

ROYAL
OPERA
HOUSE
BRIDGE

ADVOCACY TO PARENTS AND CARERS FOR THE VALUE OF ARTS & CULTURE

ROYAL OPERA HOUSE BRIDGE
RESEARCH DIGEST

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Bridge Organisation

Working with Arts Council England
to connect young people with great
art and culture

About the author

Sarah Bedell works across a range of artforms and areas of interest with established and emerging arts organisations and creatives, providing practical, affordable and relevant strategic planning, project development & management, research and evaluation. Sarah has worked in the arts since 1989, offering independent creative consultancy since 1997.

About Aspirational Arts Partnerships Ltd



Aspirational Arts Partnerships is passionate about helping people put their creative ideas into practice. They offer a range of practical services that will help you at whatever stage you're at. They are a small company that puts together a bespoke team and approach for each job, adding value with personal, reliable service and strong ethics around transparency and accountability.

About Royal Opera House Bridge

Royal Opera House Bridge works to 'connect children and young people with great art and culture'. Through research, advocacy and co-investment we nurture networks, share learning and foster innovation within the education, arts and culture sector – particularly in communities where there is limited local provision or experience. ROH Bridge is funded by Arts Council England and is part of a national network of ten 'bridge' organisations.

Based at High House Production Park in Thurrock, we work with schools, arts organisations, museums, libraries, heritage sites, and councils across Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and North Kent

Summary

This was a commission to undertake research into whether schools are finding it harder to advocate for the arts and culture in schools to parents and carers, and whether parental support for the arts and culture is declining. Schools across the ROH Bridge region were surveyed and a number of educational leaders, innovators and teachers were interviewed.

The overall findings suggest that parents continue to support and value the arts and cultural learning in schools, on the whole. Schools report that providing a wide range of opportunities for children and young people to engage with and participate in arts and culture is the most effective form of advocacy for the value of the arts and culture to parents and carers.

The research highlighted some good examples of how schools are maintaining engagement, despite reduced funding, but also identifies other, external factors, such as curriculum, assessment and changes to school accountability measures, which are impacting on the role of the arts and culture in schools.

Recommendations

- 1** ROH Bridge share these findings with the ACE South East and National teams, to gauge whether the issues that are identified are being reported more widely, with a view to discussing partnership activity. The findings could also be shared with the rest of the Bridge network, CLA and EBacc for The Future, again to see what reactions and insights they bring. This might form the basis of a partnership approach to any resources on a much larger scale.
- 2** ROH Bridge consider some research directly with parents, using the schools network and a strategic social media campaign to drive responses. It is striking how little research there is, both nationally and regionally, with parents about their understanding of and attitudes towards the arts and cultural learning in schools. There would be real value for the sector in having some idea of what and how parents value cultural learning and activities, why some parents are deeply supportive and committed, and whether any of this can be transferred over to parents who either do not have the cultural capital themselves or the information to place it in a context and perhaps value it more.
- 3** ROH Bridge create a resource of relevant and up to date data and information, bringing together key pieces of research, toolkits and how-to best practice for digital sharing of achievements (which can be advice sheets for primary IT, making use of school websites, or recommending available, free to use sites like ArtsBox and Arts Award resources, Make Waves, links to articles that are relevant, etc). This needs to be very explicitly linked to parents and advocacy for the arts and cultural learning and written like a myth-buster.
- 4** A natural development from this might be to develop a guide for parents, which could be split broadly into primary and secondary, along the lines of those produced for health education (e.g. dental care, Change4Life, Book Start and Reading Agency materials). This could be a leaflet to go home with each child, which can be shared as a PDF or digital version on school websites. This could be piloted across the ROH Bridge region, or more widely, depending on available partnerships. It would make sense to produce this after any research with parents themselves, identify their knowledge gaps, preconceptions and concerns and then address them directly through the publication/tool.

The research question

ROH Bridge was receiving feedback that schools were finding it harder to advocate to parents and carers for the value of arts and cultural learning. This raised a number of questions:

- Do all schools report these problems, or just some?
- Is there a difference between the primary and secondary or the type of school?
- Are parents and carers discouraging study of arts subjects in preference for 'harder' or more 'academic' subjects?
- Are there any examples of successful advocacy to parents, and how are they achieving this?
- What is the potential solution?
- What will help schools advocate to parents and address the problem?

The methodology used a short survey for schools (tested by headteachers) and follow-up interviews with education leaders, innovators, advisors and strategic organisations and agencies.

Findings and Analysis

The headline findings from the survey (74 completed responses) suggest that:

- **The majority of schools – 69.5% – felt that parents continue to support and value the arts and cultural learning in schools.**
- **56% respondents actively encourage and increase participation by parents and often present arts and cultural activity to families.**
- **85.5% of responding schools continue to offer a wide range of arts and cultural opportunities, most often through lunchtime and after-school activities, assemblies**

Although most schools reported that parents continue to support the arts and culture in their schools, they do feel that parents and carers are not aware of the impact of recent education policy reforms on the arts in schools or for their children, whether at primary or secondary level.

