

An appreciation of the arts distinguishes between beauty and market economy thinking

In the last few weeks more than [100 of the UK's leading artists have joined together to pen a letter condemning the impact of the government's English Baccalaureate \(or EBacc\) on the provision of arts education](#). One of the letter's authors (an artist who also taught art from the 1960s to 2009), argues that the importance of the arts has been eroded at all levels within education over the last 15 to 20 years and that, "without doubt, such ill thought through policies and attitude to the arts is a tragedy".

I quite agree that the EBacc (and the Progress 8 measure) is disastrous for the preservation of arts education in maintained schools but, on the point of the arts being eroded at all levels in recent decades, I have to object.

On the one hand, my own arts education at an independent school in the late 80s was uninspiring. The school placed a greater emphasis on academia and sports and so, except for my immersion in choral music – a tradition of the school which I enjoyed as a chorister for many years – I don't remember particularly fondly any Drama, Music or Art lessons or extra-curricular pursuits. Everything felt a bit stiff and unnatural, and there was very limited breadth in content in terms of the type of art or music or theatre we learnt about. At the time, nothing sparked in me a particular passion for the arts.

On the other hand, at Gresham's today we have incredible facilities and opportunities for all pupils to: learn instruments; be creative; perform in productions; see world-class theatre, opera, dance and orchestral performances and receive masterclasses from performers; visit the most renowned galleries; and to be exposed to great works of art.

A school's financial situation will certainly impact its ability to offer one-to-one tuition, dedicated facilities and resources, and expertise, as will its geographical proximity to theatres and galleries. These are some of the factors that are making it increasingly difficult for maintained schools to ring-fence arts provision at a time when the government, through the EBacc and Progress 8, has indicated that it considers these subjects to be second-rate. But the ideology of a school's leadership team and its ability to attract the best arts teachers will also impact the extent to which resources are allocated to arts lessons, clubs, and trips. Leadership teams which are passionate about the value of the arts could decide not to cave in to the pressures of league tables and instead commit to continuing to offer arts education. Similarly, the most enthusiastic and passionate teachers bring their own influences and interests into their teaching, to the point where their enthusiasm is contagious. Teachers who are willing to invest their time and expertise in putting on performances and showcases are also fundamental to a school's ability to offer opportunities for pupils to develop their interests and skills.

For example, our annual production involves 200 pupils in a creative project. They learn that those selected to play the lead roles weren't flawless at the first rehearsal, and neither were the dancers or the lighting technicians or the make-up artists. Everyone can be involved and everyone can improve, week on week, month on month and, by being involved at a young age, those who want to pursue their development in one of these areas will have a platform from which to take on larger roles or greater responsibilities in future productions.

Fortunately for me my lack of interest in the arts didn't last. I had an 'arts awakening' later on in life. Not only did I marry an artist, but I distinctly remember having a real lightbulb moment during a school History trip I was chaperoning to Russia. I had trawled through galleries before, with my heart not really in it, but on visiting the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow I was completely overwhelmed by the quality and diversity of the art on display.

For me it is these two factors which are the key to sparking pupils' appreciation of art, and the arts: 1) having someone who is both knowledgeable and passionate to absorb enthusiasm from and 2) having access to a wide variety of high quality work.

Another passion that I developed later on in life, in addition to fine art, is opera, which I enjoy immensely. I suspect that, had I been taken to the Royal Opera House as a child, the breath-taking experience of live opera would have sparked my appreciation for the music much earlier on. The same might be true if I had been to see the English National Ballet, or if I had attended more first-rate theatre productions. I am quite fortunate that, in my adult years, I have been able to access and enjoy as much of these types of experience as I have. Not everyone will have these opportunities and if someone's passion for the arts was not ignited during their time at school, and they don't have opportunities to be introduced to and immersed in the arts as an adult, their 'art awakening' may never happen – which would be tragic both for them on an individual level, in terms of what they miss out on, but also on a societal and economic level.

The arts are essential in helping us to understand the world we live in today. Films, literature, visual art, music, dance and theatre all help to portray human experiences in a tangible way – from depicting historical events that can be difficult to imagine from textbooks alone, to showing theories about how the world could be in the future or in a differently organised society acted out. They also have the astonishing capacity to move us, to make us feel and respond and think about things in new or nuanced ways, and to give us joy.

The arts also teach us about what is valuable. Where value is attributed based on supply and demand thinking alone, it's possible to perceive that furnishing a house with lavish, expensive materials, is the height of good taste. I would personally place much higher value on something that is beautiful, regardless of the price tag – for example, a beautifully painted representation of a favourite scenic view, or a memory that has been depicted especially well for others to enjoy. In short, the arts make us more human.

One purpose of the arts in education is to broaden the creative mind so that pupils will learn to address and approach challenges in different ways, and to ensure that schooling doesn't simply become a production line dedicated to churning out human capital to suit the skills shortages of the day. The arts within education ensure that pupils develop as well-rounded, thoughtful, flexible citizens of the future. But we need to ensure that young people don't see the arts as being elitist, or unmanly, and so as part of an arts education teachers also have a responsibility to speak about the arts in a

way that encourages participation by all and doesn't devalue the arts by using words like 'soft' to describe the subjects.

It's important not to give the message that any subjects are weaker than any others and part of the way to do so is to be genuinely open minded about which pupils should take which subjects when the time comes for them to choose their GCSEs. We ought not to be putting higher achievers off selecting the arts – they will most likely achieve highly in whatever subjects they choose, so what good reason would there be to pressure them away from the arts? These are fantastically useful skills, enriching experiences and, what's more, are fantastic nourishment for the soul, playing an important role in all of our lives, young people included, in helping us to maintain balance and mental well-being. So we shouldn't devalue the arts by using condescending language. The arts are not a bastion for those who don't like written work – they are substantial, challenging and thrilling subjects.

Schools are quite uniquely able, in setting timetables and determining extra-curricular activities, to cajole, encourage and direct pupils into trying different elements of the arts that perhaps receive less attention outside of school. You might think teenage boys would never want to sing in a choir but, when I was at school, and here at Gresham's too, being part of a group of your peers who similarly enjoy the challenge of practising and performing together in this way becomes a favourite pastime for many.

So I certainly do think schools have a responsibility to enthuse about the arts and to provide pupils with at least a basic introduction to a truly diverse portfolio – both through curricular and extra-curricular offerings – in order to create that initial spark of interest in individual pupils. From there, with the right encouragement and recommendations by supportive teachers and parents about which piece of art, or which performance, or which piece of literature a pupil might be interested in, today's young people are much more free to take control of their own arts education. In a world of YouTube and Google, and with initiatives like National Theatre Live broadcasting theatre, ballet and opera into local cinemas, access is increasingly becoming less of a barrier.

An initial appreciation of the arts will feed pupils' interests in developing their own creativity and performance skills; and the development of creativity and performance skills will in turn feed their appreciation of the extraordinary that's already available out there for their enjoyment. We just need to get them going in the first place – and all schools can and should commit to this ambition.