

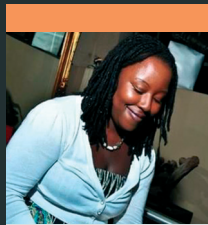
Outside in

What do educators really think about the relevance of specialist workshops in schools beyond KS2? Shareen Gray has been asking around...

As someone who organises workshops for schools myself, I recently conducted a survey to assess attitudes towards this kind of provision amongst secondary and primary school teachers and heads. I was particularly interested to discover whether specialist sessions delivered by outside agencies are considered simply as a fun addition to planned schemes of work by those booking them, or if they are seen as actively contributing to improving student outcomes across the curriculum.

Whilst 70% of teachers interviewed believed the use of outside services to be an excellent idea, there was a definite bias towards assuming them to be mainly arts-based; in fact, 60% mainly used them purely for art activities, especially performance. As Barry Bragg from School Select commented, “the range of service is amazing, and we are always discovering workshops in topics we have never even heard of before. Schools really are spoilt for choice, and some subjects, like performing arts – particularly theatre, drama, dance and drumming – are very competitive, with hundreds of similar providers offering similar services.” This is encouraging, however, topic such as history and science are being brought into schools far less often, with just 12% of respondents having made use of non-arts-based workshops.

It’s interesting to note that 43% of respondents had hired outside workshops for themed periods of study, like Arts Week and Black History Month, in order to allow students to engage with experts in those particular fields – although these were, again, mostly arts-based, there was an explicit understanding that the aim was to inspire cross-curricular links around the topic, and the overwhelming majority of schools reported extremely positive feedback about the progress in understanding made by pupils as a consequence. I feel this approach could be more widely applied when educational establishments are considering proposals from outside providers.



ABOUT THE EXPERT

SHAREEN GRAY BA (HONS) IS THE MANAGER OF STEEL PAN AGENCY (STEELPANAGENCY.COM), WHICH WAS FORMED IN 2010 AND RECEIVED FUNDING FROM THE ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND LAST YEAR TO CONTINUE TO ENHANCE SCHOOLS ART ACTIVITIES. THE COMPANY HAS SO FAR VISITED OVER 200 SCHOOLS; SESSIONS GENERALLY INCLUDE A PERFORMANCE FOR THE WHOLE SCHOOL AND INFORMATION ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF THE STEELPAN FOLLOWED BY WORKSHOPS.

STEEL PAN TRUST HAS BEEN FORMED THIS YEAR AND AIMS TO GIVE THE MANY SECONDARY SCHOOL STEELBANDS IN THE UK THE OPPORTUNITY TO FURTHER ENHANCE AND CELEBRATE THE SKILLS THAT THEY ARE LEARNING AS PART OF THEIR EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES.

Legacy is important, too. Rather than being experienced in isolation, workshops should leave teachers inspired and empowered, as well as the students – able to take what has been learnt further and weave it into the curriculum for the future. Judith Futers, a retired secondary head teacher agrees that there is the potential for CPD here, and observed while completing the survey, “all training should be linked to the school vision, aims and objectives following an audit of need.” Meanwhile Neil Coleman, a freelance consultant for children’s play provision, pointed out the need to ensure that outside providers are contributing “a specialism that cannot be readily obtained from within the typical school knowledge pool, and that the workshop is designed so that once fully trained and confident, the school staff can then go forward on their own, without having to regularly pay year after year for further external support”. It would appear that this is the ideology of most teachers, as 64% of schools do not use the same services on an annual basis.

With 91% of teachers agreeing that these services benefit both secondary and primary schools and the same percentage of educators happy to go ahead and book them without recommendation (although preferred), it is a great compliment to learn that 67% have had either an excellent or good experience as a result. Nevertheless it is still far more likely that outside organisations will be invited into primary schools than secondary. Lack of budget could be a reason for this, of course, but it’s also possible that many educators at KS3 and beyond are not fully aware of just how much of a long-term impact a well-planned workshop can have, above and beyond the excitement and enthusiasm it is likely to inspire on the day. When fundamentally linked in with a school’s vision and the needs of the pupils, this kind of activity can be a hugely enriching learning experience for both students and teachers to take forward as part of their curriculum to the benefit of all – and as such, a worthy investment at every Key Stage.