

Some suspect that the arts are mainly to do with feelings and fuzz, not relevant to the serious business of academic achievement



## The beating heart of human life? The arts

*Education is personal, and nothing is more personal than artistic practices and traditions, writes educationalist Sir Ken Robinson*

THERE ARE 15 million people under the age of 20 in the UK. That's a quarter of the population. Why should it be so important for cultural learning to be a priority in their education?

Let's start with what we mean by cultural learning. In this context, it means practising and learning about "the arts" – a phrase that is sometimes used as a synonym for "culture". Since both terms have a range of meanings, I think it is useful to distinguish them to better understand how they are related. In the social sense, culture means a community's overall way of life; its dominant values, outlook, customs and ways of being. Like styles of politics, religion, science, work and food, the arts are an integral part of the social culture, but they are not the whole of it. So what part are they?

In the West, at least, if you ask most people what the arts are they will give you a list, usually made up of music, visual arts, literature, drama and dance. The problem with such lists is their partial nature: a comprehensive run-down of arts practices across time and cultures would exhaust your hard drive. The

fact is that, from cave painting to poetry, from kabuki to throat singing, the arts in some form or another have a defining presence in all known cultures. There is a reason for this. The songs we sing, the stories we tell, the music we make, the objects we shape and the performances we share are not idle pastimes. They are among the most eloquent expressions of human intelligence, imagination and creativity. They beat at the heart of human life and give form and meaning to our deepest feelings and our highest thoughts.

If the arts are this important, why do we have to promote them? Why should they have to be explained, let alone justified? One reason is that, in Western cultures at least, when it comes to education the term "arts" is loaded with various preconceptions. For some policymakers, it seems, the arts are just leisure activities – valuable and enriching, perhaps, but not part of the hard work of life after school and consequently of marginal importance during it. Some clearly suspect that the arts are mainly to do with feelings and fuzz rather than intellect and

information: all very therapeutic, no doubt, but not relevant to the serious business of academic achievement.

The result is that when talk in education turns, as it often does, to raising standards, countering unemployment, improving economic competitiveness and squaring up to overseas competition, the arts are often pushed to the edges. Policymakers talk instead about getting “back to basics”, by which they mean the three Rs and the courses that are most obviously relevant to the economy, such as science and technology. These are essential, certainly, but they are not sufficient. Young people need the arts too.

The real basics of education are not subjects or teaching methods, but purposes. There are four (in education at least): economic, cultural, social and personal. The research and experience of many enlightened organisations – including the Cultural Learning Alliance and the Clore Duffield Foundation – has found that cultural learning embraces all of these and can support achievement in all disciplines.

### **Walking in another's shoes**

Education should enable all young people to become economically productive, for their own sakes and everyone else's. Surveys show that cultural learning directly promotes the economic skills, knowledge and attitudes that employers value most, including creative and critical thinking, collaboration, communication, social confidence and cultural sensitivity. As a result, the employability of students who study arts disciplines is higher than those who do not, and they are more likely to stay in employment.

Education should enable young people to fulfil their social roles and responsibilities in a civil society. Some of the greatest challenges we face are to do with inequality and exclusion. Studies show that students from low-income families who take part in the arts in school are three times more likely to graduate from higher education than those who do not.

Problems of apathy and social disengagement exist among young people. Schools will not solve them by running theoretical courses on civics, but by being the sorts of places that practise these principles. Research shows that students who get involved in the arts in school are twice as likely to volunteer for roles in the community and 20 per cent more likely to vote as young adults.

Questions of personal and cultural identity are becoming ever more complex. Some of the most vexing conflicts, nationally and globally, are cultural in character; they are about differences in values, beliefs and ways of life. Schools must help students to understand the traditions and beliefs that shape their own values and behaviour. They must also help them to understand those of other peoples and times. Engaging with the artistic practices and traditions of other cultures is among the most powerful ways of helping all of us to see, think and feel as others do.

None of these purposes can be met if we forget that education is about living people. In the end, all education is personal. Many of the problems in education are rooted in a failure to remember this. If they are to meet their other purposes, schools must also help students to develop their personal talents and passions. Doing so calls for a balanced education that puts the arts level with the sciences, the humanities, maths, languages and PE. Not one or the other, but all of them equally. If we get this right, the benefits will not just be felt by a quarter of the population, but by all of us. ●

*Sir Ken Robinson is an author, speaker and international adviser on creativity and education. This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in the Clore Duffield Foundation's 50th-anniversary publication, Clore Duffield 1964-2014. Email [admin@cloreduffield.org.uk](mailto:admin@cloreduffield.org.uk) to request a copy. The Clore Duffield Foundation is part of the Cultural Learning Alliance: [www.culturalllearningalliance.org.uk](http://www.culturalllearningalliance.org.uk)*