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To cite this article: Aly Colman & Geoffrey Colman (2020) An act of transgression: performing arts as a subject choice within a coastal area of deprivation, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 40:3, 292-302, DOI: [10.1080/14682761.2020.1807206](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2020.1807206)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2020.1807206>



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Published online: 07 Jan 2021.



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An act of transgression: performing arts as a subject choice within a coastal area of deprivation

Aly Colman  and Geoffrey Colman

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions and aspirations of secondary school pupils interested in a career in the performing arts. The pupils in this case study were participating in drama-based courses and this research offers findings relevant for those working in schools, FE and HE, as well as the creative arts industries. This research is located within a coastal area of deprivation, Waveside, situated within England, UK. We have used fictional names for the towns, school and participants in this research, to offer anonymity. England's coastal areas are often linked to deprivation. Within this context, a focus group of GCSE, A level and BTEC Drama pupils from Seagreen Secondary Academy, a secondary school in Waveside, provides the data that informs this research, with additional contextual narrative from the pupils' teacher. The findings show that to study a performing arts subject is perceived by some pupils as an act of transgression. These pupils resisted neoliberal curriculum priorities resulting in tensions between school, parents and friends. Those acting as gate-keepers to professional actor training and other career opportunities within the arts, may need to review practices for recruitment and development support within marginalised communities.

KEYWORDS

Technologies of the self; transgression; coastal deprivation; subject choice; conservatoire; drama school

Introduction

Education within a coastal area of deprivation brings specific contextual features related to poverty and aligned social issues. Ovenden-Hope and Passy (2015) studied the challenges faced by academy leaders in coastal secondary academies identifying educational isolation, difficulties with staff recruitment, 'failing' local primaries, engaging students and their families with education, student behaviour, the quality of teaching and learning within the school, and the shifting priorities of educational policy as pertinent factors (36). This paper considers the ways in which specific contextual factors emerging from deprivation, for example, high unemployment and related poverty issues, might impact on the expectations and aspirations of secondary school pupils studying performing arts subjects. We have drawn from Foucault's work on the technologies of the self, empirical research in one secondary school within a coastal area of deprivation, and recent reports on the status of the arts and arts-based education. Recently, the creative arts have received attention from Arts Council England, Durham and Warwick

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commissions, and salient assertions are examined first before we consider the ways in which other literature has informed this study.

The creative arts and some potential barriers

Reflecting on 20 years of cultural education policy in England, the Cultural Learning Alliance (Cultural Learning Alliance 2019) suggests that amid the many calls to action, such as the Durham Commission (2019), Henley Review of Education (2012) and Warwick Commission (2019), initiatives that once ‘looked like a simple option now seem like one more intervention in a crowded field’ (Cultural Learning Alliance 2019, 3). The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2019), a collaboration between Arts Council England and Durham University, is the most recent report to examine the role of creativity and creative thinking in young people, not as a subject specific analysis, but as an overview of creativity and learning. The report evidences the positive impact of creativity-related activities, and demonstrates concern that with decline in participation and uptake for the arts in schools, the arts then become ‘the province of the privileged’ (23). The Durham report identifies that the teaching of creative subjects such as drama, dance, art and music is predominated by ‘the absence of agreed models of teaching for creativity, a lack of confidence among teaching practitioners, and a shortage of resources’ (2019, 7). Within one specific school in a coastal area of deprivation, we were interested to highlight the perceptions of pupils regarding the potential scope of the performing arts in their future study and employment.

