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Why bother with arts education in schools?

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Abstract
Enrolments in school arts subjects are falling in both England and Australia. There are various arguments made in an attempt to reverse the situation. The arts are said to be vital for the economy, linked to success in core school subjects, are educationally inclusive and important for their disciplinary knowledges. In this paper, based on my Radford lecture, I canvass these arguments, concluding that arts education, like the arts themselves, are complex and refuse simple reductions. I speculate about what this might mean for the arts and broader education research community.

Keywords Arts education · Policy · Curriculum · Pedagogy · Educational researchers

I have been told that there are no words for art, the arts or aesthetics in First Peoples' languages. Song, dance, verse, story and image are instead the archive of sixty thousand years or more of the knowings necessary for living well, together, with Country. Culture is, if I can paraphrase in my limited whitefella way, how things get done and life is lived.

I often wonder if this is also true for the rest of us.

Despite our written records, our 'scriptural economy' as de Certeau (1988) put it, culture is how we get things done too. But our categorisations, codifications and compartmentalisations somehow hide this from us. Well, most of us. As a high school student told my colleagues and I 'The arts tell us who we are, where we've been and where we might go in the future'. But here I am, the twenty first century well underway, asking why studying the arts are important.

Rather than attempt to give a conventional social science answer to this question, I offer a montage of the three most common arguments, using over two decades of research into the arts and creative practices in schools. Montage is an arts-informed genre which, as art forms will, refuses closure (Berger, 1997). Montage juxtaposes

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rather than creates explicit links. Montage deliberately leaves spaces which solicit interpretation and tangential flights of fancy. Montage is ambiguous and an invitation to add, subtract, elide and extend (Suhr & Willerslev, 2022). Montage, as written here, is social science argument interrupted by two descriptive interludes.

I invite you to consider why studying expressive arts subjects—music; art, craft and design; dance; creative writing; drama; film and photography—may be important while you read my montaged speculations.

Why ask the question?

In many parts of the word, arts education appears to be in trouble. This is certainly true in England where I have been based for the last two decades. The most recent exam board figures[1] suggest that, between 2015 and 2023, entry to A Level arts subject fell by 16% and entry to GCSE arts subjects dropped by 35%. Entries to GCSE Drama and Music have plummeted since 2015, with Drama take-up down by a third, and Music by 37.5%. The drop is year on year—2022 to 2023 saw a drop of 7.3% in Drama and 11.7% in Music GCSE entries. This grim national picture masks the negative impact of location and class on courses, entries and grades.[2] As the arts charity Cultural Learning Alliance[3] suggests

> The arts are being gradually squeezed out, year-on-year and major policy intervention and investment is required if we want to ensure all our young people have access to the arts education they are entitled to.

Longitudinal figures in other locations are harder to come by. Until the establishment of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), it was almost impossible to obtain any data about arts participation in Australian schools. ACARA now provides a partial picture of national arts enrolments. ACARA data on year 12 arts subject enrolments shows a drop in FTE equivalents over a ten year period. In 2011, 22.6% of boys and 37.5% of girls took an arts subject. In 2021 this had dropped to 16.9% of boys and 29.1% of girls.[4] These figures are likely to vary by state, as well as by school sector. One recent media report in Queensland used ACARA data to reveal a 44% drop in Arts subject enrolments (music, visual art,

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/provisional-entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2023-examseries#:~:text=GCSE%20entries%20have%20increased%20by,to%20806%2C410%20in%20summer%202023.

[2] Recent data in England shows that pupils in schools with the most disadvantaged populations were least likely to take music or performing arts and were also most likely to be in a school where these qualifications weren't available to them. https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2024/03/how-has-access-to-creative-subjects-changed-over-time/.

[3] https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/gcse-and-a-level-arts-entries-and-grades-2023/. See also the 2024 CLA Report Card https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CLA-2024-Annual-Report-Card.pdf.

[4] https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-subject-enrolments.

drama, dance, and film, television and new media) from 2012 to 2022.[5] The Australian National Report on School Education has arts relevant VET qualification data; in 2020, 29,327 15–19 years olds studied at least one creative arts subject at QF Certificate II or above (7.5% of the total enrolment). This is an increase from the 33,022 reported in 2016 (6.96% of total enrolment). The VET subject increase coincides with the decrease in school arts subject enrolment, but the relationship between the two is not clear.

