

Speech and drama education in UK schools: where's the social justice in that?

A Case Study of Inequality

I was contacted recently by Nigel (a pseudonym, as are all names in the article), a friend and secondary school music teacher. His text read:

Will you please help a colleague, Rachel, who's been asked to teach Drama to Years 7 & 8 next year? She's a musician and our Head of Performing Arts but she knows nothing about Drama! Will you speak with her and give her a few pointers? She's really worried and hasn't a clue where to start.

Speaking to Rachel at Beechwood School, an 11-16 comprehensive in the north west of England with approximately 700 pupils on roll, I learnt the school was contending with several challenges. She offered a depressing snapshot, a mixture of her personal and professional opinions alongside official judgements from OFSTED inspectors, commenting, *'I've been here 15 years and I love the school, although there's no doubt about it, it's challenging, it's tough. But I stay because I care about the kids, and I want to do my best for them.'*

The school had been twice rated as 'Inadequate' by OFSTED, and more recently was categorised as 'Requires Improvement'. Among other things, inspectors concluded the English curriculum lacked ambition for all pupils and school leaders had not made reading a priority; consequently, few pupils could talk about the books they had read. The quality of teaching was judged variable overall, with insufficient levels of challenge for pupils, and low teachers' expectations of what pupils should achieve. GCSE examination results were poor, with many subjects falling well below national averages at grades A* to C / levels 4-9. A minority of pupils did not behave well in lessons and the school's rates of exclusion were higher than those found nationally.

While the proportion of pupils known to be disadvantaged was higher than the national average, the percentage of them attaining good passes in both English and mathematics was well below that of other pupils in the school and nationally. Similarly, the overall proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities was higher than the national average while their performance was below expectations. School attendance was below national averages and the percentage of pupils who were frequently absent from school was significantly higher than the national average. While most pupils identified as 'White British', the proportion of pupils from ethnic minority groups was higher than the national average, and the proportion of pupils who spoke English as an additional language was also higher than the national average.

However, despite its numerous challenges, inspectors found that Beechwood offered its pupils a range of extra-curricular activities, including the opportunity to participate in charity work, a range of musical activities, sports clubs, educational visits and theatre trips. Pupils welcomed and enjoyed these activities, which enriched learning.

Rachel's challenge, to teach Drama at Key Stage 3, prompted her to reflect on the opportunities she had been given as a child, and the aspirations she harboured for her Beechwood pupils. She explained:

I remember going to a local dance school, and I was there for years. I really enjoyed it and did lots of exams and competitions. At the same time, I was very musical and was having tuition on instruments and voice. I did graded singing exams and, like the dance ones, I found they were an enjoyable ladder of progression that kept me interested and motivated. I was lucky, I had parents who were able to pay for my tuition and all the extras, but of course that's not the case for everyone.

What I didn't know, until recently, was that graded exams are also available for speech and drama. And I think that's something we should pursue at Beechwood. There's a lot of deprivation in the school but I look at Rosewood (a local independent school) and they do LAMDA exams and that's what I want for our kids. I want them to have the same chance as the Rosewood pupils have.

Currently, Drama provision at Beechwood is very limited; there is only one drama specialist (part-time) and she delivers the drama component of the English curriculum at Key Stage 3 (school years 7-9), but at Key Stage 4 Drama is not offered at GCSE level. Unfortunately, this is not atypical since GCSE entries for creative subjects, including Drama, have shown a troubling decline in recent years, the result, at least in part, of a concerted effort by the government to push STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) that are perceived to have a greater economic value to the individual and society.

This neoliberal agenda has been instrumental in undermining confidence in creative and performing arts subjects, with a consequent fall off in entries for dance, music, art et cetera. It is profoundly troubling that the UK creative industries, which are world leading and add billions to the economy, are marginalised and regarded as something of a frippery. To illustrate, do you remember the controversial HM Government advertisement from October 2021, showing Fatima, a ballet dancer whose "next job could be in cyber" but ("she just doesn't know it yet")? Hastily withdrawn after a backlash, the advert seemed to encapsulate an official disregard of the arts, positioning them as worthless to society and to the individuals who choose to pursue them.

Moreover, politicians and policymakers seem to have forgotten the 'business' element in 'showbusiness'. Watching the 2021 Olympics and Paralympics, I mused on how team GB's success was partly attributable to the increased funding they received, approximately £100 million since 2016, and wondered what our already world-class performing arts industry could have done with similar sums of money? Perhaps it's a case that we're too good already and don't need this funding.

The opportunities for young people to access high quality performance training, both in and out of school/college, is under threat. In our sector, Speech and Drama, most teachers are in private practice and therefore must charge fees for their services. I am anecdotally aware that many STSD members work in the independent school sector, with relatively few teaching in state schools/colleges. This, combined with the decreasing opportunities to study Drama in the school curriculum, is clearly inequitable and socially unjust. As an academic subject, Drama does not have high status and is subsumed within the English curriculum in England. Many of my pupils have recalled uninspiring drama teaching in schools – unsurprising perhaps when, too often, non-specialist teachers are involved.

Clearly, this state of affairs should be of deep concern to us as a profession, but what might be done to address these issues? The STSD is working hard to become a more outward-facing organisation, forging links with allied bodies such as arts Council England, National Drama and CDMT. We will continue to make the case for high-quality drama provision for all students in full-time education, but perhaps we can do more than that. Perhaps we can volunteer our time and expertise in local schools and colleges, as a teacher or as a governor to press the case for speech and drama. I know in the past this has been done and the results have been patchy. However, it remains the case, I believe, that many schools would welcome the chance to have a skilled experienced and qualified specialist teacher in their midst for an hour or so a week. Of course, such small measures cannot redress the huge inequalities outlined above, but they are a step in the right direction and feel to me at least, morally and ethically, the right course of action. It would be interesting hear from colleagues who have volunteered in this way and to learn from them.

Our profession is, by its very nature, somewhat exclusive but that is not to say it should also be exclusionary. Speech and drama is for all and we know, more than most, it's transformative potential. Other bodies, such as the Council for Dance, Drama and Musical Theatre our lobbying parliament to advocate the value of private sector specialist performing arts tuition and the role of graded exams. We, the STST, in common with the examination boards, can and should do more to promote the benefits of what we offer. Its time for us to do our bit.