

The significance of art and creativity for children and young people with special educational needs, disability or disadvantage.

“Life beats down and crushes the soul and art reminds you that you have one.” Stella Adler



Emma was ten years old at the time of this self-portrait and anxious about secondary school. With cognitive abilities around that of an average six year old, her Statement of SEN for learning and communication difficulties barely conveyed the acute lack of self-confidence, social isolation and anxiety this young girl experienced on a daily basis.

Her favourite activity was to draw and arrange her immaculately kept pencils in her pretty pink pencil case. Curriculum demands and an intensive support programme meant that she had few opportunities for her favourite activity, until my visit to assess her needs. *Can you draw? I asked. Would you like to draw a picture of you, wearing your favourite clothes?*

The vibrancy of colour in Emma's portrait displayed a young girl unencumbered by the difficulties that constrained her everyday life. This drawing and Emma's love of the task, sealed a friendship and furthered my understanding of the power of art to transcend difficulty and to transform children's perceptions of themselves.

This encounter, and Emma's self-portrait, came to my mind recently when I read a statement by our **Education Minister, Nicky Morgan**, in which she asserts that sticking to the core academic subjects (a GCSE in Maths, English, a science, a language and one of history or geography) “sets every child up for life”.

In **November 2014, Ms Morgan** stated her concern for the high number of students taking arts and humanities subjects (a figure that has suffered a year on year decline), a matter that would ‘hold them back for life’. These statements, slender yet so highly publicised, represent a heavy blow for the arts and creative subjects.

I ponder, at what point do we pay attention to the opportunities for young people with SEN, with life-long difficulties and disabilities or economic disadvantage? At what point do we pay heed to what might ‘set them up for life?’

There is a vast array of evidence pointing to the benefits of creative art activities, including children's physical, social, cognitive and emotional development, as well as imagination and experimentation. Yet ensuring engagement for all children remains problematic in an education system driven by targets and Ofsted outcomes.

Schools vary significantly in their approach, with some valuing highly those teachers with an artistic or creative background, understanding the benefits of engagement with the arts. Others, sadly, pay lip service to an art and design curriculum, to art work in classrooms and display spaces in corridors, and to the needs

of those children for whom academic gain will be forever problematic, with creative talents lying dormant, unexplored and unwanted.

One glimmer of hope comes in recent reports that champion the need for a rich tapestry of arts and cultural activity in our schools and help keep alive a spirit of optimism.

King's College, London published a report in February 2015 to mark 50 years since the first ever Government policy on the arts. "**Step by Step: arts policy and young people 1944 - 2014,**" praises the benefits that arts engagement brings to young people:

*increasing confidence,
building new skills,
raising aspirations and achievement,
engendering empathy, tolerance and
a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.*

But the report has some strong recommendations for policy makers to preserve and protect the future of arts activity. They believe there should be a greater emphasis on encouraging arts activity amongst pre-school children, actively shaping encounters that may profoundly affect their subsequent engagement with the arts. Policy makers should do more to support arts activity outside of the schools system, recognizing that the family and social life of young people plays a crucial role in their identity and later life.



An image from The Local Offer website, promoting diversity of specialist and targeted provision, including art, play and drama therapy, for children and young people with SEND.

In February 2015 **Warwick University** published its report, **Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth – the 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value**. At its heart, the report is concerned that ‘creativity and the arts are being squeezed out of schools’ with the danger that, without concerted effort, there is a risk of creating a two-tier system, in which only the most advantaged youngsters have access to a wide range of experiences. The Warwick Commission cites the fall in the number of arts teachers in schools together with a reduction in teaching hours, as contributory factors to increasing disparities of access and participation.

Cape UK, working with the **Arts Council England** in 2013, produced a report called "*Opening Doors: A review of opportunities for arts and culture in the new education landscape of Yorkshire and the Humber.*"

A survey and consultation with school leaders revealed the following **key drivers for engagement in arts and cultural activities** –

To raise attainment/achievement
to enhance a teacher's continuing professional development (CPD)
to broaden pupils' experience
to link with the wider school community/external partners
to involve parents
to support the achievement of awards

Without diminishing the importance of these key drivers, it is unsettling to note that there is no focus on a child's sense of pleasure, creativity, imagination, experimentation, confidence, achievement, self-awareness or sense of identity. In short, art and cultural activity must be justified in terms of their outcomes and measured in terms of their academic and economic value to the school.

The same report high-lights a number of **practical barriers to cultural engagement in schools**. Freelance practitioners' state that it is almost impossible to get information past the school secretary; that complex and inflexible time-tables mean that external projects can rarely be factored into the equation. In addition, creating sustainable relationships with schools is a real challenge for the sector.



Anna Reyner is a US Arts Advocate with an inspirational and excellent blogpost, **Arts and Creativity in Early Childhood Education** <http://www.artandcreativity.blogspot.co.uk/>

In this scene, a child in a nursery classroom is contributing to a collaborative mural using ferns and large leaves as stencils.

For those with interest, but lacking inspiration, the site is well worth a visit, with many downloadable teaching plans and stunning ideas for indoor and outdoor learning spaces.



The work of the **Royal Academy of Arts in London** sees its role as an Ambassador for good arts activity in schools, with a growing agenda of events and activities through its **Access Programme**.

In March they held a one day conference on *Engaging children with SEND in creating art and cultural experiences*, creating a context for teachers and art educators to develop ideas around the 'nature and value of cultural and artistic engagement for children with special educational needs.'

Over the Summer, the Royal Academy are hosting an *Art Making Workshop for Families with Children with Special Educational Needs*, with further events planned for those at risk of exclusion from arts and culture.

Image courtesy of the Royal Academy of Arts, SEN Schools Workshops.

From my experience as a school improvement consultant, I'm aware how difficult it is to get educators to think outside of the box, to envisage support and interventions as more than a single-track focus on raising attainment in literacy and numeracy skills, given so many external pressures.

Far too many children with SEND have a curriculum that becomes increasingly narrow as each successive school year passes. What chance then to explore hidden talents, to unleash creativity, to create contexts for success, happiness and achievement? Many of our artists of the future have tremendous talent, lying buried beneath the label that gives a name to a disability, but remains silent in the face of ability.

What can you do today to unlock the creative potential of children and young people with special educational needs, disability or disadvantage?

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