The Australian lack of transparency about arts enrolments is problematic. A 2005 study of music education across the country noted that

> One of the disturbing observations from the research undertaken by the Review is that it is not possible to give a complete and accurate portrait of student participation and achievement in music across Australian schools. States and Territories do not aggregate information on students studying music K-10. There is some information at Year 12 level but needs careful interpretation (Pascoe et al., 2005, p. 50)

Little has changed it seems, with ongoing reviews (e.g. Collins et al., 2020; Hocking, 2023) producing much the same picture. Without regular and transparent data, it is hard to know what is going on, and why.

Reasons for falls in arts enrolments are generally complex. In England, the introduction of a new school performance measure, the English Baccalaureate (the E Bacc.), is usually blamed. The E Bacc. was introduced in 2010 with an expectation of substantial school take up in 2016.[6] The E Bacc. prioritises a selection of GCSE subjects—English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history and a language. The DfE website explains the EBacc as an equity strategy.

> The EBacc is made up of the subjects which are considered essential to many degrees and open up lots of doors. Research shows that a pupil's socio-economic background impacts the subjects they choose at GCSE, and that this determines their opportunities beyond school. A study by the UCL Institute of Education shows that studying subjects included in the EBacc provides students with greater opportunities in further education and increases the likelihood that a pupil will stay on in full-time education. (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-baccalaureate-ebacc/english-baccalaureate-ebacc)

The arts then are neither essential, nor likely to provide greater opportunities or help pupils stay at school. They are not 'core' but 'foundation' subjects to be taught in primary and lower secondary schools. The DfE measures secondary schools on the

[5] https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-29/qld-school-student-enrolment-arts-subjects-decline-over-sciences/101077754#.

[6] See the history here: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06045/SN06045.pdf. Comparison between the two countries is difficult as English data does not show gender, Australian data does not appear to show any year level below Year 12.

Fig. 1 Year 5 creative mending ▶

number of pupils that take GCSEs in core subjects as well as how well their pupils do in them. The arts are metaphorically and actually not counted.

The UK government wants to see 90% of students studying the EBacc. by 2025. But in 2023, the DfE reported that only 38.7% of students in state-funded schools were studying the EBacc. combination of subjects.[7] Despite the relatively low numbers of schools fully implementing the EBacc., the measure has had a negative impact both on the choices that students and their families make and the subjects that schools offer (Neumann et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2020). Credentialing is influential. Falls in arts education enrolments in Queensland Australia have also been linked to changes in credentialing.[8]

There are of course other processes at work in declining arts numbers e.g.:

- Cuts in school budgets mean that subjects high on consumables, like the arts, become more of a luxury (All Party Parliamentary Group on Art Craft & Design Education, 2023; Chapman, 2004).
- Inadequate arts education preparation in primary teacher education and little subject specific professional development for secondary teachers means that schools sometimes struggle to staff the arts even if they want to (Caldwell et al., 2021; Garvis & Pendergast, 2010; Kerby et al., 2021; Russell-Bowie, 2009). In England, art teachers are leaving the profession and there are now fewer arts specialist teachers and local authority arts support services (All Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education et al., 2019).
- A recent inquiry into arts education in England (Tambling & Bacon, 2023) suggests that part of the problem for school arts education is the lack of consensus about its purposes.

These issues map onto the long-standing educational narrative which separates hand from head work (Rose, 2005), positioning the arts as 'non-academic' and thus of lower status and value. The arts are not seen as disciplines with distinctive histories, powerful knowledges and praxis-based activities and conversations.

[7] https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/english-baccalaureate-entry-and-achievement/latest/.

[8] https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-29/qld-school-student-enrolment-arts-subjects-decline-over-sciences/101077754.


COTTON

Interlude 1: mending

Year 5 children at Gomersal Primary have been creatively mending. This activity was developed by Mandy,[9] a specialist art and design teacher. Mandy invited Julia, a local textile artist also known as @upcyclefashion, to visit their classroom. Children learnt more about the industrial textiles history of their local area and the ethos of 'make do and mend' in WW2, built understandings of the (un)sustainable practices of the global cotton and fashion industries, connected with a traditionally feminised activity—darning—and learnt stitchery as both a functional skill and an aesthetic practice (Fig. 1).

