

Teacher's Voice

Creativity in Education: Seizing opportunities

Sarah Lewis is the Headteacher of St Mary's CofE Primary School in Oxted, Leader of Tandridge Teaching Alliance and a Board member of Surrey's Cultural Education Partnership, Culture Box. She has led the development of the Partnership's Pupil Premium-focused work, which aims to make Surrey schools 'disadvantage-friendly' in terms of culture, through creative collaboration and partnerships to develop replicable and sustainable models for schools to work with artists. Here she shares her thoughts on creativity, education and seizing opportunities to shape children's learning for the better.

I believe we have a moment to seize in terms of embedding arts and cultural learning across the whole curriculum in Primary schools, but to achieve this, we need to ask ourselves the following question:

Why, given that creativity is fundamental to our humanity, is it not already embedded in our school systems?

In part, I am beginning to believe that this is because the barriers to a more holistic approach to education are not where we think they are - that rather than being ideological, they are fundamentally practical, and that it is this mismatch which is creating a gap when it comes to implementing improved schemes for learning.

Mind the Gap

Over the past year, I have had the privilege of working closely with Katie Green (ByKatieGreen), Alison Swann (Dance Educates) and Culture Box Surrey. Supported by grants from Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Surrey Education Trust, we worked across seven schools on an action research project called *Maths, Movement and Mastery*. This project worked to create a 'vocabulary' of movements linked to each of the digits 0-9, exploring and communicating number patterns through movement and dance.

One of the most exciting aspects of the project was that it wasn't only our pupils who were learning: teachers and artists were also positioned as learners. We wanted to ensure that the learning was personal, purposeful and clear for all involved. We were 'working with the willing', so we had the personal part covered. However, finding that common ground to make professional learning purposeful and clear was much harder - and we certainly veered off into some ideological conflicts at times!

We are still in the process of reviewing the full findings of the project but overall, some key learning has emerged around how to anticipate barriers to progress, and how important it is to be explicit about the benefits for children in terms of their learning.

Overcoming practical barriers

So...what stops schools being able to give more time to arts and culture in the classroom? If we want arts and culture embedded in our schools, we need to do better than to simply say, 'The arts are important'. It's just not enough to counteract the high-accountability culture so prevalent in schools today. Teachers and leaders need to understand why and how this is going to help their 'bottom line'; they need to feel that creative learning is not different from or additional to core learning. We need to make the change feel both purposeful and personal.

Through the *Maths, Movement and Mastery* project at St Mary's, we are drawing down heavily on the principles of practice and rehearsal within artistic disciplines, to show parallels with core curriculum

learning. This shows how arts and culture are inextricably linked with the curriculum as a whole. It also creates opportunities for multidisciplinary projects, rounded off by composite tasks that feature an element of performance to support the learning.

No expertise needed

A sticking point we wanted to explore was how to enable non-specialists to teach dance both regularly and effectively. We wanted to make key essential knowledge, skills and concepts relating to dance easily accessible for our teachers, so we asked Katie and Alison (the visiting practitioners) the following: 'What is it that you always see, do and say when running dance workshops to work out what non-specialists aren't automatically doing? What might be the impact if these aspects were explicitly articulated when meeting with teachers, both before and after sessions, as well as being illustrated throughout the workshops?'

Unsurprisingly, we found that the teachers who were the most confident in their own existing abilities or understanding really concentrated on the sessions. They captured the essential heart of the pedagogy and ably applied these ideas to their own practice. The children in their classes had richer experiences, and these teachers are now in a position to cascade what they have learnt to other colleagues, as well as to apply their learning more broadly in their own teaching practice.

Conversely, the teachers who were the least comfortable in their own abilities were adamant that they just wanted a lesson plan. They were the most likely to follow the 'surface' of the sessions in their own practice, but they then failed to encourage high enough standards from the children in terms of effort and the quality of their learning. For the children in these classes, having the opportunity to work with a skilled arts practitioner as part of the process was absolutely crucial to their successes.

We now have a much deeper understanding of how powerful embodied learning can be, and how much more we still have to learn. As a school, we have learnt that investing in working with artists and exploring key questions together has enabled us to achieve something we would never have managed alone.

Our full report will capture more about how our learning from the project has also influenced other work that Katie and Alison are carrying out with our teachers and pupils. At our school's core, we want to embed arts and creativity not only through subject-specific learning, but also through expanding on the principles of artists and schools working together, across the whole curriculum.

The Arts and Culture
Discipline of the arts
Acquisition of skills honed through regular repetition and rehearsal
Working to the deadlines of a performance or exhibition
Delivering under pressure
Communication through the arts
Underpinned by fluency in basic skills
Linking ideas to form meaning
Collaboration and exploration
Interpretation
Audience and performer
Reflection and feedback

Whole School Curriculum
Basic skills
Phonics
Tables
Number bonds
Spelling
Reading
Handwriting
Performing under exam pressure
Communicating understanding of learning
Underpinned by fluency in basic skills
Linking ideas to form meaning
Collaboration and exploration
Interpretation
Audience and performer
Reflection and feedback