- There was a raised awareness of SATs for some parents reported in the qualitative findings, but these were very engaged schools and communities in the first place.

Communicating and advocating the value of the arts and culture:

- Half of those responding **do not have designated cultural governors**
- Fewer than half have **frequent or integrated conversations about the arts** with students
- There is a good deal of arts and cultural activity taking place, but **it is not seen as a central part of the school’s promotion of its facilities**, ethos and standards when communicating with prospective or existing students, parents/carers. Only a third of respondents said the arts and culture were central to their promotion.
- Very few seemed to **recognise the arts as a viable career choice.**
- When asked about the kind of tools which would be useful in promoting the arts there is a focus by schools on the value of the arts and cultural learning in terms of **evidence about its impact on attainment, achievement, physical or mental wellbeing.** The qualitative research stage also highlighted the need for schools to focus on **the impact of the arts and culture, rather than the arts and culture themselves**, due to other factors including school accountability measures such as EBacc and Progress 8.
- The secondary responses suggest that schools do not clearly and explicitly articulate the links between arts and culture in schools and career pathways for students and parents/carers. Again, this was reflected at the qualitative stage of this research by teachers interviewed.

Positioning the arts and cultural learning with parents

The majority of primary schools said the arts and culture were ‘Highlighted’ when promoting their school – and also reported that parents were supportive. At secondary level, less than one third said it was ‘Central’ to school promotion. One third of schools canvassed highlighted the arts in promotional material, but 10% didn’t use the arts to promote their schools at all.

The qualitative findings suggest that the positioning of the arts and cultural learning by the school senior leadership and the ethos of a school has a significant impact on how parents value the arts, positive or negative, and a ripple effect on parents supporting the arts in school.

Most effective ways of communicating with parents

Both primary and secondary schools identified the most effective ways of communicating with parents, in order to get a response, as being:

1. the newsletter
2. individual invitations to attend events, activities, exhibitions, etc to see their child’s work
3. MS or other social media alerts

Successful approaches used by schools

75% of respondents shared what works for them in the survey. For Primary schools, these are:

- Integrated **shared learning opportunities for children**, parents and family members to learn together
- Providing opportunities to **come and see children’s work** – putting on productions, art exhibitions, singing, making events around key community/religious dates, eg Christmas, Eid, intergenerational sharing events
- Embedding or making use of **Arts Award and Artsmark**, which create opportunities to engage

- **Partnering with external events** and organisations
- **Engaging with families through the children**, by getting them to do the invitations, etc, inviting grandparents or toddlers for specific events

Secondary schools reported similar approaches, with some additions:

- Use of **school blog and Twitter** to increase attendance.
- Annual **Arts Evening presentations and Art exhibitions** with press release, ParentMail, newsletter, personal invitations.
- **Arts programme sharings**; Artsmark events and curriculum evenings.

Tools to help advocate the value of arts and culture to parents

The most popular choices of the kind of tools which might be useful to primaries were:

1. A **resource that schools can share with parents** that advocates for the value of cultural learning
2. Informed **facts about the impacts of the arts** for physical and mental health and wellbeing
3. **Signposting to reliable and up to date existing resources** that are relevant to children, young people, schools and/or parents/carers
4. **Advice on sharing children's achievements digitally**, such as how to safely stream young people's cultural achievements so parents can access these virtually

Secondary schools had slightly different priorities and sought:

1. Informed **facts about the impacts of the arts** for physical and mental health and wellbeing
2. A **resource that schools can share with parents** that advocates for the value of cultural learning
3. **Signposting to reliable and up to date existing resources** that are relevant to children, young people, schools and/or parents/carers
4. Evidence of **rigorous research that demonstrates the value of the arts and cultural learning** for other types of attainment and achievement

Making a creative learning environment

We spoke to representatives of primary and secondary schools, selective, independent, maintained, academies, in areas of high and low deprivation, including those who were also OFSTED inspectors, county council school improvement officials, teachers with designated responsibilities for culture and schools that are part of cultural entitlement initiatives.