Creative mending was an encounter with craftivism (Corbett, 2018; Greer, 2014), a socially engaged practice of slow making. Craftivism resists consumerist waste and advocates for dialogues about the social and cultural situatedness of, and interventions in, the production and distribution of goods. Importantly, these themes (and others)—the local, the domestic, sustainability, functional making and beauty, the necessity of practice to attain skill—are not one-off, but woven through Mandy's K-6 curriculum. These concerns underpinned her choices of activities and their sequencing and pacing.

Why study the arts? To ensure a pipeline to the Creative Industries

Asserting Creative Industries (CI) connections with schooling appears to have little traction in Australia, where the primary focus seems more on how to support creative industries-related postgraduate education and training.[10] However, this rationale has dominated discussions of arts education in the UK since Tony Blair's invocation of 'cool Britannia' in the later 1990s (Buckingham & Jones, 2001).

The 'pipeline' metaphor itself is particularly fraught. A pipeline is continuous, its joins are sealed, there is no leakage. The metaphor presumes that all students have equal access to relevant arts subjects in schools, no matter who or where they are, and that they can both access and afford the kinds of further training and qualifications that they need. After this, they will seamlessly find the jobs that are available. But this is far from the reality. There is mounting evidence of the classed, raced and gendered nature of the UK arts and culture workforce (Brook et al., 2020). Already privileged young people are far better able to manage the unpaid work, freelancing and insecurity characteristic of the arts and creative sector (Creative Access, 2023). The situation in Australia is likely to be very similar (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017; Lye et al., 2024).

The 'CI pipeline' creates two further problems for arts education:

[9] Mandy Barrett is the art and design specialist teacher at Gomersal Primary, Cleckheaton. These images were taken by her. Name and images used with permission.

[10] For example, see https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/growing-australias-creative-industry-position-paper--abac--march2022.pdf.

(1) It constructs 'the arts and culture industry' as an homogenous block: this obscures the ways in which actual connections with school arts subjects might be made—they are not the same for each industry.
(2) The notion of an homogenous block readily lends itself to an uber-creativity stretching across all subject areas, with the arts acting primarily as a conduit rather than possessing benefits of their own (this was one of the key justifications for New Labor's Creative Partnerships program, according to Parker, 2013).

The notion of industry is also vexed. As O'Connor (2024) suggests, thinking of culture as an 'industry' takes away from seeing culture as what it means to be human. O'Connor argues that the 'creative industries' are characterised by 'a lack of funding and vision' and that

> culture finds itself in the grip of accountancy firms, creativity gurus and Ted Talkers. At a time of sweeping geo-political turmoil, culture has been de-politicised, its radical energies reduced to factors of industrial production.

O'Connor's argument resonates with concerns in the education community about the reduction of schooling to the production of human capital for twenty first knowledge economies, rather than something more wholistic and futures-oriented (Biesta, 2006; Riddle & Apple, 2019). The CI pipeline designates a national economic benefit as the *primary* purpose of arts education. This makes the range of other purposes and benefits that might arise from arts leaning invisible. For instance, personal development, wellbeing and citizenship are ignored, as is the importance of maintaining and building cultural traditions within a diverse society, and the arts as a way of creating and sustaining social bonds (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). While there may appear to be strategic rhetorical potential of the arts learning-creative industries nexus, the need for political traction promotes a narrow and singular view to the detriment of all other possibilities.

Nevertheless, despite the alleged appeal of the CI argument to successive economically-focused UK governments,[11] it has failed to gain much purchase. While the evidence that the creative industries are heavily skewed to white men who went to particular 'public' schools (Brook et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2016) has led to some government action[12] and a parliamentary inquiry,[13] there is no equivalent in state schools where requirements for 'British values'[14] and the populist discourse of

[11] The UK creative industries brought in £109 billion to the UK economy in 2021, 5.6% of the total, and grew faster than other sectors of the economy in 2022, see https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/arts-and-creative-industries-the-case-for-a-strategy/.

