



Drama Matters: Does It?

You would think that as a member of the Executive with National Drama, running a Drama Matters campaign, championing drama and endlessly battling to keep it on curriculums, that obviously, I think it does.

But do we all think so? With the Ebacc, the need for more rigour, retention and retrieval of masses of arguments, vocab, facts, stats and formulae, a more technological workforce, the centrality of crucial core subjects and a conservative education agenda - do we? Maybe PE, Art and Music will give our children all the range they need? There's creativity there, and opportunities for competition and skills, enjoyment and teamwork. Should we just pipe down and realise Drama is not for everyone? There's always private stage schools if a child is really keen.

So why should we keep championing Drama, as an entitlement, more joyfully, and more powerfully than ever? Why should more arts lovers, liberals, politicians, educationalists, academics, creatives and businesses shout about Drama, join National Drama, support the Cultural Learning Alliance, and/or support their kids' schools to keep Drama on timetables at KS3, support the local theatre, and ask about drama in primary schools?

I'll explain.

Drama matters, ND believes, as an entitlement for children in KS2/3, a joy, a challenging academic, physical pursuit, a hobby, a complex, contemporary art form that has been making sense of humanity for millennia, a professional path, and a way of telling engaging stories collaboratively in a rainbow of genres. Drama helps children learn content, a canon, language from William Shakespeare to Timberlake Wertenbaker, from Aristophanes to Caryl Churchill, and when children rehearse, they participate, using language and the drama medium as playmakers themselves. In class, they are trainee artists, not imitators, or consumers, in an ensemble. Drama opens the doors to historical, socio-political and personal stories that entertain, demand reaction, and transform. Think of War Horse, The Crucible, Girls Like That, Kindertransport, The Colour of Justice, Medea, East is East, Nirbhaya. Nothing else does this comprehensively. PE gets us moving, English helps us love language, History illuminates different perspectives, Music helps us communicate through sound and performance, PHSE helps us understand controversy and socio-cultural problems - but only Drama does all of this as a living art form and amazing pedagogy that is accessible.

We know that championing Drama is the ethically, educationally right thing to do, right for children and learners, right for diverse and often fragmented communities and society. There is plentiful evidence of its riches, from Darren Henley, The Arts In Schools, John Somers, Ken Robinson the research exists in spades. We know that learners should have entitlement to Drama as they do to Art and Music. This is true, despite the arts-free Ebacc obstacle, the wall that sustains the exclusion of Drama from the foundation subjects' stable, and the disingenuous view that asserts that Drama is fine within English.

Take one issue (but you could take any) like war. Learning about war through Drama explores its specific narratives, its roots, its reasons, what it costs, the circles that won't square, the heroism, the loss, the actual people and the overarching context. Think about War Horse, Sergeant Musgrave's Dance, Oh What A Lovely War, Kindertransport, Stuff Happens, Antigone. The other arts definitely enable this personal and academic understanding, with empathy, with facts. Only Drama enables it collaboratively, making the story come alive with others, to audience, and in rehearsal and workshop classes, with the framing devices of characterisation, through text, or a stimulus, and the prism of a genre.

With specialist teachers, making stories come alive for audience, learners develop confident teamwork skills, collaboration with debate, leadership with compassion, aesthetics with inclusion, and really vital workplace skills: empathy, listening, organisation, imagination, risk taking, curiosity, enjoyment of work. This supports Bacc for the Future, urging an Arts strand in the Ebacc, the Alliance for Arts Education, and all Drama professionals. We think Drama matters because it is a unique, life enhancing, visceral, powerful, intellectual and creative subject that students are entitled to. This also supports a future workforce which is more diverse, successful and confident. Numerous business leaders agree that both the arts and STEM subjects prepare learners for work. For example, Eric Berridge (chief executive of Bluewolf, a global business consulting firm) in July's City AM magazine, urges the government not to dial down the importance of the arts to industry, as, "The arts teach us to challenge, persuade, and argue. They give us our language through which we convey our emotions and thoughts. While STEM skills are necessary, the arts reinforce human-centered thinking that empowers businesses to sympathise with their customers in order to drive growth."

I am not advocating that we teach Drama for its transferable skills - but they are a fabulous additional gain. Drama is an engaging, massive art form in its own right and our heritage. It does open the doors to historical, socio-political and personal stories that entertain and transform, it does support children to become empathetic, literate and confident, it does support vital workplace skills.

Our children have an entitlement - too often ignored - to Drama, because it matters of itself, as part of a broad and balanced education. Think of the last play, musical, film, or devised piece that made your senses sing. This is an entitlement. I love that Drama is a humanising, ancient, complex specialist art that makes audience feel and think more. Full stop. Yes, drama students are encouraged to analyze, be creative, work hard - these are important extras. Access to the art form is what matters, and this should be equitable, and high quality, in schools.

Even Nick Gibb, in 'Why Good-Quality Music Education Matters' (22.3.16), talks about his love of Music in terms of, 'The delight I still feel today when I listen to 'Zadok the Priest,' not better employment skills. Oddly, in 'The Importance of High-Quality Arts Education' (10.2.17), he only mentions Drama as part of English and doesn't acknowledge a lack of access to specialist Drama time/staff in the way he stresses about Music. He doesn't express a passion for Drama as he does for classical music. I love Zadok too, but wish in his role he'd endorse a more diverse canon and not his personal preferences - Franzmann's explosively brilliant Mogadishu, maybe, or current music that challenges the status quo. (Zadoc was written by Handel for King George II coronation.)

If this resonates with you, whatever you do, and you champion Drama, as Drama, as well as a magical teaching pedagogy, then support this and pass it on. If you believe learners should be entitled to Drama provision taught by specialists, then please act.

What can you do? Join National Drama. Sign up a friend. Our conferences are brilliant, and that's the participants' feedback, not just my view. We've got great plans for our 30th Birthday Celebrations including bursaries, £30 joining offers and a conference party! Sign up to the Bacc for the Future campaign. Check out the Cultural Learning Alliance. Do write to your MP, your local schools, talk to your drama teacher, and tell National Drama why it matters to you, campaign on social media.

The more of us cheering and shouting for Drama the better - because, or course, it does matter.

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