, design and PE in our schools?

Far from being “soft” or “easy” options, the creative arts, design and physical education have an essential part to play in delivering a broad, challenging and opportunity-rich curriculum. NACE trustee Liz Allen CBE explores the current status of these subjects in UK schools, and shares next steps for school leaders...

“In whatever way you construct your list of 21st century skills, you will always come across creativity – creating new value... bringing together the processes of creating, of making, of bringing into being and formulating and looking for outcomes that are fresh and original... This is all about imagination, inquisitiveness, collaboration, self-discipline.” - Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills and Special Adviser on Education Policy, OECD

Why prioritise creative arts, design and physical education?

If one of the purposes of education is to prepare young people for their working lives, we need to ensure they are equipped with the creative, imaginative, problem-solving skills that will enhance their economic future. The growing opportunities in creative businesses, science, technology and the media offer them a bright future: those who have experienced a rich, creative curriculum will have a head start and their quality of life will be enhanced in many ways.

Social impact

The social value of creative arts and design education is widely evidenced. Schools with a strong academic and enrichment offer in the arts, design technology and physical education create a culture of citizenship, service and tolerance. Young people who engage in creative activities are more likely to feel socially confident, to take on roles of responsibility and to be active members of their community.

Most significantly, there is a growing body of evidence that participation can improve social mobility. The Cultural Learning Alliance (CLA)'s 2018 [briefing on arts in schools](#) found that students from low-income backgrounds are three times more likely to get a degree. They benefit most from access to their cultural heritage and the opportunity to develop their creative thinking and the perseverance and self-discipline to succeed.

Cross-curricular benefits

The educational value goes beyond the creative arts, DT and PE curriculum. Studying these subjects improves young people's cognitive abilities and enhances their performance in English and mathematics, especially for young people from low-income backgrounds. The CLA paper argues that "they are as essential as literacy and numeracy in equipping children with the skills for life and the creativity to contribute to the building of a successful nation."

Wellbeing and personal development

The personal value of creative arts, design and PE may have been grossly underestimated. It is possible there is a causal link between the decline in the arts, technology and PE curriculum and enrichment provision and the worrying rise in young people's mental health issues, feelings of low self-esteem and lack of self-regulation.

There is no doubt that participation in the creative arts, design and sport make us happier and healthier. The [Time To Listen](#) research articulates the value that both young people and their teachers place on their relationships: "...teachers approached students as 'artists'... (working) to encourage intellectual and disciplinary skills development... to take risks, to be responsible for deadlines... to engage in critical interpretation of their own and others' work."

The high levels of trust and respect between teachers and students allow young people to build both the empathy and resilience to succeed in collaborative and challenging environments. The experience of being part of a team – preparing for a production, performance, competition, exhibition – may not eliminate the pressures young people face but it can give them a strong sense of self-worth and the socio-emotional confidence and skills to overcome them and thrive.

The decline in arts, design and PE provision in our schools

Despite all the well-documented evidence, arts and design provision continues to decline and PE/sport is barely holding ground in 90% of schools, according to an ASCL survey in 2017. A number of factors are pushing them further out of reach:

Misguided perceptions

For many years, the prevailing view in the state sector has been that the arts, design and sport are a pleasant diversion from academic rigour for the more able and good choices for students who are less academic and more practically inclined – all far from the truth, as the independent sector has demonstrated.

To excel in music, art, dance, design technology or sport, young people develop high levels of critical analysis and creative thinking, the rigour of listening, sharing expertise and collaborating, the self-discipline to practise and persevere. Far from being "soft" options, they help to build the character and competencies that lead to success in the core and foundation subjects.

School performance measures

Recent national strategies and their accountability systems have had unintended consequences, making it increasingly difficult for subjects to survive if they don't count in performance measures. I recall the introduction of the EBacc as a concept, even before it became a formal measure: many school leaders rushed to re-configure their GCSE option choices, anxious for students to choose subjects that would count the most.

The introduction of new GCSE specifications prompted a move in many schools to start GCSE courses in Year 9; the opportunity for young people to study creative subjects in depth were drastically reduced and it became increasingly difficult for schools to sustain specialist teaching. Primary schools faced similar challenges from the change in Key Stage 2 performance measures.