The largest gaps in educational achievement are seen in countries that have the greatest social inequalities (see Dorling 2015; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Arts education has the capacity to promote positive change in young people and the Durham report confirms this by stating that ‘teaching for creativity confers personal, economic and social advantage’ (7) and therefore should be available to all young people ‘as a matter of social justice’ (7). Reay reminds us (2013) that there is ‘a long history of problematizing social mobility’ (660). Asserting that ‘social mobility is increasingly seen to be a major source of social justice’ (661), Reay argues that this should be something ‘much more than the movement of a few individuals up and down an increasingly inequitable social system’ (661). The author considers social mobility, relevant policies and her own experience of reconciling ‘the working-class girl I was with the middle-class woman I have become’ (673). She concludes that she feels ‘frozen in a world that ... seems to have lost the plot’ (675). Part of this feeling relates to the unequal society that the UK is defined by. This aligns with Archer and Hutchings (2000) who, in an earlier study, identify risk as the barrier to participation. Risk here not only relates to financial and academic failure, but also, crucially, the risk of losing one’s identity (570). The authors conclude that ‘working-class respondents generally positioned themselves “outside” of HE (e.g. constructing HE as a white, and/or middle-class place)’ (570). We were interested to observe whether this was prevalent amongst the performing arts students in our research including whether, for example, the students perceived risks in relation to study or employment within the performing arts.

Conceptual framework

To understand access to the performing arts, both in terms of educational routes and career opportunities, we have drawn from Foucault’s writing. Foucault chose to examine

power relationships, rather than power *per se*, and in so doing considered ‘the relationships in which one wishes to direct the behavior of another’ (Foucault 1984, 11). These are the ‘micro-practices of lived experiences’ (Olssen 2003), shaping the reality for individuals through power induced relationships. Power here is ‘something which is performed, something more like a strategy than a possession’ (Mills 2003, 34). Foucault tells us ‘Power produces. It produces reality’ (1991, 194) and we are interested in this study, in the way power shapes the reality for the school pupils, illustrated through their perceptions. Foucault’s technologies of the self, assist further understanding. While the concept of domination remained a central preoccupation for Foucault, he became increasingly interested in the ways in which we, as neoliberal subjects, continue to be worked on through the exercise of power on self, *by* self. These are the techniques of self-government, or technologies of the self, and include the process of transforming ourselves ‘in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (Foucault 1988, 18).

The technologies of the self include any particular shaping of self in response to discourse (Gillies 2013, 15). Relevant to this study then, discourse might construct our knowledge of which curriculum subjects are deemed valuable to society, constructs built upon notions of desirable career pathways, the purpose of conservatoire training and who this training is for, etc. Crucial to understanding how the technologies of the self might be used as the conceptual framing to our study is the role of resistance within the concept of power. As Mills (2003) explains, Foucault was concerned with ‘foregrounding resistance to power’ (34) and while power produces compliance, it also produces resistance. Resistance emerges through our ‘struggle of becoming’ (Ball 2013, 146). The manifestation of resistance includes, for example, identifying ‘spaces of doubt’ (Ball and Olmedo 2013, 93) or ‘the possibilities and impossibilities of transgression’ (94) within the school pupils and their teacher. Drawing from Foucault, then, we use the technologies of the self as a conceptual tool to examine ways resistance, or transgression, might be understood in the fieldwork. We were interested in whether this might manifest in the ways pupils encountered advice and guidance that informed their aspirations and expectations relating to the performing arts as a subject choice. This included a focus on the choices they made as they struggled with ‘capability and constraint, limitations and transgression’ (Ball 2013, 146).

The study

To examine the perceptions and aspirations of secondary school pupils interested in a career in the performing arts in one school site within a coastal area of deprivation, the research design was constructed using one research question: How do pupils studying performing arts based qualifications, and their staff, perceive the educational and professional opportunities available to them?

The school context

A single case study was formed from one large secondary school, which we have called Seagreen Secondary Academy, in one town, which we have called Waveside, situated within an area of coastal deprivation in England, UK (The English Indices of

Deprivation 2019, Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government).¹ Waveside was once a bustling seaside holiday destination, but over the last three decades it has experienced high levels of unemployment resulting in high levels of adults on out of work benefits, considerably lower than average household incomes, low levels of educational achievement including literacy rates and an intergenerational impact from these and other socio-economic factors. Seagreen Secondary Academy is one of two secondary schools in Waveside, and both have been academised in recent years.