[12] See a government commitment to investigate training in the creative industries (https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-07-18/38755) and the debates and an APPG inquiry on diversity in the creative sector (https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/APPG/creative-diversity).

[13] https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/APPG/creative-diversity.

[14] See British values mandate for schools: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a758c9540f0b6397f35f469/SMSC_Guidance_Maintained_Schools.pdf.

'wokeness' still play out.[15] If there is an argument about the creative pipeline and its highly selective employment route, it is not one that has yet permeated UK education policy. This defensive rhetorical 'failure' may be a warning to Australian arts educators encouraged by the growth of the local creative industries (McCutcheon & Cunningham, 2022).

Why study the arts? Learnings in the arts 'transfer' to other subjects

Many arts advocates suggest that learnings from the arts are generalisable. The argument goes—if you take expressive arts subjects, learning in other high stakes subjects such as literacy and numeracy will be improved because the learnings are transferable. But does the available research support this claim?

Unfortunately, to date, evidence of learning transfer is both limited and mixed. Researchers (e.g. Burger & Winner, 2000; Deasey, 2002; See & Kotkotsaki, 2016) seeking evidence of transfer largely conduct systematic reviews which select out specific research designs—RCTs, cohort studies, comparative studies—looking for causal connections between arts and other areas of attainment. There are three strands of this type of transfer research.

(1) The affirmative evidence of global transfer.
There is some research which shows transfer—for example, a UK government commissioned systematic review (Newman et al., 2010) compared students who participated in structured arts activities to non-participants, finding that participation in structured arts activities improves academic attainment in secondary school aged students.[16]

(2) The no or minimal evidence of transfer.
There is also research which shows the opposite—no or little transfer (See & Kotkotsaki, 2016). However, no-one entirely dismisses the possibility that some transfer exists. It just hasn't yet been conclusively found.

(3) Some evidence of transfer, but it's not as good as it might be, and/or it is specific to specific arts subjects and some aspects of non-arts subjects. The Education Endowment Foundation (England) suggests arts education has a low-cost moderate impact on overall learning outcomes—'There is some evidence to suggest a causal link between arts education and the use of arts-based approaches with overall educational attainment'.[17] Some studies suggest links between either arts integration and/or arts education and Maths (e.g. Comerford Boyes & Reid,

[15] See for example the connections made between Critical Race Theory and wokeness in schools in media discussion https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10522731/As-teachers-new-rules-wokeism-Britains-wokest-schools-revealed.html.

[16] Working across range of different types of studies, the researchers claimed that academic attainment scores of arts participants improved by 1% to 2%, on average, above that of non-participants (all other things being equal).

[17] *Arts participation*. (no date.) Education Endowment Foundation. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/arts-participation.

2005; Todhunter-Reid, 2019; Trimble, 2019), although others disagree (Miller & Bogatova, 2018). There is also persuasive evidence of some music-associated transfer (e.g. Akin, 2024; Román-Caballero et al., 2022).

Part of the reason for this lack of evidence may well be the definitions and measures used for transfer. Better questions yield more positive results—see for example more focused inquiries in Ewing's (2019) case for 'deep literacy' arising from Drama and Barton's (2014) work on literacy and the arts. The Royal Shakespeare Company's RCT (McCulloch & Collins, 2024) on studying Shakespeare and language development showed statistically significant improvements in vocabulary and writing. Another reason for lack of evidence may be that researchers are expecting way too much arts impact; social class and family educational levels are much more significant in educational attainment that any school programme, whether in the arts or elsewhere (Gorard, 2018; Lamb et al., 2020).

Perhaps then researchers should concentrate on getting stronger understandings of learning within arts disciplines, rather than chase a holy grail of transfer. This does not mean embracing a vague 'art for art's sake' position but focusing instead on what learnings arts subjects particularly afford. As Winner and Hetland (2008, p. 31) said some time ago

> We don't need the arts in our schools to raise mathematical and verbal skills – we already target these in math and language arts. Arts programs teach … vital modes of seeing, imagining, inventing, and thinking. If our primary demand of students is that they recall established facts, the children we educate today will find themselves ill-equipped to deal with problems like global warming, terrorism, and pandemics.

