

Reframing the research case for arts education: how to build an evidence base that reflects its true value

The debate about how best to describe and evidence the impact of the arts in education and on the lives of young people, is not a new one. However, this discussion has become more urgent over the last year as the role of research and evidence in education has become more prominent and this raises some challenging and profound questions about how the arts education sector (artists, teachers, cultural leaders etc.) might need to respond.

Research, evidence, data have never been more important in the debate about educational approaches and policy. Nick Gibb in his speech to the ResearchED conference in 2015 talked about a new 'movement' of research-led practice in teaching. In the same speech he castigated 'learning styles, multiple intelligences, discovery learning, and the 21st-century skills movement' as representative of the past snake-oil approach to teaching.

The current enthusiasm for evidence in teaching underpins the work of the Education Endowment Foundation, a relatively new 'what works' organisation for education. EEF seeks to improve our understanding of which teaching strategies have the most success in increasing the educational attainment of economically disadvantaged pupils. This knowledge provides the bedrock for the Pupil Premium Toolkit, a guide for teachers and school leaders on how to build effective plans for supporting lower income pupils and spending the pupil premium.

The research case for the arts in education has been under increasing scrutiny both from a recent report by the EEF - *Impact of arts education on the cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes of school-aged children*ⁱⁱ and in the 2013 report from the OECD - *Art for Art's Sake*ⁱⁱⁱ. Both studies are 'meta-evaluations', drawing together and evaluating evidence from a wide range of existing studies.

The EEF report looked at over 200 reports and runs to over 200 pages, however the take away is pretty simple; there is little to no solid evidence of the arts having a positive impact on cognitive (that is straight forward academic) or non-cognitive (developmental/behavioural) outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. The reason for this is partly a lack of studies which show genuine causality and partly that the studies that do have a strong study design show little to no positive outcomes. On this last point it is instructive to look at the EEF's own studies into arts interventions, few of which have unambiguously positive outcomes.

These reports come at a time when secondary schools are increasingly under pressure for more pupils to achieve the Ebacc, leaving less room for other subjects. There is little in the EEF report to support teachers and school leaders trying to make a case for the value of an arts-rich curriculum, particularly for disadvantaged pupils, who arguably have the least capacity to access cultural resources outside of school.

Of course, the whole notion of what constitutes 'evidence' in a field like education is contested. There are many who are critical of applying methods such as randomised control trials (RCTs) to the education context where there are so many variables. It is also true that EEF is really looking for teaching practises which can be assessed and replicated, which is a difficult concept to apply to much of the arts.

Another recent meta-evaluation on the impact of the arts came from Project Oracle^{iv}, a London social enterprise which aims to increase the standard of evidence in the youth sector, which took a much more holistic approach to assessing evidence and found many positive outcomes as well as a well-informed set of professionals actively grappling with the complexities of the question of evidence.

There is a debate to be had about where the arts position themselves within the evidence-based vs evidence-informed debate. Evidence exists on a spectrum of rigour (see Nesta standards of evidence) and it may well be that it is not appropriate to try and assess the arts in education at the very toughest level. But this discussion needs to be had, and not from a position of defensiveness or fear but in the spirit of a unified and professional sector.

In the prefaces to both the EEF and the OECD reports they suggest that the arts should concentrate on describing arts value for its own sake and not try to make a case for tangible educational outcomes. But to accept this position is to say that we don't really believe there are any 'educational' impacts that could be evidenced, is this the case? It seems particularly counter-intuitive to say there are no really strong 'non-cognitive' or behavioural impacts, as the EEF report suggests.

An alternative is to suggest that what is needed is a fundamental re-think of the way in which the arts engage with research and evidence in this context. There are three key areas that need to be addressed - firstly the nature of the logic behind studies of arts impact on education, secondly the standard of study design in the sector and thirdly the question of understanding what quality looks like. Other parts of the public sector are stepping up to the challenge of being evidence-driven but in some ways the arts is lagging behind, focussing on advocacy and short term evaluations rather than coalescing as a profession to build an evidence base for itself.

1 Apples and pears?

Many of the studies considered in the EEF report look at the impact of the arts on non-arts outcomes, for example how does visual arts support maths achievement or dance improve cognition. In the OECD report this tendency is characterised as looking at 'transfer' impacts and in their meta-evaluation they find little positive evidence of this transfer happening.

Whilst each individual study that looks at transfer outcomes has its own internal logic, taken on mass it seems like an odd and unnecessarily complex approach, why should we seek a maths outcome from a music class for instance? It raises the question, in focussing on transfer are the really meaningful effects of arts engagement being lost?

When you ask somebody about the impact of the arts on their life and the relevance of the arts within their schooling they rarely talk about the fact that music helped them unlock maths or art helped with their English. They talk about finding a lifelong passion, developing a sense of self and identity, maybe they speak of gaining confidence and a sense of the world outside of their immediate environment. Which is not to say that arts engagement and academic attainment have no relationship, but perhaps it is time to reconsider what that relationship is and how does it work? What is the mechanism? Is it about the individual and their engagement with learning in general? Is it about the school environment and fostering a culture of creative endeavour?

