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**THE ARTS IN SCHOOLS:  
MAKING THE CASE, HEEDING THE EVIDENCE**

**Robin Alexander**  
University of Cambridge

- I -

We know that the arts excite, amaze, inspire and move us; that they illuminate and enrich our lives; that they deepen our understanding of who we are; that they propel our thinking beyond the actual and mundane into the realms of the possible, the mysterious and the exalted; that they help to nurture essential transferable skills; that they challenge conventional wisdom and speak truth to power; that they encourage us to think and feel more deeply and acutely. In short, we know that the arts are truly and profoundly educative - not least for children who are disadvantaged by circumstances over which they have no control.

Surely, if we know all this I don't need to say any more. Artistic, creative and cultural engagement are essential to every child's education. *Quod erat demonstrandum*. Bring on the next speaker.

Well, *we* may believe this but many people don't. To them, arts education may be desirable but it is certainly not essential. Of course, such people may *publicly* support arts education - for nobody wants to appear philistine - but their decisions and actions indicate otherwise.

Who are these doubters and unbelievers? Well, in the UK they include some of our political and educational leaders, though fortunately not all of them. How these people view the arts has consequences for every child, because it is they who determine what shall be taught in our schools. So in 2013 the UK government produced for England's schools a new national curriculum handbook with a very old message.<sup>1</sup> For primary schools - that is, for children between the ages of 5 and 11 - the handbook has 51 pages for mathematics but just two pages for visual arts, two for music and none at all for drama and dance. For secondary students, the UK government's proposed EBacc (English Baccalaureate) excludes creative and artistic subjects altogether.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, national tests reinforce this gulf between the so-called core subjects and the rest, and school inspections patrol and police it.

As for what happens here in Denmark ... well, that is for you to say, not me.

Of course, it's teachers, not politicians, who determine the nature and quality of children's learning. A curriculum on paper may have legal force but it has little practical meaning until it is translated by teachers into classroom experiences.

Yet policy *does* matter, for it sets the constraints of opportunity and accountability within which schools must work. It signals to teachers, parents, employers, the public - and of course children themselves - what kinds of learning matter most and least, what it means to be educated, and by what fundamental values a national culture is shaped and defined.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education (2013) *The National Curriculum in England: framework document*. London: DfE.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc>

Today, governments everywhere are petrified by PISA and obsessed by international league tables. This PISA panic leaves little time for arts education. So how can we persuade policymakers and educational leaders that PISA should *serve* education, not drive it, and that while STEM subjects - science, technology, engineering and mathematics - are indeed vital foundations for learning, employment and economic competitiveness, the arts have a strong claim too?

I want to suggest two responses. First, we should publicise the *evidence* that supports our cause. Second, we should expose those *myths* by which, for some people, even the strongest evidence is outweighed. We may not be successful, but we can try.

- II -

In Britain the case for arts education was made as long ago as 1982 in the Gulbenkian report *The Arts in Schools*.<sup>3</sup> Yet while encouraging the believers Gulbenkian had limited impact elsewhere. Then in 1999 a UK government enquiry chaired by Ken Robinson produced a report<sup>4</sup> that set the arts in the broader context of culture and creativity, thus enabling its arguments to appeal to others than those who were already convinced. Robinson's enquiry argued that creative capacities are needed in all walks of life, including business, industry, science and technology - a fact which, of course, our best scientists and business leaders have always understood.

As well as extending and mainstreaming the idea of creativity the Robinson report brought many businesses on side and encouraged partnerships between artists, performers and teachers of a kind that across the UK are now commonplace. I expect you'll hear more about these from Paul Collard this afternoon. Yet one thing did *not* change: the national curriculum. Here the message was clear: by all means develop partnerships and do exciting things *outside* the classroom, but *inside* the classroom the old curriculum hierarchy remains intact.

Next came a major report from the United States. In 2011, President Obama's Committee on the Arts and Humanities published *Reinvesting in Arts Education: winning America's future through creative schools*.<sup>5</sup> Like Robinson, it argued that economic success requires creative capacities, though it placed greater emphasis on the arts as such than Robinson, whose report tended to lose them in its quest to spread the idea of generic creativity. Like Robinson, the US report saw the future not in traditional teaching but in partnerships between artists and teachers, arts organisations and schools. Children and the Arts, of which I'm proud to be a trustee, provides many brilliant and successful examples of such partnerships, as do Barndrømmen, Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE), Sistema Scotland and other organisations represented at this conference .

