

Independent Schools Headteacher Interviews

“We must take cultural learning seriously in schools.”

Anthony Seldon, Wellington College

Introduction

The Cultural Learning Alliance has interviewed the headteachers of five leading independent schools:

- John Baugh, Dragon School
- Kevin Jones, St John’s College School
- Tony Little, Eton College
- Emma McKendrick, Downe House
- Anthony Seldon, Wellington College

We were interested in the reasons why fee paying schools prioritise delivery of cultural learning both in and out of the classroom.

All five schools are acknowledged as leaders in their field, providing children and young people with very high quality education. Two are prep schools (Dragon School and St John’s College School) working with children aged 4-13. Three are secondary level, teaching 13-18 year olds (Eton College and Wellington College) and 11-18 year olds (Downe House).

By any measure pupils at independent schools perform better than those who attend state schools. In 2012 for example 91% of independent school pupils went on to Higher Education and 91.1% of pupils achieved five or more A* to C grades compared to 58.9% nationally¹.

The type of education provided by independent schools includes a high pupil teacher ratio; there is on average one teacher for every 9.4 pupils. The attraction of these schools is also, in the words of Barnaby Lenon, Chairman of the Independent Schools Council, because of:

“... the commitment our schools make to education beyond the classroom, something which is reflected in our disproportionate influence on areas of life such as sport (one third of the gold medals in the Beijing Olympics) and the arts - not least music and acting.”

The headteachers we interviewed stated:

- Cultural learning improves children’s attainment
- They felt a duty to provide cultural learning to the children in their care
- They were responding to the demands and expectations of parents

¹ Independent Schools Council Census 2012

http://www.isc.co.uk/Resources/Independent%20Schools%20Council/Research%20Archive/Annual%20Census/2012/ISC_Census_2012_Final.pdf

- They need to provide excellent opportunities for the reputation of their schools
- Delivering high quality cultural learning requires specialist teachers and a commitment from the school
- They had doubts about the current systems of accountability including the English Baccalaureate and National Curriculum

In each of the schools arts subjects are a valued part of the curriculum in their own right. Cultural learning is embedded across the schools connecting and enhancing learning in other subjects.

For all of the headteachers it was unthinkable that they would not provide arts and cultural subjects in their curriculums and in their schools. They saw them as essential to producing rounded, resilient, articulate thinkers who would succeed in the wider world and in providing a fulfilled and joyful childhood.

Provided below is more detail on the discussions around each of the key points and a selection of quotes from the headteachers.

Cultural Learning improves children's attainment

The headteachers unanimously agreed that teaching about and through the arts and heritage improved the attainment of their pupils.

“Children who take part in cultural learning feel fulfilled and they behave better and perform better. It has an immediate effect on their English language and their ability to articulate.”

Anthony Seldon, Wellington College

“There isn't an area of education that isn't going to benefit from teaching the arts. Bet your bottom dollar if a child develops a love of drama, maths and science will improve.”

Emma McKendrick, Downe House

“In my experience if you ignite an enthusiasm in one area it illuminates all other areas.”

Tony Little, Eton College

The headteachers felt there were a number of elements at play in causing the increase in attainment – from an improvement in behaviour as a result of taking part in cultural activities to the way in which cultural subjects develop our sense of self and enable new ways of doing and thinking.

“Emotional resilience is important to learning. Children learn how to problem solve through how they feel – we do lots of teaching of the very young through role play. The arts help children to explore and express themselves, to find their voice, and this

enhances all learning.”
Kevin Jones, St John’s College School

“The arts help us communicate. The more we communicate the better. Children who struggle in orthodox lessons can communicate wonderfully through paint, music and drama.

Arts are used as a tool for improvement. They improve self esteem and self belief. The tools you learn in the arts you often see transferred to other subjects.”
Emma McKendrick, Downe House

“Everyone needs to do cultural subjects, they enable creative and emotional expression.”
Anthony Seldon, Wellington College

This impact on attainment is backed up by research summarised in the *CLA Key Research Findings* paper.

A duty to provide cultural learning

Aside from its impact on attainment headteachers voiced a sense of duty as teachers to provide children and young people with a cultural education seeing it as an essential component of educating a child.

“Cultural learning is about the development of the whole child. It facilitates and develops. Education is about opportunity. If you are only developing part of the child then you are not educating them.”
Emma McKendrick, Downe House

“We need to think that we are educating the 22nd century child – many of the children we teach are going to be productive adults in the 22nd century. The people who will be most valued and sought after are those who can continue to learn and see the value in it, who are adaptable and creative.”
John Baugh, Dragon School

“A key part of cultural learning is engagement in spaces where you can explore what it is to be human and connect deeply with yourself and others. This is essential to children’s growth.”
Kevin Jones, St John’s College School

“There should be a balance with sciences, arts and PE. It is about healthy living and lifestyle. Developing interests and passions that extend and fulfil. The arts help you stay in balance.”
Emma McKendrick, Downe House

“Cultural learning offers enrichment and balance to children. It sparks their interest and it relieves stress and anxiety. That is the reason we want to put time into these subjects.”

John Baugh, Dragon School

The arts and culture were described as a fundamental underpinning in the development of children’s sense of self from which so much else grows.

“Who we are is determined by our creativity. The ability to express yourself artistically leads to our distinctive characters. It is what makes us. Cultural learning is important in the formation of personality and individuality.”