Ask a head teacher why they value the arts in school and they might say things like; it helps manage behaviour, it makes school more appealing, it enables pathways for different kinds of students to form relationships and breeds tolerance and shared values, it helps the students with their university admissions, it is a good preparation for an increasingly complex job market. All of these ideas could impact on attainment in an indirect sense as well as speaking to the current government concern about 'character-building' in education but they don't lend themselves to a linear relationship between arts practice and academic attainment.

If we want to understand the impact of arts in education we need to spend longer thinking about what we are trying to achieve, in what timeframe, with what intervention – the logic or value chain. And if the answer to these questions is not about attainment in a traditional sense or behaviour change, that can be ok too.

Looking at intentions (theories of change, logic chains) and designing studies with sufficient scale and length of time to meaningfully assess impact and methodological strength would not be easy but is surely preferable to more studies which seem peripheral to what the work is actually trying to achieve.

2 What works for the arts? Study design first.

The EEF report finds the majority of studies looking at arts impact are weak or poor in terms of their study design by this they mean that we cannot be confident in the findings because the study had too few subjects to be statistically significant or was flawed in terms of its replicability and approach to causality. As has been said, the whole notion of applying RCTs and other robust methods to educational studies is contested; however many of the studies examined by EEF did not meet the most basic standards in terms of reliability of evidence. In a sense the arts needs its own 'What works' centre that could validate and strengthen research and evidence in the field. Project Oracle^v in London is undertaking some of this work but there is a way to go.

Without very clear outcome logic or theories of change it is hard to show cause and effect. In the arts we often don't plan interventions in this way and therefore struggle to evidence impact. Equally, 'replicability' is a difficult concept in the arts as we don't prize standardisation as other sectors might. In fact we value the opposite: originality, the experiential, innovation.

To take a real example, last year Random Dance worked with around 30 primary pupils in the summer holidays culminating in a performance in the Olympic Park. These students were drawn from 5 schools and had all worked with the dancers for five days to devise and perform an hour long piece. The dancers were at the height of their powers working for one of the best contemporary dance companies in the world. Talking to the organisers they spoke about how the pupils' management of themselves and their bodies had improved, how they had risen to the challenge of the discipline of the class, how they had gone beyond what they thought they were capable of – all great outcomes. But replicable? Perhaps in process, but not with those dancers in hundreds of schools. And how and when to assess the real impact of the intervention? At the end of the performance or in five years' time when a student might recount this experience as the moment when they realised they had multiple choices in their life and pursued a different path?

If the arts want to be involved in an evidence based set of arguments then we cannot dodge the challenge of study design. But we need to be intentional in our interventions and have the resources to work at scale and across long time spans. There are some areas where the sector needs to catch

up – for instance the GL PASS test - Pupil Attitudes to Self and School – ‘standardised against a highly representative national sample of more than 600,000 respondents and is used in over 2,500 schools across the UK’^{vi}. This test looks at the extent to which pupils are engaged in their learning and offers real time data for teachers to help them keep students on track. It would be very interesting to see if arts engagement has any impact on these measures which might tell us something about the relationship between the schools environment, attitude to learning and attainment.

3 Do we know what good looks like?

The pursuit of defining academic and non-academic outcomes and ‘proving the case’ has perhaps distracted us from the business of defining quality in terms of arts interventions in education and how this might be distinctive from arts activity in other contexts. This is about understanding, as a profession, what high quality looks like and how this can be described, shared, evaluated and developed. This might be about understanding the difference between a good art class and a less good art class – in artistic as well as pedagogical terms - or it might be about thinking deeply about a holistic creative education. We know much of this thinking is taking place in schools and in educational fora but how is it happening across the whole sector of practitioners, cultural organisations, commissioners, Ofsted? Perhaps the new Artsmark framework could provide a site for catalysing this conversation and making it useful to assessing outcomes and longer term impacts. The Arts Council’s quality principles^{vii} is a good start to this conversation but how meaningful is that process to school leaders juggling reducing budgets, or parents deciding where to send their children to school or young people making choices about options? Schools are data rich environments where many elements of progression are constantly measured, if the arts discussion of quality sits outside of this activity how meaningful can it ever be for schools?

I recently had the pleasure of listening to Bob and Roberta Smith talk about the National Arts Education Archive at Bretton Hall. He talked about the proud tradition of arts within education that started with the establishment of private education in England (and is still a feature of our best independent schools) and continued after the establishment of universal state funded education. He reflected that this only really changed in the 1980’s when it was decided that all elements of school had to be in service to the achievement of ‘academic’ qualifications. I cannot say whether this view of history is correct, but it is a reminder that notions of what constitutes education are fluid as well as externally derived. France, an education system known to prize tradition, has just announced it will be looking to build in more opportunities for creativity and team working into their system, there is a hugely interesting creative education push in Wales. As the trends in education change it is important that those who work-in and champion arts education understand the value of what they offer and can translate this into an education context in order to be capable of expansion, capable of sustaining relevance and ultimately ensuring more children and young people can have a creative childhood.

ⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-importance-of-the-teaching-profession>

ⁱⁱ https://v1.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/Arts_Education_Review.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/arts.htm>

^{iv} <http://project-oracle.com/studies/arts-based-projects-for-children-and-young-people/>

^v <http://project-oracle.com/about-us/>

^{vi} <http://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/products/pass-pupil-attitudes-self-and-school>

^{vii} <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/what-we-do/cyp/resources/quality-principles/>