But the strength of the US report lay in its use of research evidence to show how the arts in schools can have a significant positive impact on five educational outcomes:

- *Student motivation and engagement*, including attendance, persistence, attention, aspiration and risk-taking.
- *Student achievement* in tests of reading and mathematics.
- *Skill transfer* from the arts to other subjects, including, again, reading and mathematics. (One such research study claims to have demonstrated 65 relationships between arts and non-arts outcomes).

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<sup>3</sup> Gulbenkian Foundation (1982) *The Arts in Schools: principles, practice and provision*. London: Gulbenkian Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (1999), *All Our Futures: creativity, culture and education*. London: DfEE and DCMS.

<sup>5</sup> *President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities (2011), Reinvesting in Arts Education: winning America's future through creative schools*. Washington DC: PCAH.

- *Habits of mind* across all areas of learning, including problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, and the capacity to deal with ambiguity and complexity.
- *Social competencies* including collaboration, teamwork, tolerance and self-confidence.

An impressive list.

The US report also cited a study by James Catterall that followed students from school into adulthood. This showed that such outcomes aren't just temporary: they can have a lasting impact on students' lives. And of disadvantaged students Catterall said: 'Arts-engaged low-income students are more likely than their non-arts-engaged peers to have attended and done well in college, obtained employment with a future, volunteered in their communities, and participated in the political process by voting.'<sup>6</sup>

A further body of evidence comes from brain research. Peter Vuust will talk about this later, so I'll merely mention examples such as the links between music training, phonological awareness and early reading skills (something the Hungarian composer Kodály spotted back in the 1930s); between the disciplined practice required for learning to play an instrument and improvement in other cognitive domains; and between musical training and the ability to manipulate information.

Back to the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. What was the impact of this third excellent report? Sadly but symptomatically, my American colleagues shrug and tell me that few American educators have even heard of it. They tell me that no evidence, however conclusive, can resist the pressure of high stakes testing and the Common Core Curriculum Standards.

By now it's clear that in this area as in so many others, governments tend to be selective in their use of evidence. We must not be. It is therefore right that I should compare my three reports with a much less favourable account of the evidence which was published last year. England's Education Endowment Foundation receives funding from the UK government to organise randomised control trials of initiatives that look likely to improve the educational performance of disadvantaged children. Responding to pressure from those who complained that these trials are limited to initiatives in language, maths and science, the Foundation commissioned a review of 200 research studies dealing with the impact of arts education on children's learning.

Although the resulting report<sup>7</sup> confirmed some of the findings reported elsewhere, for example the non-musical benefits of learning to play a musical instrument, it could find no proof of the impact on educational attainment of the visual arts and very little positive evidence relating to drama, dance, poetry or creative writing. Devastatingly, the report concluded: 'Though there are promising leads, at the moment there is not enough robust evidence to be able to demonstrate a causal link between arts education and academic achievement.'<sup>8</sup>

But before you become too depressed, I must tell you that this UK review is deeply flawed.

First, it is extremely narrow in its focus. Most of the studies reviewed were of primary school students. Most tracked outcomes not in the arts themselves but in other subjects. This report defined 'academic achievement' not, as logic dictates, as achievement in the subjects in question but as achievement in language and mathematics. I shall return to this point later, but for the moment we can imagine the consternation if someone were to suggest that children's mathematical understanding should be assessed by a test in, say, Danish history.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p 18.

<sup>7</sup> See, B.H. and Kokotsaki, D. (2015) *Impact of Arts Education on the Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Outcomes of School-Aged Children*. London: Education Endowment Foundation.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p 3.

Second, this report judged all the studies it reviewed against the so-called 'gold standard' of the randomised control trial (RCT), with its use of pre-test / post-test and control and experimental groups. No other methodology was deemed sufficiently robust. However, not only is considerable insight available from other kinds of research, but transferring to the complexities of teaching a model devised for clinical drug trials is highly contested.<sup>9</sup> To accept it without question was very unwise.