Financial pressures

Significant ongoing reductions in school funding make curriculum design and delivery increasingly challenging. The fear is that, once the specialist teaching and resources are lost it will be hard to reinstate them.

Reasons to be optimistic

There are the early signs of positive change that should fuel our optimism.

The Russell Group's recent decision to remove its list of "facilitating subjects" for A-level choices is a welcome start.

The new Ofsted inspection framework (2019), "will move Ofsted's focus away from headline data to look at how schools are achieving these results and whether they are offering a curriculum that is broad, rich and deep... Those who are bold and ambitious and run their schools with integrity will be rewarded." (Amanda Spielman, press release)

And – as we see from our own community of NACE Challenge Award-accredited schools – there are many examples of schools which offer a broad, rich and deep curriculum and which show integrity by putting the life chances of their students first when making curriculum and staffing decisions. As a consequence, their students and staff thrive in a school that is alive with creative energy.

Case study: Greenbank High School

At Greenbank High School, teachers' deep subject knowledge and expert questioning lead to high levels of discourse: students are articulate, critical, creative thinkers and confident, resilient learners. The broad, rich curriculum runs from Year 7 through to 11, with opportunities for students to specialise (e.g. in languages, the arts) from Year 9.

Strong collaborative working relationships with primary, FE and HE providers and excellent in-house careers advice and guidance create a culture of deep learning and high aspiration. The school buzzes with activity: students enjoy the range of academic, physical and creative challenges and the leadership opportunities they bring; they are socially aware and active in

supporting each other, both academically and emotionally and see themselves as global citizens.

Case study: Oaksey C of E Primary School

At Oaksey C of E Primary School pupils experience a rich, deep subject curriculum aimed at developing “lively, enquiring minds with the ability to question and argue rationally. We aim to enable our children to be well motivated both mentally and physically for success in the wider world.” As well as academic rigour, there is a focus on values: “valuing human achievement and aspirations; developing spirituality, creativity and aesthetic awareness; finding pleasure in learning and success.”

IT and computing have a high profile: “to enrich and extend learning; to find, check and share information; to create presentations and analyse data; to use IT in real contexts and appreciate e-safety and global applications.” The school grounds are a rich learning environment, with spaces for performance, meditation and reflection designed and constructed by the pupils, as well as places for horticulture and play. Music provision is strong: a specialist part-time teacher and a richly equipped music room (funded by the children’s fund-raising efforts in the community), give every child the opportunity to learn and perform.

What steps can school leaders take?

Taking courage from the Russell Group’s decision, Ofsted’s messaging and the examples of schools which have succeeded in maintaining a flourishing and broad curriculum, school leaders can consider the following:

- Recognise and celebrate the value of creativity and critical thinking across the curriculum.
- See the creative subjects, PE and design technology as essential to the development of high cognitive performance, self-discipline and collaborative practice, well-deserving of their place in the curriculum.
- Employ specialist teachers and encourage them to engage with professional organisations and the creative industries, so they can continue to see themselves as artists.
- Be adventurous with Pupil Premium funding, to make cultural and creative learning opportunities accessible.
- Manage teachers’ workload so they can focus on rich extracurricular provision. Value and acknowledge the impact enrichment makes on young people’s life chances.
- Engage with national champions in the arts and creative industries. Artsmark, Youth Sports Trust, DATA, the RSC, Get Creative (BBC Arts), the Cultural Learning Alliance and local organisations are among many who can give advice and guidance.

“We owe it to future generations to ensure they experience an education that offers them the whole of life and culture: head, heart and soul.” – Cultural Learning Alliance

NACE trustee Liz Allen CBE has over five decades' experience of working in education – including several headships, work with educational charities, and support for schools in England and overseas to raise aspirations and achievement. She is a National Leader of Education and in June 2014 was awarded the CBE for Services to Education.

References:

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- Ofsted and HMCI commentary September 2018: “Curriculum and the New Inspection Framework”
- House of Commons, Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2019: “Changing Lives: The Social Impact of Participation in Culture and Sport”