Interlude 2: in their own words

Feversham Primary in Bradford.[18] The school is nationally known for its turnaround from failing to outstanding, a shift that the head, Naveed Idrees OBE, attributes in large part to the school's commitment to the expressive arts. Idrees is very clear on why the arts are important.

> 'Everybody's got something inside them. That's like, just for want of a better word, it's a soul, something that's nonphysical, something like nature, art, music, drama, something that gives you something bigger and deeper and higher. If you can activate that inside the child and a teacher, they're unstoppable, and that, that was precisely what we did. So we've used the arts as the vehicle for school improvement. And you can see that actually the kids are benefitting, and the community's engaged and they're happy and the kids're

[18] Names of school and staff used with permission in line with ethical approvals, specific permission was obtained for use of the tweet.

Fig. 2 Educational inclusion and the arts

> achieving as well. So our mantra is that the arts are the bedrock of academic success. That's it, the bedrock of academic success'.

In addition to arts leads with expertise in drama, dance and art and design, the school has invested heavily in music. Jimmy Rotherham is Feversham's music lead. He explains

> 'What we do is so vast now. It's a lot more than a one-man job. We've got guitar teachers, drum teachers and various instrumental specialists. We have a Nasheed singer[19] who sings with the community who we bring in, and we also coach all the staff to teach music. And if you think about subject like maths, if you had just one person coming in for half an hour a week, progress would be pretty slim, wouldn't it? And we wouldn't teach maths like that and music's no different. So, we have the specialist input but we also expect teachers to have good subject knowledge and skills.'

Jimmy puts the success of the music programme, and successes in other curriculum areas, to the way in which the headteacher works with him (Fig. 2).

> 'He trusts that I know what I'm doing and understand music much better than he does, you know? So he leaves me to it and trusts me to make all the deci-

[19] Nasheed is a form of unaccompanied singing or chanting. At Feversham, Nasheed is strongly connected with the Islamic practices and heritages of the school community.

> sions and supports me with making my decisions rather than making them for me.'

Why study the arts? The arts make a difference

There *is* research which strongly suggests that the arts take a more inclusive approach to education, allowing more children to enjoy success (Karkou & Glasman, 2004; Kinder & Harland, 2004; Sanderson, 2008). One longitudinal US study found that 'in some cases, the relationship between arts integration and student achievement was more powerful for disadvantaged learners' (Ingram & Reidel, 2003). Catterall et al.'s (2012) much-cited US meta-analysis of four longitudinal studies of arts and the achievement of 'at risk youth' claimed that:

> Teenagers and young adults of low socioeconomic status (SES) who have a history of in-depth arts involvement show better academic outcomes than do low-SES youth who have less arts involvement. They earn better grades and demonstrate higher rates of college enrolment and attainment (p. 12)

The arts are often linked with better outcomes for neuro-diverse learners (Alhassan & Osei, 2020; Alter-Muri, 2017) although arts classrooms can appear to be inclusive, but still exclude through a range of arts specific micro-practices and conceptual lacunae (e.g. Penketh, 2023).

Such changes are attributed to student engagement. Being productively engaged is linked with improvements in students' motivation, attitude to school, and their willingness to attend. Arts integration researchers claim significant improvements in discipline (Snyder et al., 2014), attendance, especially on the days on which the arts are timetabled (Brouillette, 2012; Cooper et al., 2011; Durbin et al., 2010). Of course, simply being at school is necessary but not sufficient for better educational outcomes. However, arts subjects also provide otherwise disengaged learners with some successful learning outcomes, and thus a pathway through school to graduation (Elpus, 2018).

Arts education does more than reduce problematic behaviours. Arts education has been linked to increases in creative thinking, imagination (Barry, 2010; Luftig, 2000; Stephenson & Dobson, 2020), risk taking, self-awareness, empathy and the understanding of others (Goodwin & Deadly, 2012; Jeffers, 2015). The arts also afford wellbeing, (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts Health & Wellbeing, 2017; Vic Health, 2003), something students often refer to as 'relaxing' (Thomson & Hall, 2021) - arts pedagogies promote concentrated absorption and 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998), combined with the satisfaction that comes from achieving an ambitious and challenging task.