But the third flaw in the Education Endowment Foundation report was fatal. Having concluded that its evidence showed few causal links between arts education and what it chose to define as academic achievement the Education Endowment Foundation report said: 'Almost all of the studies in this review were rated as providing weak evidence because of serious design flaws.'<sup>10</sup>

I'm afraid that this is the point when the Education Endowment Foundation report invalidates itself. If the research studies in question are methodologically so weak, then they don't prove anything either way, negative or positive. End of story, end of report.

So where does this leave us? Well, setting the Education Endowment Foundation's pessimistic but self-defeating report against findings from other sources, I submit that we do in fact have a growing body of persuasive evidence. Here are a few examples:

In England, Opera North has been involved in the government-supported In Harmony programme. This aims 'to inspire and transform the lives of children in deprived communities, using the power and disciplines of community-based orchestral music-making.' It is one of six such projects in deprived areas in different parts of England. Earlier this year the programme's evaluation reported dramatically improved test results in language and mathematics, results that can only be explained by reference to the In Harmony programme.

In Germany, the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen moved its headquarters and rehearsal space into a Bremen inner-city secondary school. This created first unease, then a dawning sense of opportunity and finally an extraordinary fusion of students and musicians, with daily interactions between the two groups, students sitting alongside orchestra members at lunch and during rehearsals, a wealth of structured musical projects and dramatic improvements in student motivation, engagement and behaviour. As a result, the school's reputation was transformed from one to be avoided to one to which parents from other parts of Bremen competed to send their children.

Perhaps the most celebrated example is El Sistema, which since 1975 has promoted 'intensive ensemble participation from the earliest stages, group learning, peer teaching and a commitment to keeping the joy of musical learning and music making ever-present' through participation in orchestral ensembles, choral singing, folk music and jazz.

El Sistema provides the model for In Harmony, the English programme I mentioned whose work through Opera North led to big improvements in test results in Leeds; also for Sistema Scotland, which Colin McKerchar will tell you about this afternoon. The official evaluation of In Harmony cites 'positive effects on children's self-esteem, resilience, enjoyment of school, attitudes towards learning, concentration and perseverance' with, as a bonus, 'some perceived impact on parents and families including raised aspirations for their children, increased enjoyment of music and confidence in visiting cultural venues, and increased engagement with school.'<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For example: Ginsburg, A. and Smith, M.S. (2016) *Do Randomised Control Trials Meet the 'Gold Standard'? A study of the usefulness of RCTs in the What Works Clearinghouse*. Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p 4.

<sup>11</sup> Lord, P., Sharp, C., Mehta, P., and Featherstone, G. (2015). *Evaluation of In Harmony, Year 2*. Slough: NFER.

There are many more examples like these.

But here I must issue a warning. In the vital matter of seeking evidence to convince sceptics that arts education is not only desirable but also essential, we tend to use only those outcome measures in which the sceptics are likely to be interested. Hence the number of research studies that assess impact not in terms of outcomes specific to the arts but by reference to reading and mathematics.

The danger of presenting the case in this way, necessary in the current policy climate though it may be, is that it reduces the arts to the status of servant to other subjects, a means to someone else's end rather than an end in itself. ('Why study music?' 'To improve performance in maths'). It also blurs the vital differences that exist between the various arts in terms of their form, language, concepts, practice and modes of expression. Literature, creative writing, the visual arts, music, drama and dance may have elements in common - form, for example, is fundamental to all of them - but each is also in obvious ways distinct. Each art engages specific senses, requires specific skills and evokes specific responses.

Until schools have the courage to champion *l'art pour l'art* - art for art's sake - and to make the case for each art in its own terms, then arts education will continue to be relegated to the margins of the curriculum. And if one considers for a moment the spectacular yet also very diverse achievements of El Sistema or Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, let alone Britain's Children and the Arts or Denmark's Barndrømmen, one might ask how people can be so arrogant and misguided as to presume that only by improving literacy and numeracy test scores can the arts justify their place in the curriculum.

### - III -

I said earlier that in order to persuade we should not only argue from the evidence but also expose the myths to which people have recourse either because they know no better or because they find the evidence inconvenient. Let's consider three of these myths.

First and most familiar is the myth that the arts are about feeling and doing rather than thinking, and that they are therefore intellectually undemanding. We find this view reflected in the exclusion of the arts from lists of 'academic' subjects and from the English Baccalaurate for secondary students. We find it in a previous UK government's manifesto on curriculum and educational standards entitled *Excellence and Enjoyment*.<sup>12</sup> This rightly argued that teachers should strive for both excellence and enjoyment in learning, but then made it clear that excellence comes from literacy and numeracy, and enjoyment from the other subjects, signalling, conversely, that the arts are not about excellence while reading and mathematics are too serious in their pursuit of excellence to be enjoyed.