The school leaders interviewed shared a number of principles/practice:

- the **arts and cultural learning are central to a child's happiness and rounded education**, regardless of income, background or anything else
- placing **creativity at the centre of the curriculum impacts positively on learning outcomes and standards** over a relatively short time (2-3 years)
- rigorous **attention to evidence for the outcomes and impacts delivered by arts and culture**, using data, reflective tools and analysis to track progress and satisfy inspection/assessment requirements; these leaders reported that effective data collection, management and analysis creates time for targeted creative learning and engagement, alongside the curriculum.
- demonstrating **a variety of ways in which schools' creative and cultural activities for and with their children can bring together communities** and improve parent relations and engagement
- showing **confidence in these strategies** because the data and evidence demonstrates its efficacy

These interviewees also agreed there are a number of ideal features for schools to provide that result in a creative learning environment:

- The commitment of school leadership
- Inclusion in the whole school vision
- Commitment of staff
- Determination
- Patience
- Thoughtfulness, Reflection
- Creativity (lateral thinking, trying new things, going beyond the curriculum, bringing other skills and experience to the job, taking managed risks, pushing boundaries and stretching people and expectations)

Warning signs

Although a minority group within the survey, some respondents felt that there were issues preventing the arts and cultural learning from flourishing in the way they did before the curriculum, school accountability and exam changes, or since when Creative Partnerships was active, or even just in terms of the impact of standstill funding.

The issues they particularly highlight:

- A **lack of leadership or confidence in staff**, students or themselves leads to **a focus on exam results at the cost of everything else**, and is part of a management style that relies on data and teaching to the test, driven by government policy.
- These comments applied to Good or Outstanding schools, which **contradicts OFSTED's assertion that culture is part of a good school**, or indicates that heads do not believe this and are not willing to risk it.
- A **sense of being driven by results and targets**, even though the profession acknowledges this is not conducive to effective learning and results in unhappy students – which might reflect the interest in a resource that evidences the impact of the arts on wellbeing.
- The education reforms have left schools **struggling to keep on top of core activities**, at the same time as having no transition or testing time for curriculum and assessment changes to settle in.
- A **change in parental engagement for cultural reasons**: changes in population, ethnic and cultural diversity can introduce different values for education. For example, in one school, if it is not part of one group's cultural heritage to participate in school events outside school, they will not encourage their children and they will not attend. In selective areas, the dominance of tuition for the 11+ was highlighted as taking precedence over any other after-school activities, sometimes from Year 3.

Conclusions

The research findings indicate that parents are not discouraging their children from pursuing the arts and cultural learning in schools, on the whole. Schools understand the relationship between providing opportunities for children to participate and engage, and parental engagement. Schools also understand the wider role of arts and cultural learning, and the positive impacts on physical and mental wellbeing, but they have perhaps focused on this, rather than the intrinsic skills, benefits and impacts of arts and cultural learning, specifically arts subjects at GCSE and A-level.

The findings indicate there are some issues around some groups of parents' values and views of what a "good" education looks like, and this is impacting on participation at primary level and subject take-up at secondary. There are pockets across the Bridge region where this applies. In some locations, this is not a new phenomenon; in some places it reflects a change in population and demographics. Again, the response to this is generally influenced by senior school leadership. Whilst it is a small minority that fall into this category, it might be useful for schools to have some strategies to address this.

Accountability measures such as the EBacc and Progress Eight will have a more significant impact on students' choices than their parents' views on subject options. The effect is through the timetabling of options: schools are limiting the number of arts options available to students, to ensure that they have the maximum number of subjects in the two most valuable baskets in Progress Eight. Not all schools are introducing it yet, but as the Department for Education's goal is to have 90% of students taking the EBacc by 2020, it is likely that even those offering a wide and balanced curriculum with two or more arts options will be changing this.

Deprivation does play a role in active parental engagement and support for arts and culture in their children's schools – a lack of cultural entitlement among parents, pressures on time and income – and primary leaders interviewed often said that parents valued the arts, once they had the chance to experience their child's participation or performance. In areas of deprivation, the most common impact on engagement (by children and parents) seems to be that schools have to provide everything for the children's cultural entitlement, as parents and carers do not have the experience or the knowledge or the cultural capital themselves to provide this for their children outside of school. Yet not valuing the arts is not confined to deprived areas. More worrying are those leafy, relatively wealthy areas where parents are either suspicious of any culture that is not very popular (ie 'high culture'), or value sport as a more meaningful and valuable activity.

Schools at both levels that offer regular visits, in-house performances, productions, exhibitions and other ways for parents to come and see their children performing or sharing their work, find this the most effective form of advocacy. Enabling and facilitating regular and plentiful opportunities for CYP to engage with and participate in cultural activities, and developing critical appreciation through presenting and attending performances was recognised by respondents as the most effective ways of embedding the arts and cultural learning.

The findings suggest a number of approaches ROH Bridge might use to inform future strategies and plans for supporting schools in their advocacy for the arts to parents:

- Providing **opportunities for children to see and watch a wide and diverse range of arts and cultural activities** and events, to be active attenders and participants with a wide range of cultural organisations.
- Continuing to **pilot and sustain long-term creative learning** and teaching through existing investment programmes
- **Identifying those schools which are not providing many creative or cultural opportunities** and initiating support with investment.
- Responding with a **set of resources and tools for schools to use**, in addition to the work they are undertaking independently, as they have outlined and requested.

Recommendations

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