These arts 'effects' require explanation. It is not sufficient to demonstrate that the arts can make a difference. Researchers offer a range of reasons which elaborate the unique capacities of arts disciplines to engage (Eisner, 2002), for example:

- there is mounting evidence that the arts are significant in culturally responsive pedagogies (Rigney, 2023). The arts can connect with and share diverse cul-

tural practices, including those from popular, vernacular, family, community and religious contexts (Hickey-Moody, 2023). They thus allow a wider range of students to use their funds of knowledge, interests, and assets in order to 'do school' (Rowlands et al., 2022).

- the relational pedagogies of the arts support the exploration of young people's identities, preferences, values and behaviours (Hickey & Riddle, 2021; Thomson et al., 2019)
- the arts offer a wide range of media, genres and platforms and thus more capacious systems of meaning-making and communication. These multi-modal avenues (Mills & Doyle, 2019) afford relevant and meaningful learning to a wide range of students, including those who typically struggle with the conventions and practices of modern schooling and curriculum (Price et al., 2023)
- arts subjects offer ambitious scaffolded programmes which encourage independent research and critical conceptual development; students often enjoy responding to the challenges and opportunities presented, going further than they initially expected (Hall & Thomson, 2017)
- opportunities for collaboration, leadership and team work can be provided through the arts (Thomson et al., 2014), and these can extend to active citizenship (Kuttner, 2016; Neelands, 2009) via participation in 'little publics' (Hickey-Moody, 2012).
- The arts address students' concerns about the world and their place in it, they provide the means and media for them to understand, critique and take action (Wright et al., 2021).

Studying the arts and accountability measures

In English schools, it is commonly believed that allocating time for the arts in the curriculum will detract from other learning areas. And it is these other areas, specifically literacy and numeracy in primary schools, and core subjects in secondary schools, that are tested. Poor test and exam performance leads to poor inspection results and then to serious consequences—declining reputation and public confidence, falling enrolments, dismissal of senior leadership and even school closure and/or mandated takeover by an academy trust (Ball, 2018; Thomson, 2020). NAPLAN results similarly haunt Australian state schools where enrolments are determined through fierce competition with publicly-funded independent schools and the familiar rhetoric of parent choice (Hayes et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2019). However, our research into arts rich primary schools suggests that where the arts are taken seriously there is no serious issue with standardised test results.

The Researching the Arts in Primary Schools (RAPS) project[20] starts from the premise that educational success against the odds depends on foundations built in the primary years, as—for many—does a long-standing interest in the arts. Our research in arts-rich primary schools seeks to understand both what they do and

[20] The RAPS project—artsprimary.com—is funded by the Freelands Foundation. Ethical approval for the project was given by the University of Nottingham Social Sciences Ethics Committee (2019–2024).

what they offer to children. The term 'arts rich' was used by James Catterall (2009) to describe a secondary school that offered a suite of arts subjects through to the final year, had an arts faculty, dedicated space and equipment. Catterall's longitudinal studies suggested strongly that students who attended arts-rich schools were more likely to go to college than their peers who didn't attend arts-rich schools. We are researching arts-richness in England.

We began by asking arts organisations across the country to nominate primary schools they thought were arts-rich. This produced a list of 168 schools. And, just as the pandemic started, we wrote to these schools inviting them to participate in an initial survey. 76 schools responded. From these responses we learnt that almost all of these arts-rich primary schools:

- Teach art and music to all children, every week, all year
- Regularly teach other arts subjects, with creative writing and drama being the most popular.
- Have at least one specialist arts teacher
- Have some facilities dedicated to the arts
- Have a range of long-standing partnerships with cultural organisations

From our 76 schools we selected 40 to visit. We made sure we had schools in all parts of the country, that served a range of communities and were of different sizes and types.