And so, following such leads, we continue to hear children saying, 'It's only art.' Only? Talk to any writer, artist, musician, actor or film-maker about the knowledge, skill, intellectual effort and even pain that go into creative activity of any kind.

Here's an example - from a somewhat specialised area of musical performance, admittedly, though I'm in the country of Buxtehude and the Århus Orgelfestival so I'll risk it. If any of you have learned to play Bach's organ trio sonatas, as I once struggled to do, you'll know how they stretch the mind as well as elevate the spirit. Right hand, left hand, fingers, feet: each of them tracing melodic lines which are independent as to their journey around the three keyboards - two manuals and pedals - yet also parts of a complex but coherent contrapuntal and harmonic whole that inspires intellectually, emotionally and at many other levels that are hard to name. This music is not just highly demanding technically. Eyes, hands, fingers and feet must be co-ordinated while the mind simultaneously sustains not

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<sup>12</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2003), *Excellence and Enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools*. London: HMSO.

three but four channels of creation - three independent yet interwoven musical lines and the whole.

So let's bury the myth that the arts are intellectually undemanding.

Then there's the myth that schools can *either* pursue high standards in so-called core subjects like language, maths and science, *or* they can offer children a broad and rich curriculum, but they can't do both. In this myth, curriculum breadth and educational standards are viewed as mutually exclusive.

In England, this myth, which has been peddled by most recent UK governments, has been firmly debunked not just by research but also by the government's own school inspectors. They have consistently shown that the primary schools that achieve best results in the government's literacy and numeracy tests are those that provide a curriculum that is broad, rich and well-managed, and in which all subjects, not just those that are tested, are treated seriously. The inspectors reckoned that the connection between curriculum breadth and standards in literacy and numeracy was causal rather than merely a matter of statistical association, and their findings reinforce research evidence on learning transfer between subjects.<sup>13</sup>

Children have a right to a curriculum that treats every subject with equal seriousness, regardless of how much time it is allocated, and educational standards are about the quality of learning in all subjects, not just those that are tested. If a subject is worth doing, it is worth doing well. That's what we argued and demonstrated in the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review - Britain's biggest public enquiry into primary education.<sup>14</sup>

Linked to the myths that the arts are intellectually undemanding and that they are incompatible with high standards in literacy and numeracy is the myth that the arts are not useful socially or economically. This myth, too, has been demolished by the UK government itself. Earlier this year it reported that what are called the 'creative industries' contribute £9.6 million pounds sterling *every hour* to the British economy, or £84 billion every year. At today's exchange rate that's about 83 million Danish kroner every hour and the staggering figure of 722 billion kroner for the UK economy every year (even when one allows for the fact that three of Britain's most successful television drama series - *Forbrydelsen*, *Borgen* and *Broen* - have come wholly or partly from Denmark). Britain's Minister for Culture said:

The creative industries are one of the UK's greatest success stories, with British musicians, artists, fashion brands and films immediately recognisable in nations across the globe. Growing at almost twice the rate of the wider economy our creative industries are well and truly thriving.<sup>15</sup>

Yet while the Minister for Culture celebrated that £84 billion annual contribution to the British economy, his colleague the Minister for Education excluded arts subjects from the secondary school EBacc. What is going on here? Our leaders need to talk to each other.

Having used evidence from one branch of government to expose the folly of another, I should stress that to judge the usefulness of the arts in terms of national economic impact is valid and indeed dramatically persuasive but it is far from sufficient. We have seen that when children engage meaningfully in the arts they gain in terms of motivation, attendance,

<sup>13</sup> This evidence is summarised and discussed in Alexander, R.J. (2013) *Curriculum Freedom, Capacity and Leadership in the Primary School*. Nottingham: National College of School Leadership. <http://www.robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Alexander-Nat-Coll-curric-capacity.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Alexander, R.J. (ed) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. London: Routledge. For information on the work and publications of the Review, and its successor the Cambridge Primary Review Trust: <http://www.cprtrust.org.uk>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/creative-industries-worth-almost-10-million-an-hour-to-economy>

engagement, aspiration, risk-taking, achievement across the curriculum, skill transfer to other subjects, habits of mind such as problem-solving and creative and critical thinking, and social competencies such as collaboration, tolerance and self-confidence. These outcomes are not only invaluable for the individual; they also contribute to the common good.

The arts are indeed useful, profoundly and comprehensively.

- IV -

I end by noting three problems whose persistence reinforces myths of the kind I have mentioned.

First, there's the problem of the habitually dualist or dichotomous mindset: thinking versus feeling, cognitive versus affective, academic versus practical, theory versus practice, 'hard' sciences versus 'soft' arts, knowledge versus skill, excellence versus enjoyment, depth versus breadth, and of course as the ancestor of them all, mind versus body. We don't need a philosopher to remind us that these are both unnecessary and untenable. But they are also hard to shift, for they are rooted not just in today's educational thinking but also, hence my allusion to Descartes, in the history of western culture.<sup>16</sup> We need to make inclusivity our cardinal curriculum principle: thinking *and* feeling, academic *and* practical, science *and* arts, depth *and* breadth, knowledge *and* skill, and so on.

Second, there's the problem of how the educational impact of the arts is demonstrated when the dominant paradigm allows only mathematical measurement. True, we have that annual figure of £84 billion / 722 billion kroner for the UK economy, but what about impact on student achievement? Many research studies, as we have seen, sidestep the problem by using whatever measures are available, which usually means that tests in reading or mathematics serve as proxies for attainment in the arts. But when *outcomes* specific to the arts are ignored because they don't fit the measurement paradigm, *objectives* specific to the arts tend not to be validated either. There is, as the great American arts educator Elliot Eisner first warned in the 1960s, an inherent problem in the way we define both objectives and outcomes in the arts.<sup>17</sup> Arts outcomes *can* be assessed, but the task requires a more subtle paradigm such as Eisner tried to capture in his distinction between instructional and expressive objectives and his efforts to extend the vocabulary of arts assessment beyond measurement into the more elusive realm of educational connoisseurship and criticism.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, there's the problem of understanding. Myths of the kind I have exposed stem in large part from simple ignorance of what the arts are about and the capacities that artistic endeavour requires. And I'm afraid this isn't just a matter of political or public perception: we must also accept the possibility that the considerable level of understanding and skill that good arts teaching requires may not be as widely available in our schools as it should be. Evidence from school inspections shows that this is certainly the case in England.<sup>19</sup> What about Denmark?

For, make no mistake, what teachers don't fully understand they will not teach well, and they probably won't value either, and the resulting combination of limited professional

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<sup>16</sup> Explored more fully in Alexander, R.J. (2008), *Essays on Pedagogy*, chapter 4 'Beyond dichotomous pedagogies.' London: Routledge.

<sup>17</sup> Eisner, E.W. (1969) 'Instructional and Expressive Objectives: their formulation and use in curriculum, in W.J.Popham, E.W.Eisner, H.J.Sullivan and LL.Tyler, *Instructional Objectives* (AERA Monograph Series on Curriculum Evaluation 3. Chicago: Rand McNally.

<sup>18</sup> Eisner, E.W. (2005) *Reinventing Schools: the selected works of Elliot W.Eisner*. London: Routledge, chapters 2-5.

<sup>19</sup> See note 13 and two recent reports from England's school inspectorate:  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/483347/Ofsted\\_annual\\_report\\_education\\_and\\_skills.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/483347/Ofsted_annual_report_education_and_skills.pdf)  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/459830/Key\\_Stage\\_3\\_the\\_wasted\\_years.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/459830/Key_Stage_3_the_wasted_years.pdf)

knowledge, low esteem, low expectations, uninspiring teaching and limited outcomes will reinforce and perpetuate all those myths and prejudices about arts education.

But when the arts are taught well, and teachers have the knowledge, skill and imagination to teach them with the flair and enthusiasm that we see in programmes like Denmark's Barndrømmen and Britain's Children and the Arts, the impact can be spectacular. We know it, the children know it, their parents know it, and the evidence proves it.

It is clear that we must educate our policymakers. We may also need to educate our educators.

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<http://www.robinalexander.org.uk>  
<http://www.cprtrust.org.uk>  
[rja40@cam.ac.uk](mailto:rja40@cam.ac.uk)