

Chartered College of Teachers *Impact* article

What's different about arts teachers (and why it matters)

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We've recently finished analysing 6000 responses from 14-18 year old students. As part of a three year research project, we asked students - through focus group interviews and a survey - about the arts in school: whether the arts subjects matter to them, what they learn, how they experience the teaching. One message came through consistently and powerfully: that students think their arts lessons and their arts teachers are different. This short article is about what those differences are and why they matter.

These findings and our analysis of them come from the Tracking Arts Learning and Engagement Project (TALE), a study funded by Arts Council England and jointly conducted by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Tate and the University of Nottingham. The research took place in thirty secondary schools, fifteen nominated by the RSC and fifteen by Tate because of the long-term professional involvement of either a teacher or the school with the company/gallery. The case study schools are spread across the regions of England from Northumberland to Cornwall; they serve very different communities and are faring differently in terms of Ofsted inspection ratings. Three of the schools are special schools; 29 are state schools and one is independent. We tracked 63 arts teachers over the three years of the study, as well as the students. (The full report of the project findings, papers and chapters is available at <https://researchtale.net>).

So, our sample of schools was purposive, rather than representative; the sites were chosen for their potential to give empirical and theoretical richness to our inquiry. We were conscious that many state schools struggle to offer their students a rich arts and cultural education, though this rarely seems to be the case in the independent sector. We wanted evidence of what difference - if any - sustained engagement with the arts has on the lives of students in schools, to understand better what some students are getting and some are missing. To do this we needed to identify schools that had a reasonable degree of commitment to arts and cultural education. We took involvement with the RSC or Tate professional development programmes as an indication of this.

What the students said

The overwhelming consensus from students was that their arts teachers teach 'differently', in ways that they generally like and appreciate. Of course, individual practice varies between teachers and across different arts disciplines and, for a variety of reasons, teachers are not always able to put their pedagogical principles into practice. Nevertheless, very clear and coherent themes emerged from the

teacher interviews in response to questions about how they taught and how they wanted to teach, and these findings were reinforced by what students told us, and from our own observations.

Students reported that arts lessons provide them with opportunities to work independently, to do research, to explore questions that they are interested in, to develop skills and to realise ambitious ideas. Many students told us that this contrasted with their experience of other lessons where they felt less 'free', more constrained both by the structure of typical lessons and by the need to maintain pace and coverage of the syllabus requirements. Often students spoke of feeling 'relaxed' in arts lessons while also emphasising that they worked hard and that there was a lot of time-consuming work to do in and out of school. Many students linked this experience - and the opportunities the arts give them for self-expression - to their own well-being and mental health; they saw their art work as a valve for releasing pressures they experienced elsewhere in their lives (including in school).

Arts pedagogies

The TALE interviews and observation data show that in both the performing and visual arts, teachers set out to approach students as 'artists', treating the class as a community of producers working together to share, critique and debate ideas in a respectful and appreciative manner. They often set ambitious projects and scaffolded the teaching so that students could develop understanding over time, make and correct mistakes, rehearse ideas, build their confidence. In this way, they frequently helped students exceed their own (and others') expectations. When working with Shakespeare, teachers used rehearsal room and ensemble pedagogies. In art rooms teachers worked through whole class workshops, and small group and individual projects to encourage intellectual and disciplinary skills development. Students were supported to take risks, to be responsible for deadlines, to exhibit and perform their work to real audiences. They were expected to engage in critical interpretation of their own and others' work.

An unmissable characteristic of so many of the teachers in our sample was their own personal levels of cultural engagement. Many of the teachers engaged deeply with the arts themselves, attending events, exhibitions and performances, some directing, acting, making and showing their own work. Many were part of local arts and cultural networks; some were also part of regional and national networks. These teachers were committed to continuing to learn about the arts. They shared their knowledge and out-of-school experiences with their students, routinely talking about what they had seen and made and done and read, creating an ongoing classroom conversation. In this sense, they embodied for their students what it means to be culturally engaged and to be both critical appreciative audiences and active cultural producers.

This approach to cultural engagement led the teachers to find out about and value students' own cultures and interests. They recognised students' own arts practices as cultural participation and as learning resources, took a critical interest in the

popular and everyday and looked for opportunities to negotiate the curriculum to reflect students' individual interests. They actively tried to connect students to local artists, events, institutions and organisations, through sharing information, organising in and out of school visits and sometimes creating opportunities for students to exhibit and perform their work for wider audiences. In these senses, the arts teachers' pedagogies contained a significant – and distinctive - element of *brokerage*: between the cultures of home and local communities, the personal and the public, the taught and the experienced curriculum. We think that this arts and cultural brokerage is not exclusive to arts teachers, but that it is a distinctive and important component of their signature pedagogies (Hall and Thomson, 2016).

Why these differences matter

Just as PE teachers' work, looked at through a broad educational lens, is now seen as important in helping young people establish lifelong patterns of physical activity and engagement (DfE, 2013), the work of arts teachers might be said to be fundamentally about the formation of active and engaged cultural citizens. Both these sets of teachers need to work across the boundaries of school and the wider community. An important success criterion for both PE and the arts subjects is that students acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes that encourage them to make independent choices to engage in activity outside school.

Some of the signature pedagogies of different disciplinary areas represented in the secondary school curriculum are well known and acknowledged: fieldwork in geography, for instance, or analysis of primary source materials in history. We would argue that the distinctive cultural brokerage element of arts teachers' signature pedagogies is not currently well-recognised or valued in schools. This matters because effective arts teachers are engaged in highly skilled pedagogical work that requires deep knowledge of students, arts disciplines and professional norms and practices – and this work needs supporting through training and in the structures and reward systems of schools. Specifically:

- Recognition of the cultural brokerage work is important because it needs a commitment of time and money from the school budget. In many schools, engagement with cultural sites and events in or out of school is seen as an expendable luxury rather than a core part of the curriculum. Even in the schools we studied, where there was some degree of commitment to arts education, students routinely received messages from non-arts teachers and from school leaders that devalued the arts and positioned them as second rate activities.
- Initial training needs to support new arts teachers in understanding the importance of the cultural brokerage element of their role and in successfully negotiating the obstacles and arguments they are likely to meet.
- Like other secondary teachers, arts teachers need access to professional development in their discipline (Cordingley et al, 2018). As enthusiastic cultural consumers and sometimes artists themselves, the distinctiveness of

arts teachers' disciplinary identities lies in knowing how their particular field works, how it is developing and what the opportunities are. The obvious sites for their professional development are arts and cultural organisations. Arts teachers can play a unique role in brokering and sustaining relationships between cultural organisations and schools. Good partnership work between schools and arts institutions and organisations gives teachers access to working with professionals whose disciplinary norms and identities are different from their own; it allows them to engage with the ways theory and practice are combined within the specific discipline, to update their knowledge and refresh their enthusiasms. However, budget cuts have meant that, over the three years of the TALE research, fewer and fewer arts teachers were being given the chance to engage in the arts based professional development they most valued. Similarly, many teachers reported difficulties in sustaining partnerships with local arts and cultural organisations, because of lack of time and/or because such partnerships were accorded relatively low priority by senior leaders.

The experience of studying a broad and balanced curriculum exposes students to the different kinds of people who become teachers of different subjects and to the teaching approaches that are part of the way different disciplines are framed. Young people have the right to be introduced in school to these diverse ways of seeing, learning about and experiencing the world. But this diversity needs nurturing. The arts need nurturing.

References

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