The first thing we noticed about the schools was how diverse they were. There was no one way to be an arts-rich school. Each school had a distinctive identity which was evident as soon as we walked in; the arts were key to how this identity was expressed in the foyer, in corridors and classrooms and in the playground. As we got to understand the schools better, we learnt that:

- They all had at least one other strategic priority—most common were eco-schools and rights-respecting schools. Because arts subjects encourage what Maxine Greene (1977, 1995) called 'wide awakeness to the world' the arts and the additional priority area worked together.
- All of the schools were strongly connected with their local area and took place-based curriculum seriously. The arts were often integral to children learning about the histories, presents and futures of their communities.
- The schools had different ways of teaching the arts. All of them expected some arts to be taught by generalist classroom teachers. Some had enough specialist staff to teach one or two arts subjects during teacher planning time. Specialist teachers also rotated through year groups, team taught and offered both bespoke support and whole school professional development. Some schools bought in part-time specialists. Most worked with arts partners some of the time.
- More than half (25) had child-led Arts Councils which were active in organising arts activities.
- All of the schools offered arts-based clubs which allowed children additional opportunities to extend their knowledge and skills in cross-age groups.

- All of the schools engaged in a range of special arts projects, often public performances and exhibitions, which provided a challenge as well as a way for children to showcase their learning to family and community audiences. Unlike other schools we have been in, these extra-curricular activities were complementary to the core arts curriculum, not a substitute for it.
- The schools were characterised by their 'leadership density' (Smith et al., 2004) within and beyond the arts. Senior leaders supported and trusted highly knowledgeable arts middle leaders who in turn supported their colleagues to learn and grow their arts teaching repertoires.

The final stage of the RAPS project was a further round of visits to 22 of the schools to find out more from school leaders and arts leads about the process of becoming and sustaining arts-richness. We matched the 22 schools with 44 comparator schools, identified from the Education Endowment Family of Schools data base as schools operating in similar contexts. This comparison suggested that there is no penalty in studying the arts. In other words, offering an arts-rich curriculum does not detract from core test results, a finding that chimes with US research (e.g. Bowen & Kisida, 2019, 2021; Catterall, 2009; Catterall et al., 2012; Elpus, 2018, 2022; Noblit et al., 2009). Additionally, although we did not select the schools on the basis of their inspection status, we noted that 19 of the 22 RAPS schools are rated 'good' or above, with some coming at the very top of their family of schools. Many of the RAPS schools strongly associated their general success and positive ethos with their arts richness.

We wonder, then, why more schools don't aim for art-richness? And is there any conceivable merit in being arts poor?

The arts: a challenge for arts education researchers

My purpose in this paper has been to canvass the common reasons given for and against arts education and to outline the resulting challenges that these create for arts researchers.

The arts have historically been sutured into an individualist discourse which places high value on the unmeasurable experiences of pleasurable and enchanting moments or events. The arts are synonymous with aesthetic appreciation, illumination of ideas and a refined cultivation of the senses, they are about beauty in all of its forms (Barton, 2023). Over time, researchers have elaborated arts' intrinsic values, for instance: captivation, intellectual stimulation, emotional resonance, spiritual value, aesthetic growth, and social bonding (Brown & Novak, 2007; Winston, 2008); and/or knowledge/learning, quality aesthetic experience enhanced by risk and live-ness (Radbourne et al., 2010).

Critics of the 'intrinsic values' argument (Atkinson, 2017; Belfiore & Bennet, 2010; Naughton et al., 2018) point to the ways in which the social is ignored—for example, the social contexts in which many arts are practised and experienced, the social relationships which can be fundamental to both audience and artist, the

socially and culturally situated nature of arts representations and the processual nature of interacting with arts artefacts and practices. The connections framework (occupational identity, civic participation and social and emotional health and wellness) (Pepler et al., 2023) is an example of a socially oriented approach to the benefits of arts learning. There is also an argument that the more generous notion of 'cultural learning' would be preferable to arts education (Anders et al., 2021).

Regardless of these debates, advocating the aesthetic value of the arts education has been unpersuasive to policy makers who are more interested in measurable evidence. Our arts education research community has yet to find either a way to produce persuasive evidence or to persuade on the basis of benefits or values.[21]

Perhaps the issue with arts education is that it has multiple benefits. One approach then might be to elaborate the purposes of arts education. The draft UNESCO Education Framework for Culture and Arts Education[22] suggests a number of purposes for arts and cultural education.

