

## THE SHAME OF THE E-BACC AND CONTINUING CHALLENGES TO CRATIVE EDUCATION

### The view of the National Association for Fine Art Education

An increasingly vocal constituency drawn from education, the cultural professions and specifically the arts have been adding almost daily to the literature and debate surrounding the government's discredited plan to establish the English Baccalaureate. It now appears they have succeeded in deflecting this one catastrophic policy and must be congratulated. Of course the exact composition of the performance measure was always under review pending broad confidence in a public response. Mr Gove only ever managed to convince a remote minority of its merits. It is very likely he will now claim that he has acted according to the principles of a fair and democratic process. But this was never democracy in action: a political celebrity, under-qualified and inexperienced in his field of influence, conjured a big idea presented as a solution and set about propagating the concept to develop its gravitas, rationale and inevitability irrespective of reason or entitlement. Despite our delight at this morning's news we remain extremely concerned about the direction of travel and the constant erosion of creativity in the curriculum.

That the Baccalaureate was designed to comprise seven subjects did not mean that pupils should not study in additional areas nor that schools should not offer a range of other courses. However, it did suggest a premium list that failed to celebrate the importance of other subjects. It effectively prescribed the realms of enquiry that students should aspire to develop as an interest or enthusiasm and it stipulated the general loci of per-capita resourcing that schools would need to invest in to ensure their business sustainability. Despite the u-turn the persistent ministerial philosophy favours limiting the range and means of teaching delivery in schools by specifically promoting one particular culture of learning above all others and prioritising test-based examinations as the principle method of assessment. The Education Minister's intention appears to be the eradication of wider educational processes in favour of instruction or dictation. He may have changed direction on the E-Bacc but this does not change his view. Our priority concerns are not wholly answered by this change of heart. The government's actions are still directed at diminishing creative behaviours in the processes of teaching and learning with the risk of undermining the social, moral and economic capital that creative education undoubtedly fosters in mature liberal democracies.

'The number of non-academic qualifications taken up to age 16 rose from about 15,000 in 2004 to about 575,000 in 2010, with a higher take-up of vocational qualifications by young people from deprived backgrounds. Many of these qualifications do not carry real weight for entry to higher education or for getting a job.'

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These two sentences are the fourth introductory paragraph on the Department of Education web-site, updated in November 2012, and demonstrate a distinctly functional perspective unadulterated by any concession to motives such as the spiritual enrichment of the learner or the nurture of emotional intelligence or independent creativity. The passage brings some semblance of clarity to the reasoning that was behind the English Baccalaureate; however unsophisticated, simplistic and untested, it did seem like a method of filtration and separation and that is shocking enough. Even so, nothing on the department's web-site provides a rationale for discouraging creativity but this is effectively what is steadily happening and the Department of Innovation and Skills is helping wherever it can. Of course, it is not possible to withdraw from creative education as a practice or habit. People learn through; disruptive enquiry, heuristic testing, speculation, kinaesthetic experience, basic experimentation; etc, even where it is not supported or measured. This is not merely a menu of exotic behaviours exhibited by and expected of deviant art students; this is normal inquisitive creativity; for any child, at any age. To ignore the presence of multiple cultures of learning means to suppress them and that means marginalising the type of active learning that has the greatest capacity for driving our economy and culture. Worse, unless creativity is celebrated in the processes of education and as a theme for learning in subjects such as Fine Art, we will exclude ever greater numbers from cultural participation or, at least, from participating in the cultural spaces that reflect our national reputation and identity as a society. Such a drift is anti-democratic and even inhumane. We haven't yet achieved the goal of fully inclusive comprehensive education but the aspiration for a fair and balanced cultural contract is the best chance we have of raising participation and improving conditions in pursuit of basic equality.

Ruskin described the balance of art education as representing heart, head and hand. That may translate to attitude, aptitude and application when referencing a broader subject range. At the core of this sentiment is the idea that a person is seeking to grow and become effective in the world. The need to balance one's emotional intelligence with a growing sense of knowledge and reflective experience is what brings a person to wisdom and most importantly, self-determination. Education is an endlessly evolving mission, in permanent revolution, a journey of personal discovery intertwined with expanding technologies and shifting cultural norms that builds from a base of innate ability, habitus, intergenerational tradition and a passion for belonging somewhere in society. Creativity is a standard, an ethos and principle at the core of learning that some choose to harness and exploit in discrete measure and others may rely on to balance their experiences and promote their independence of thought and reason. In fairness, even before the current government, a sequence of curriculum controls, accountability measures and standardisations, bourn from policy over a number of years, had already weakened the value proposition and practical delivery of creativity across all subjects. Political parties of differing hue have repeatedly tested teaching professionals generally and made it increasingly challenging for them to maintain a creative learning environment. However, the current Minister of Education has exhibited an ignorance that has surely surpassed any of his predecessors. His failure to establish the E-bacc is welcome but it is also indicative of a habit for

political posturing. It is never OK for professional politicians to believe themselves to have superior awareness of a field of specialist practice but it is all too common and it must now be clear that Mr Gove was wrong but also remains wrong.

Educators have experience of education; more than politicians and hopefully more than the learners. They might also have knowledge and pertinent experience in their specialist themes. Instruction and knowledge transfer, from teacher to pupil, is a significant priority but it is not the only one and it is not the top. Teaching can be timetabled and regimented and it can be delivered in short bursts but this forces an anomaly in that learning is unpredictable at best and frequently takes an entire lifetime. The educator's principle expertise is educational process. The primary tasks are to develop independence in the learner, to develop mutual learning gain from peer to peer interaction and to contextualise learning and encourage lifelong habits. These are goals that belong to contemporary education but they have a very long tradition that relates to the way we build society's wisdom through knowledge exchange and sharing. Eventhough state education is a relatively recent social innovation, the role of the educator and our instincts for teaching through empowerment have a deep history. We have had to learn to maintain and value the spiritual and sociological components of learning through a period of growing mass education characterised by organisational structures and systems for efficiency. This means nurturing methods of creative education and habits of creative learning (many of which have been borrowed and adapted from the arts) for the sake of the empowered learner and the benefit of improving cultural and economic inclusion. The real breakthrough will come when educational participation starts to reference high quality and widespread mutual learning exchange within social networks and between individuals. This point may be summed up in the words of Septima Clark whose contribution at the Highlander Folk School of Tennessee in the 50s inspired inclusive educational practices world-wide; '...if we start now, we will have less people to teach tomorrow'. In other words, properly educated people will disseminate a culture of learning in others. We need to design and then protect state sponsored comprehensive and distributed educational access so that it can benefit all and a very large component of that offer needs to be the nurture of individual creativity and the teaching of the arts at all levels of achievement.

The attempt at establishing the English Baccaluateate and moves to prioritise test-based assessments in secondary schools have been evolving in parallel to the wholesale transfer of debts relating to higher educational engagements from the public purse to individual students (or their families). These policies appear to have been part of the same mission; a strategy for privileged education, posing as meritocracy. We have to be wary of a continuing objective to sort and distinguish the descendants of the deserving and better off in society from a parallaxed under-class; 'us and them' gestures that seek to confirm difference and further stratify society. Direct fees for higher learning are and will inevitably reduce demand as if it were a market place for commercial exchange and it can be fairly expected that those who cannot afford the cost will be most likely to adjust their

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aspirations accordingly. The exacerbation of social segregation on the basis of class, economic access and educational privilege is part of a new settlement that enhances policy controls whilst diminishing democratic access. Public subsidy for Higher Education was initially triggered at the end of the First World War by a University sector bankrupted by a stagnant economy and zero growth rates; a condition that has a ring of familiarity in 2013. This generated a welfare offer that was quickly adopted as the norm but never succeeded in properly and fairly embedding into society; in other words it has failed to deliver mass inclusion or universal benefits. As a culture we generally believe we have a public education system but forget that very few people and families have directly accessed all of its privileges. The notion that education supports democracy and consequently fairness is well established in our collective memory, but if that were ever its function it never quite got there; at least, not yet. Right now we need to be aware that this aspiration may be delayed indefinitely as what our current political leaders repeatedly seek to initiate may not be reversible.

We are bothered by the situation affecting creative subjects and pedagogies because we have an interest in the principles of humanism. We are anxious as a community of Fine Art educators as the core constant for all of us in our working lives is concern for the quality of creative adventure that students can access or experience. We see it as an essential component of experience in schools, colleges, universities, community facilities, adult education classrooms and anywhere that people seek to learn. The essential nature of creative and arts education is that it reinforces independence and empowers learners to direct their own discovery, personal development and vocation. It is relatively easy to describe as a process in higher and tertiary education because it has so many subject headings. However, it starts as a process in early years, pre-school and pre-nursery. Creativity is an innate human characteristic; it distinguishes our reflections and discourses and drives our inquisitive instincts beyond a steady state equilibrium with the external world. Were it not for the creative and artistic impulses that we each share it would be hard to see how innovation, invention, discovery and science might have gained any traction in our collective consciousness and, most importantly, been passed between us as nuanced wisdom and communication.

The arts and the distribution of creative freedoms or opportunities is a barometer for the health of any democracy and the well-being of civil society. Arts education is generally popular because people elect to explore their own creative potential and for a myriad of different reasons. The government's various attempts at interfering in education indicate that they believe politicians need to dictate what people should be allowed to learn and in what manner. This is a direct contradiction of any concept of universal rights. Access to creativity in learning is a reliable route to self-awareness, fulfilment and a sense of self-worth; equal access is good for society because it can so easily promote confidence and foster broad political and cultural engagement. It is essential that we as a society focus on the release of latent individual capacity; the development of independent learning skills, innovative thinkers and motivators and it is imperative that we spread the net as widely as is conceivable. In short, arts

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education, wherever it may be found, is one of the most reliable means of growing creativity and embedding it as a value and asset across the whole of society. We are very pleased that the E-Bacc appears to have been ditched but this is not the whole story and in no way compensates for all of the damage that this government is reaping on the individual's access to independent creativity.

**Prof Paul Haywood (on behalf of the National Association for Fine Art Education: NAFAE)**

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