Methods

The pupils within this research have been selected as whole class groups because they were studying a performing arts subject as either GCSE (Key stage 4/Level 2), BTEC, Applied or Advanced level (Level 3). Their teacher, Ms Wallis, was Head of Department and managed a large curriculum provision for the school with a commitment to producing whole school productions for any pupil wanting to be involved. Drama, dance and music were popular choices at both sixth form and key stage four. Two focus groups were undertaken. One was with the younger pupils who were studying GCSE and the other with a mixed group of BTEC Dance and A level Drama students. The teacher was present throughout both focus groups. A semi-structured interview was held with Ms Wallis. All data was audio-recorded and transcribed and analysed using data driven themes. The themes that emerged included: A controversial choice – the perceptions of studying performing arts; An end of the railway kind of town – perspectives of living in the Waveside context, and An alien species – a place for others.

Findings

A controversial choice – the perceptions of studying performing arts

The pupils studying in the sixth form at Seagreen Secondary Academy were keen to share their enthusiasm of studying drama and performing arts. The impact of studying drama was evident as Christie stated proudly: ‘I wouldn’t be the person I am today without drama. I also write as well, so it’s almost using both of those in drama – it’s a form of self-expression. It’s a bloody good one as well.’ Ed concurred, describing a production of *Angels in America* he had seen: ‘It blew my mind. It was absolutely incredible. And I think that for me it was like, wow! Theatre is a medium that is so powerful and moving. And I think that’s something that I want to be part of. So for me, it was what drove me on this path.’

The teacher, Ms Wallis, suggested that the performing arts are not deemed to be acceptable subjects of study by many teachers at the school:

The kids are bullied into doing academic based subjects. I have teachers within this school who have said, ‘if you don’t do this, this, this and this, basically, then you don’t succeed’. I’m just gonna say, can you stop them telling lies, because that’s not true. It’s not that drama has had a bad press – we are quite . . . respected. And we’re respected for who we are rather than what we are. Erm, whereas it would be quite nice to be respected for what we are. I think a lot of people just don’t get it.

Pupils concurred. Guy told of the ways in which he was ‘nurtured’ to do Biology, for example: ‘I’d say I was probably kind of pushed towards and nurtured to doing Biology A Level. Which is bad [laughs]. Sort of had to drop out of that, this year [more laughter]. Obviously no one said “do Biology”, but I’d say I was probably nurtured that way.’ Ed described the moment when he told his family about selecting a performing arts subject: ‘I mean from someone who doesn’t come from that type of family. I come from a very sporty kind of family and they’re like “Oi, drama isn’t good”. So it was a controversial choice for me, anyway, I think.’ Christie had a similar experience:

Yeah, again, a sporting family. ‘Oi, you’ve got to do law’. I was very much pushed. I was supposed to go and do a law degree next year. No thank you! My mum has been great about it. Cos she’s very scared. My mum cried when I told her. But I think it was more of the fact of ‘I don’t know how to help you’.

For Bella too, parental responses were memorable: ‘My mum was like noooo!’.

Despite the perceptions of the performing arts from teachers and parents, pupils were keen to demonstrate the strengths of the subject. Charlie noticed that as well as his ‘appreciation of art and theatre growing stronger’, his ‘awareness of politics and stuff like that has also shone through’. He continued: ‘And yeah, it certainly has developed me intellectually – far more than I feel anyone who has pushed the academics [subjects] would think it would. I feel like people think it’s an easy subject and it’s too low brow. And it’s actually far more stimulating than I think people think it would be.’ Bella agreed:

I used to think that the world was very much, I don’t know, my world used to very much be Waveside. I don’t know if anyone else has felt that – your world is Waveside and there’s nowhere else. But then I went into drama and they started talking about ‘oh go and watch this and read that and watch this person and read that play’. It felt like I was exploring the world a lot more. I was spreading my knowledge and because of that, I feel like I’ve become more aware of certain occurrences in the world. Certain terrible events, certain feelings that other people feel. It makes you very aware of everyone and everything.

An end of the railway kind of town – perspectives of living in the Waveside context

We described some of the contextual features of Waveside earlier in the paper. The pupils were very explicit about the context they lived in. Ed told us, ‘We live in an end of the railway kind of, sort of town, that’s thought of [laughs], I don’t know.’ Charlie continued, ‘It’s just always been that way [laughter]. No one’s ever thought to change it. Sandshire [reference here to the county, again given a pseudonym for anonymity] has always been this working class – get on with it sort of thing’. This was echoed by Ms Wallis as she confided, ‘We really do feel like we’re at the end of the railway line’. She suggested that ‘we’re an extra half hour from what people feel comfortable coming to’. Ryan offered, ‘It’s just druggies and old people’. There was much laughter each time Waveside was discussed and at one point, Ryan said:

Obviously there’s probably like a handful of people here who are great – and there is. But the majority, if you ask someone in London if they knew about Waveside, like what would you expect to come out of Waveside, they’d probably just say, like, a pile of shit. I don’t think anything special really does come out of Waveside.

Much agreement followed Ryan's stark portrayal of the town within which both school and home was situated. Ms Wallis suggested that Waveside is 'a very misunderstood place', later saying, 'we're kind of parochial, but urban at the same time'. On the day that the data was collected, Ms Wallis told of 'two vicious attacks' that had taken place in the preceding two days. This type of event, along with 'huge queues of people getting their methadone outside the pharmacies', 'the movement of county lines' and 'the gang culture', results in the pupils having a perception of Waveside as: 'not being a safe place. Of it being a dangerous place. Of it being an urban place. Of it being a failed place. And they don't see regeneration. They just see the failure.' (Ms Wallis)

Immersed in their own lives within the coastal area of deprivation, and studying performing arts, a tension began to emerge as pupils and teacher shared an acknowledgement that *their* voice was not being heard. Charlie suggested that there was no drama that 'shows ... like ... the power of where you come from'. When pushed regarding what he meant by this he said, 'I guess how difficult it is being down here. I don't know. It's not like walking over landmines or anything like that, but I can't think of anything [*theatre*] that has done that'. Maisie added: 'It would be a very interesting piece. I don't know. It would depict life as life [*is*] really. Obviously it would show the struggle of trying to do something and move out the area.'

'Where is our bloody voice?' declared Ms Wallis. She continued, saying, 'The wrong people are telling our bloody story at the moment. And no one is telling *our* story'. Ms Wallis told of other communities finding their voice, for example, mining communities and life in Liverpool etc. but then went on to an impassioned outpouring:

But we are becoming increasingly the disenfranchised. But our voice is not ... It will come ... It's coming and that's what I'm sitting on. I'm sitting on that voice. That voice is coming ... And actually I have always said, if you want to understand it, you have to be in it. Put yourself there. Be in it and stop being scared of it.

An alien species – a place for others

Waveside has a strong tradition of amateur dance, theatre and operatic companies and some of the pupils at Seagreen Secondary Academy were part of this. The pupils in the focus groups were asked about the differences between trained performers and amateurs. Ryan suggested that 'If you're acting with amateurs, you'd expect them to slip up much more'. He continues, 'Amateurs would make more mistakes and think less about the role and character and more about the lines'. One of the students, Jasmine, had a father who was an actor. Although she was keen to go to drama school herself, she confessed, 'Everyone asks me what do you want to do once you go to drama school, and I don't really know the answer to that yet'.

There appeared to be some confusion between the various names used for the professional actor training institutions, for example, drama school, conservatoire etc. When asked what a drama conservatoire was, Christie offered, 'I have no idea' and Charlie suggested, 'It's probably a very foreign word down here, to be honest'. Ms Wallis suggested that although the pupils visit university fairs when traditionally, providers set out stands with publicity and arrange for advisors to be available to talk with potential

students, 'There's nothing to say on conservatoires, or performing arts schools, or anything'. Another pupil, Lily, who hadn't said much until this point, pointed out:

It's like a more focused art school, isn't it? So it's like erm, this is my understanding of it, it's sort of like a drama school, or a music school, but it's even more focused. It just does that one sort of thing ... I suppose it would stand out more (*compared to university provision*) because it's more focused on that. Some uni ones I've looked at are quite broad and they're quite theoretical, and it's more analysing things rather than going and doing it. Whereas drama schools are more on the doing of it and the understanding of it.

There is some confusion here as Lily begins by suggesting that the conservatoire is similar to a drama school, but even more focused, yet returns to the notion of the drama school and conservatoire as synonymous.

Perhaps because of the social context described above, the pupils worryingly, had a dampened sense of what might be possible to achieve. Ryan, for example, revealed that he did not think that a drama school was reachable:

I personally don't see it as reachable. Like, I know it's there, but I would never consider myself as someone who would go there ... I'm not too sure that I can probably get a job from drama. And I know there are jobs out there, but I just think it's really hard to get in, and I don't know if I'm going to get a certain job. Whereas with an academic subject, I know that they're (*jobs*), actually there.

It is understandable that within an area of deprivation, a greater sense of the likelihood of a job, rather than precarity, might be desirable. Within a coastal, 'end of the railway' context, including the isolation caused by more than fifty per cent of the surrounding area being seawater rather than urban developments with a flourishing employment market, perceptions of a more *normal* career route may well seem more secure. When pupils do decide to pursue performing arts in the nearest large town, about twenty miles from Waveside, there are several barriers. Ms Wade explains that 'They find it really hard because they have to pay ... for train fares. It's not cheap'. She continues:

So they're paying to go and do these things and often they find them quite intimidating, because they're the outsiders. And all the kids in Castletown know each other. They're in a huge network. And then they go in and they're like the two kids from Waveside. 'Oh', and then, 'you're from Waveside'. So also then you've got the perception ... The problem is, you've already got that perception going on. You can bring it on yourself. Which means you become quite closed. And you struggle to feel comfortable, and you go, 'I don't like it. I don't like it'.

In terms of parental support to navigate this transition to further study beyond Waveside, Ms Wallis suggested that parents 'don't equate that [*study of performing arts subjects*] with being able to make anything from it'. She continues:

The parents are even ten steps behind. 'My child will never be involved in that world'. It's like an *other*. It's a foreign place. And they can't ever imagine that world being part of ... and that's why they often treat their kids who are interested [*in arts subjects*] as alien species. I think the kids often feel, who are interested in that world, as if they've walked off a different planet.

This aligns with the views of parents expressed by the pupils in the first section *A controversial choice – the perceptions of studying performing arts* regarding the

controversial choices, nurturing towards Biology etc. Christie offered: ‘They [*friends*] think it gives you baggage. Cos they worry you’re all deep ... Cos it’s not the same as other academic subjects. If you’re like, “I’m doing a maths degree”, it’s like “oh, that’s brilliant. I wish you all the best” kind of thing, and that’s not the same as doing a drama degree. It’s totally different.’

Charlie agreed. ‘They’re like, “oh, that’s hard. How competitive. How will you get into that?”’.

Discussion

The context was described by pupils and teacher as a climate of failure. This dominated responses within the focus groups and semi-structured interview. Context appeared to impact on the ambitions of pupils. Pupils believed that people from Waveside were unlikely to do well and felt that they would not necessarily be taken seriously by people from London. There also appeared to be some challenges in leaving Waveside. Fitting in to a new context, even the nearby Castletown, cast those from Waveside as ‘outsiders’ because perceptions of Waveside preceded them. This meant that it was difficult for pupils to leave their town. The extreme deprivation of Waveside (including low levels of household income, lower than average educational attainment and intergenerational factors associated with poverty etc.), resulted in pupils feeling that being situated within such a landscape, was, to be cast aside.

In terms of school curriculum choices, the data suggests that to take a performing arts subject, particularly at sixth form and further or higher education, was a ‘controversial choice’ for the pupils at Seagreen Secondary Academy. Some of the pupils in this research were willing to accept the adverse criticism from friends, parental disappointment and school’s disdain in order to study the performing arts subjects. While the discourse relating to facilitating curriculum choices and notions of academic success was evidenced within this context, some pupils were willing to disregard what was deemed normative and attempted to locate themselves beyond the discourse – an act of transgression. In doing so, they risked dislocation from school and family.

The data from the Indices of Deprivation suggests that the rewards for subscribing to the discourse of success has not reached most of the population at Waveside, despite their alignment to it. This results in the Head of Performing Arts, Ms Wallis, feeling that she is respected only for *who*, not *what* she is. The pupils also struggled with the non-normative associations of the performing arts as a respectable subject. While some pupils felt *pushed* towards non arts-based subjects by parents and teachers, others maintained their commitment to their chosen pathway. Christie believed that when you study drama at a university, friends might worry about you giving yourself ‘baggage’ indicating micropolitical power amongst pupils to dissuade and undermine career pathways that sat outside the dominant neoliberal discourse. That traditional academic routes might be perceived as less precarious by those within an area of deprivation is perhaps understandable. It might suggest prudence – a sensible and safe choice. We also recognise that to study the performing arts when inculcated within this context might appear churlish, cavalier, or even irresponsible. There are implications here for the ways the performing arts as subject choices are represented, particularly beyond compulsory education.

We draw briefly from Bourdieu here, to explain the tensions that emerged between achieving the institutionalised state of cultural capital (1986), for example: ‘you’ve got to do law’ (Christie) and ‘the kids are bullied into doing academic based subjects’ (Ms Wallis), and the embodied state – the process of becoming cultivated through the ‘long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’ (1986). When Christie said, ‘I wouldn’t be the person I am today without drama’, this is a personal recognition of the change in herself. Charlie too, ‘it’s actually far more stimulating than I think people think it would be’. Importantly for Bourdieu, the embodied state of cultural capital results in the potential for ‘the transmission of cultural capital’ (1986) in the process of socialisation creating opportunities for the reproduction of cultural capital in future generations. For Foucault, however, the deviation from normative subject choice is part of a continued struggle with ‘the possibilities of freedom’ (Ball 2013, 46). While we recognise that the micropolitics of resistance (Colman 2020) is relatively underwritten in the literature, this small-scale study of a specific secondary school at a particular moment in its history, has opened up a space to examine the factors that impact both compliance and resistance, and here, an act of transgression.

Concluding remarks

Since the establishment of the first national widening participation committee in 1994 by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), which set out to promote access for people who had not previously participated in education or training, their now seminal 1997 publication, *Learning Works: Widening participation in Further Education*, still resonates – notably the identification of extremely ‘appalling ignorance amongst decision-makers and opinion-formers’ (Kennedy 1997, 1). Nearly twenty-five years of policy since then, has failed to successfully create the enabling conditions for access to learning for the marginalised voices of our society, such as those from Seagreen Secondary Academy. The higher education sector, which embraced the recommendations of *Learning Works*, has undoubtedly done much in recent years to address the widening participation agenda, but as this case study reveals, there is still a gap.

If the Durham Commission located issues of creative arts participation within ‘the absence of models of teaching for creativity, a lack of confidence among teaching practitioners, and a shortage of resources’ (2019, 7), we argue that the issues lie elsewhere. While we acknowledge that our research is small scale – one school in one coastal town within a particular time of the school year – the associated risks of studying performing arts, for example, job precarity and a perceived betrayal to school, family and community, weigh heavily for those living in an area of deprivation. The creative arts industries in the UK have been valued at over one hundred billion pounds (DDMCS, 2018). Within a neoliberal economic agenda, policy makers, schools and parents therefore need further understanding of the opportunities offered. Baker (2019) suggests that it is not ultimately about academic or professional aspiration, but the financial constraints that lead young people from areas of deprivation to a critical *renegotiation* of their aspirations. We would suggest that it is the policy makers, schools and parents who are engaged in an initial renegotiation, rendering further aspirational considerations for the pupils, impossible. Within a coastal area of deprivation, the lack of clarity regarding the creative arts industries, both in terms of training and employment, has a profound effect. Some of

the pupils at Seagreen Secondary Academy however, despite the associated risks of subject choice, undertook an act of transgression in order to study beyond the discourse that governed them. We therefore suggest that a further process of demystification regarding the creative arts industries is required, and a consequential clarification of the diverse routes to training and subsequent employment.

Note

1. All names for town, school and participants are anonymised using pseudonyms throughout the paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under Grant AH/R012962/1.

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