> Culture and the arts can **enrich and revitalize education** by **integrating a greater diversity of cultural expressions and ways of knowing and being**, histories and languages of peoples and communities in the curricula and teaching, **giving diverse learners**, including vulnerable and marginalized groups, **a sense of meaning and self-confidence, improving their motivation to learn and succeed**. Learning in and through the arts can **strengthen social and emotional learning**, as well as foster intercultural dialogue, cooperation and understanding, which are critical to sustainably address global challenges. (my emphases p. 2)

UNESCO also suggests that access to and meaningful participation in an arts curriculum is a right.

> Access to a broad range of artistic and cultural expressions is fundamental to realize the human right to participate in cultural life, which is an enabling condition for individual and societal well-being. This not only includes ensuring the availability of culture and arts education in schools but also quality formal education for the development of professional careers in culture and the arts (p. 4)

But many arts educators *have* been arguing these multiple deep and rich benefits and affordances of the arts without apparent shifts in policy.

It is perhaps the very complexity of arts education purposes, combined with the practical implications of seeing arts and cultural education as a right and the culturally contested ideas of the social value of the arts that makes it so difficult to argue

[21] This stands in some contrast to the success of connecting the arts with place-making, either in a community development or entrepreneurial way. See https://www.pps.org/article/creative-communities-and-arts-based-placemaking#:~:text=Arts%2Dbased%20Placemaking%20is%20an,cultural%20diversity%2C%20and%20civic%20engagement.

[22] https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/01/Draft%201_UNESCO%20Framework%20for%20Culture%20and%20Arts%20Education_EN_0.pdf.

their case. It is perhaps easier, although not easy to substantiate, a narrower and more instrumental singular benefit—literacy gains, or creative and cultural thinking or wellbeing. The delightful/frustrating paradox of arts education is that, just like the art forms embedded within, it is not amenable to reduction, not amenable to we whitefella's accustomed processes of making something complex into something simple (Yunkaporta, 2019). Finding our way through this elliptical thicket without instrumentalising, romanticising, simplifying or obfuscating is a serious and vital task.

Can we, will we, rise to this challenge?

And before I go

A final word. We have only to look at children singing, or the artefacts they produce, or the performances they make, to see/feel/understand at least something of the point of arts education. The affective nature of the arts is also something of their problem—they resist being straightforwardly converted into word.

In support of this assertion, I invite you to follow this link to Somerleyton School, a tiny village school of 78 children, where every child makes music every week, playing in an orchestra and singing in a choir. This video clip is of Years 5 and 6—every child in Years 5 and 6 (Fig. 3).

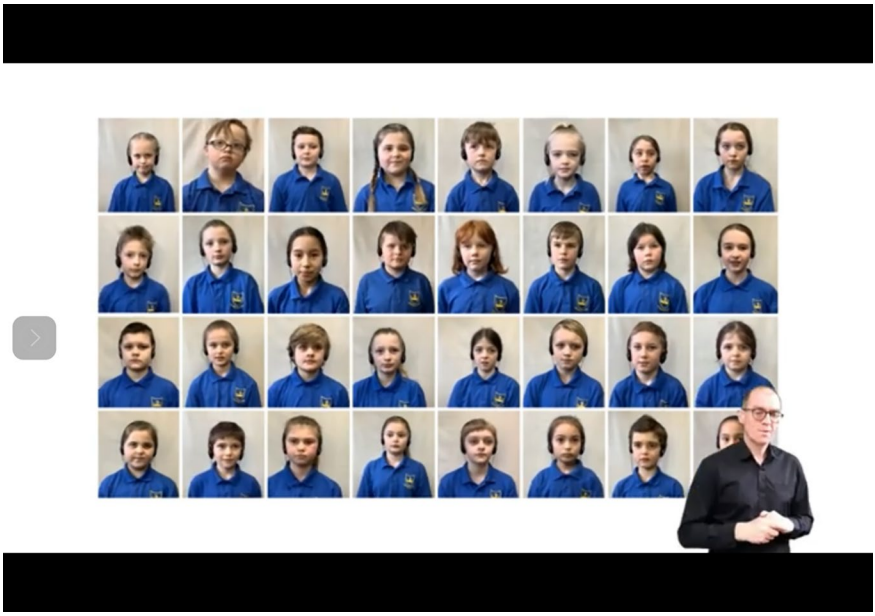

Fig. 3 Screen shot of Somerleyton Primary Choir

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SWog2ZHoe4
Enjoy.

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