Anthony Seldon, Wellington College

It develops empathy, experience beyond your own, self expression, enjoyment and pleasure. Communication and self belief. It is a way of accessing many different cultures. Enhances understanding and ability to think.

Emma McKendrick, Downe House

Parental expectations and reputation

Headteachers felt that there was an expectation from parents that they would provide a cultural education, and that part of their reputation was bound up in the arts and cultural offer they provide.

“We would want to offer a broad cultural education, but if we want to be successful there is no choice but to offer cultural learning, it is part of our reputation and marketing of the school. By offering cultural learning we are meeting parents’ expectations, they want cultural education as opposed to a tight academic education.

Parents obviously make comparisons with other schools, and we want to make an offer that exceeds other schools.”

John Baugh, Dragon School

“Parents buy in to Eton and our approach. To an extent we are talking to the converted about the value of cultural learning. You could get excellent A level results far more cheaply in other ways so a key reason to spend on an education at Eton is the breadth of cultural learning.”

Tony Little, Eton College

There were a variety of factors at play in parents’ drive for cultural learning:

- The school is standing in for parents during leisure time in a boarding environment

In a boarding education you expect arts and culture. You are giving opportunities the parents cannot. If you choose boarding you expect whole child education. Emma McKendrick, Downe House

- Parents want children to have the same opportunities they had or want children to have opportunities they were denied

“Parental expectations and motivations for wanting a cultural education for their children broad fall into either a desire to give their children the same opportunities they had as children to participate in sport, art, music and so on or they are seeking to give children opportunities they didn’t have as a child.”

John Baugh, Dragon School

Headteachers felt there is an unarticulated assumption by parents that providing a cultural education was part of giving their children the best education.

“They want to give their children the best, which they believe is a broad and enriching education.”

John Baugh, Dragon School

“Some parents have strong cultural values. They feel that a broad cultural experience is central for their child being ‘rounded’.”

Tony Little, Eton College

Quality

In the interviews we discussed with the headteachers how they delivered high quality cultural learning in their schools.

“The leadership and management has to fully support cultural learning to reap the benefits: you can’t just pay lip service to the idea. We attract teachers who are interested in the time we have to be able to deliver and take cultural subjects seriously. When they apply for jobs they will mention they are grade 8 on flute as well as being a science teacher, as they know we will value those skills, take them seriously and there is time in our system to support them to use these skills.”

John Baugh, Dragon School

“30% of our timetable is devoted to cultural activities, including sports so we can employ full time specialist teachers of these subjects, who teach children from the age of four upwards. Our children will have a specialist drama teacher and a specialist music teacher long before they have a specialist maths teacher.”

Kevin Jones, St John’s College School

“There is not right and wrong in the arts, but there is better and worse. Quality teachers lead to quality products.”
Anthony Seldon, Wellington College

“Whatever the type of cultural learning, it needs to be treated seriously. There is sometimes a fear around delivering a play on a sensitive subject. You have to trust in the quality of the work. You must do any risk taking with integrity and discipline. If you are going to allow students to tackle difficult subjects, they must do it well and convincingly.”
Tony Little, Eton College

Prioritisation of cultural learning in schools and accountability

We also discussed the reasons why cultural learning might not be prioritised in wider education, which led to comments on the accountability systems in place in English schools.

“People’s consumption of arts is often related to the idea it is a luxury, but also class can act on people’s choices. There is a fundamentally anglo-saxon perception at work which has a deep suspicion of intellectual and artistic activity. Access to the arts is about having a shared artistic and cultural experience. We need to encourage this in Britain.”
Tony Little, Eton College

“Perhaps one of the reasons cultural learning has come to be seen as a luxury is because for adults finding the time and the funds for cultural activity is a luxury and we are transferring the same logic to our children participating in culture.”
John Baugh, Dragon School

“The whole system of accountability, league tables, inspection can narrow the curriculum and make schools risk averse. Independent schools are not bound in the same ways and can therefore choose to commit to cultural learning even when that commitment is not supported by the national curriculum.”
Kevin Jones, St John’s College School

“The whole national curriculum notion of 'core subjects' excludes and marginalises cultural learning. We should be asking why cultural learning is seen as a luxury. Discovering yourself, expressing yourself, understanding yourself and others, being at ease and in command of yourself, giving and receiving joy are core human qualities and should be seen as core parts of education.”
Kevin Jones, St John’s College School

“In a competitive world there are a lot of messages saying to pupils and parents the arts subjects aren’t important.”
Emma McKendrick, Downe House

“There should be an obligation to deliver a cultural subject in the EBacc. The British liberal tradition is one of breadth of education, with a broad based perception of culture, which is given parity with other subjects. By limiting the subjects that are valued, the EBacc is downgrading and reducing the potential for achievement. We aren’t being true to ourselves and are limiting the different ways to express ourselves if all we concentrate on is having to matriculate.”

Tony Little, Eton College

The Cultural Learning Alliance and its membership

The Cultural Learning Alliance is a collective voice working to ensure that at a time of social and economic stress all children and young people are able to have an active engagement with the creation and enjoyment of our arts and heritage.

The Alliance includes a range of organisations working across the cultural and educational sectors, including non-departmental public bodies, philanthropists, umbrella organisations, cultural partners, education specialists and schools. It is supported by a wider membership of over 3,300 organisations and close to 5,700 individuals.

The Cultural Learning Alliance is chaired by Lord Puttnam. A Steering Group meets quarterly to oversee the work and direction of the Alliance, and an Advisory Panel offers expertise and strategic support to all aspects of the CLA activities.

www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk