

ARTS: CREATIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Creative thinking, independence, team spirit and discipline are just some of the reasons to make the arts a core part of any school curriculum, say the region's educators. Words by Dave Gooderham

AN indulgence compared to more traditional subjects or a vital part of educating aspirational young people? While schools have to firmly focus on the likes of maths and English, you would be wrong to think music, art and drama are downplayed. Instead, a real emphasis on creative subjects is a feature – both in and out of the classroom – to help our young people become more world-ready and more rounded individuals when they leave school.

Stefan Griffiths, headmaster at Norwich School, said: “There is absolutely no doubt that creativity and the ability to think laterally is a crucial skill in the 21st century and the world our students are going into.

“At Norwich School, we are very fortunate to have a thriving creative community, whether

music, drama, dance or the spoken world. It is something we care about a great deal. The world is moving so fast that we must arm our children for this fast-changing world.” Norwich High School for Girls, which runs a Winter Arts Festival, is one of many who believes the creative arts are important on many levels.

Headmistress Kirsty von Malaisé said: “The arts develop creativity, discipline, perseverance and independence of mind, which are in themselves qualities of great value and which can be applied to other fields. Involvement in the arts can also promote students’ wellbeing, as they engage deeply in something outside of themselves.”

Similarly, St Joseph’s College in Ipswich highlights its commitment to the arts with a music and poetry evening, public speaking opportunities, a week-long arts festival and frequent concerts and performances.

Principal Danielle Clarke said: “Creative subjects are absolutely key in a school that believes, as we do at St Joseph’s College, in a holistic education, developing each child’s heart, body, spirit and mind.

“Creative and performing arts unlock hidden talents, broaden minds and develop confidence in children who may – or may not – excel elsewhere in the curriculum.

“Many a St Joseph’s student has found a new career path, having been given an opportunity to perform. It is no surprise that one of our most famous alumni, Richard Ayoade, is a leading light in the British arts scene.”

An Artsmark gold school, St Francis College in Hertfordshire has a thriving art and music department.

Tabitha Wilson, director of art, said: “The arts are highly valued at St. Francis’ College and are central to encourage enthusiasm, participation and involvement.

“Our ethos is to facilitate opportunities that will offer enjoyment and inspire every student through practical exploration in its widest sense. Our collective planning enables us to



A-level art in the studio at St Joseph's College



Pupils at St Mary's Colchester learn to make music

provide a curriculum of the arts experience that aims to cultivate imagination and develop knowledge to instigate independent learning.

“The arts reflect our unique cultural circumstances of a nation and offer an immensely rewarding way of human knowing and being – of imagination, aesthetic knowledge and translation and the expression of ideas.”

A sense of team spirit is just one of the many advantages of the arts, according to Jack Hammersley, director of music at St Mary’s Colchester.

He said: “What is, perhaps, not stressed enough is that music is an important social activity and what school provides, par excellence, is the opportunity to make music with others and to perform to others.

“This is particularly true of participating in a musical or pantomime where you become part of a close-knit team working together over an extended period. Parents and teachers alike note the increased confidence gained by students performing at concerts or on



Making music starts early at St Mary's Colchester

stage and students are inspired to improve by witnessing the performances of their peers.”

While Jonathan Taylor, principal at Wymondham College, believes involvement in the arts can enhance a university application.

He explained: “We view music and the wider arts as integral to the development of a well-rounded education, contributing significantly to creativity, self-esteem and resilience.

“The skills provided through the wider arts are highly valued by universities, employers and the wider community – and many students will continue to engage in music, drama and visual arts throughout their adult lives, proving not only their value within school, but a lasting legacy.”

Anna Winton-Mills, director of music at South Lee School in Bury St Edmunds, said: “In the age we live in, I think the arts are increasingly important.

“We have 10 music clubs at the school, everything from an orchestra to the ukulele, so there is an opportunity for every child who has even the slightest spark of interest. ▶

“As well as a sheer enjoyment, children can get a huge amount of confidence from tackling something new.”

David Ashton, academic deputy head at Framlingham College, added: “We are great believers in offering a holistic educational approach and promoting art in the curriculum.

“We offer a full range of music, art and drama and students are encouraged to continue with a creative subject when they choose their GCSEs.”

While declaring a “personal interest” in music education, Nick Weaver, headmaster at Ipswich School, believes there are many advantages, in and out of the classroom.

He said: “I know what great joy I had as well as a lot of personal development by playing music. This then gave me opportunities when I went to university.

“We have a community drama group who recently visited the dementia ward at Ipswich Hospital. We have had some wonderful feedback - the staff said they had not seen some of the patients smile before, but they just lit up. That kind of experience can have a profound effect on students.”

But Mr Weaver admitted: “I think there is a great worry about arts education. Julian Lloyd Webber recently opened our new multi-million pound music building and said ‘well done Ipswich School’ for championing arts education at a time when it is under threat nationally.”

And Serena O’Connor, head of art at Walden School, added: “One of the most frustrating aspects of the teaching of the arts is the ‘pigeon-holing’ of the subjects’. Students will characterise themselves as ‘arty’ or ‘science/mathematical’ – rarely both.

“This polarization is entirely missing the point. We are all creative and the creativity within us needs to be nurtured and explored for self-expression and all that has been mentioned above. You can be artistic and be good at sciences - indeed creativity is what helps the development of ideas in all subjects.”

Giving young people confidence is an important and reoccurring theme within our schools.

Jonathan Tan, music and drama teacher at Langley Preparatory School at Taverham Hall, said: “We strongly believe that music and arts contribute considerably to pupils’ wellbeing and creative thinking.

“We find that as our pupils grow in confidence on the stage and within music and drama lessons, they become more confident in other subjects too extending these cross-curricular links further into areas such as sport, where a number of children excel from the confidence they have developed through their performing arts.”

Garry Ravenhall, head of art at the Royal Hospital School in Holbrook, near Ipswich, believes creative subjects are just as important as PE in catering for a



Norwich High School textiles study



Ipswich School's concert at Snape Maltings



Norwich High School's production of Alice in Wonderland



Wymondham College's production of Grease

child’s physical developmental needs.

He explained: “In a sense, an art teacher’s job is not to create artists but to allow all children, regardless of ability, to have a mechanism whereby they can express their feelings and thoughts in a visual and/or tactile way.

“Art is important because it allows children to express themselves through visual and tactile media and literally grow up emotionally along the way.

His colleague Damon Kerr, head of drama at the Ipswich school, added: “Academically, American data suggests that pupils involved in performance or creation or simply arts appreciation score more highly in tests both in verbal and mathematical components.

“Epistemologically, they are more likely to provide more frequent opportunities for stretching people. They encourage risk-taking and open-ended thinking more often than many other subjects.

“Economically, the arts have long been an area of excellence in this country. It is a sector that generates significant wealth. Futuristically, we face a time when many white-collar workers will face redundancy as computers and robots prove to be cheaper and more effective replacements. The arts’ future is not threatened in this way.” ♦



Arts festival week at St Joseph's College, students in a dance workshop