

Photography: © Mark Pluckrose

Arts Education for Everybody? Every Student? Everywhere?'

World Alliance for Arts Education Conference

Frankfurt, Germany
29th October – 1st November 2019

by Mark Pluckrose

Thanks to National Drama and the bursary they awarded me I was lucky enough to attend the World Alliance for Arts Education in Frankfurt from 29th October to 1st November 2019. WAAE is an organisation made up of the following bodies: International Drama/ Theatre and Education Association (IDEA), International Society of Education through Art (InSEA), International Society for Music Education (ISME) and World Dance Alliance (WDA). The WAAE was formed in 2006 following UNESCOs reduced commitment to arts education. It is a partnership between world organisations which provides a powerful voice for advocacy, network and research for art, drama, dance and music.

To provide some context about me: I have taught Drama and led the Performing Arts at Great Torrington School for 15 years. I am also the Director of Pike and Musket Productions, a theatre and film company for young people. Since taking on my current role, Great Torrington School has seen an extensive overhaul of its Performing Arts provision. Purpose built studios and rehearsal spaces along with a professional recording studio and dedicated team of staff have led to the Performing Arts being one of the highest achieving and most successful departments in the school. This has been recognised

this year as we were shortlisted as School of the Year by *The Stage* publication. Our school is in a very rural setting with the lowest average income in the UK due to its ageing population and very few highly paid job opportunities. Despite these challenges, our school supports the arts and leads learners to become well rounded, creative and confident young people. The WAAE provided an eye opener to Drama Education globally which has always been difficult from the winding roads and countryside of sleepy North Devon.

After arriving in Frankfurt and registering, all delegates gathered together for the opening of the conference. It was very daunting being surrounded by, what I saw as, the elite of the world of Arts education. Keen minds coming together to share opinions and campaigning for much needed change.

Following a musical introduction and a video message from the Assistant Director General for Culture of UNESCO, a talk from the keynote speaker, Robin Pascoe, asked us to consider 'turning points' in our lives. I was immediately thrown back to the moment I attended my first National Theatre Connections directors' weekend in 2015. This was the moment that transformed my teaching and approach to drama in education and I haven't looked back since. Until now…

The goals of the Seoul Agenda are:

1. Ensure that arts education is accessible as a fundamental and sustainable component of a high quality renewal of education – especially 'comprehensive studies in all arts fields for students at all levels of schooling as part of a broad and holistic education'.
2. Assure that arts education activities and programmes are of a high quality in conception and delivery.
3. Apply arts education principles and practices to contribute to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today's world.

www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/CLT/pdf/Seoul_Agenda_EN.pdf

The WAAE was more inspiring than I hoped it could be. It's very easy to get drawn into the routine of planning, teaching, marking and repeat: especially as Drama teachers, when the weekend and late evening rehearsals take hold and there's nothing else left to give. This experience reminded me to keep changing, adapting and challenging what I do as an educator. More importantly, it reminded me that I am far from alone. There's a huge exciting world of Drama education out there.

The first 'turning point' that I was introduced to wasn't a performance or new research but a nine year old document agreed with UNESCO and the WAAE at the Seoul World conference in 2010: *The Seoul Agenda*. Anyone heard of this? Until a few weeks ago I hadn't either. I won't lie, I felt terrible, like I'd instantly failed as an Arts educator. My first thoughts were: How has there been such a huge disconnect between researchers and teachers that I hadn't heard of this document; yet there's such a strong desire to achieve the same goal: high quality arts education for all young people?

It was identified in these opening talks by Prof. Dr. Susanne Keuchel that UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) centered around economic, social and environmental pillars, which is recognised as controllable; whereas Arts education is not. This is perceived to be a barrier to changing the way in which we approach education and what we see as valuable. Added to this,





"The training at LAMDA is so robust. The diversity of techniques you're taught will prepare you for anything"

BA (Hons) Acting student

LAMDA

London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art



Want to become a professional actor, director or theatre technician?

If you have the raw talent, drive and passion, we'll help you realise your dreams through our exceptional training.



"LAMDA has shown me the entire spectrum of roles within the backstage theatre world."

FdA Production & Technical Arts student

Choose from:

- BA (Hons) Professional Acting
- MFA Professional Acting
- MA Classical Acting for the Professional Theatre
- LAMDA Foundation Diploma
- FDA Production & Technical Arts: Stage & Screen
- BA (Hons) Production & Technical Arts Top-Up
- MA Directing

TEF Gold

For more information visit lamda.ac.uk





population on Earth has changed: we are more nomadic. Families and friends live and stay connected over long distances, utilising modern technology to stay close. In Prof. Dan Baron Cohen's Keynote he identified that,

'*Culture across the world can provide identity, identity can provide safety and a place in the world*'.

The days that followed included a series of panels. My first panel focused on the impact of Arts Education (yes, I felt like Ofsted had followed me). Delegates from Canada and China presented on the impact the Drama had in their classrooms but unfortunately, the challenges sounded all too familiar. In Canada, there isn't a central education system, which means each province is in charge of its own curriculum and certification of teachers. Because of this, Arts education in schools is disjointed. In China, participation in the arts in education is mostly restricted to reproduction arts with a small number of students (12-18 out of 2000) participating in after- school drama clubs in some schools. There is very little valuing of the cultural and creative knowledge that arts subjects provide. Instead, all interest in the Arts is driven through competition. Students would only learn ballroom dancing or a musical instrument in order to compete, not for the creative outcomes.

The second panel I attended included Taiwan, USA, New Zealand and Iceland, looking at Arts Education as an element of school reform. It was encouraging to listen to some creative approaches to curricula on a national scale which valued the arts. Taiwan has recently introduced a new national curriculum which places arts subjects as having the same value and importance as all other subjects. Drama even features as a subject in its own right. In the USA, Art education in schools relies on independent trust funds. Often arts subjects are taught through lunchtime, after school and holiday clubs. New Zealand's Ministry of Education has realised the gap in Arts education in schools and professional development for teachers. Some programmes, including the new 'Creatives in school', have been introduced for 2020 to address the situation. In Iceland they had never taught drama in schools until a few years ago. They now have excellent drama education programmes in schools thanks to the perseverance of Drama teachers like us.

Panel three explored future challenges of arts education and was presented by delegates from Germany, USA, China and the Czech Republic. Art in the core subjects, digitalisation of art and ballroom dancing were the topics of conversation. Even our chair of National Drama, Áine Lark, tried the '*Strictly* Look'. Prof. Dr. Ben Jorissen stated in his talk 'Digialisation and AE' which explored new responsibilities for Arts Education since the Seoul Agenda that

'[we] don't have a choice about being creative in the world today'.

As meems and videos pave a new means of communication which require thought and creativity, students can hashtag lessons and respond in their own digital language.

Bangladesh, UK, USA, New Zealand presented the final panel that I attended: advocacy for the future. There was some real hope amongst the call to arms: Bangladesh's use of community theatre to draw on cultural identity; USA's creative gen initiative which strives to find a place for the arts in America's education system again; and New Zealand's focus on self-actualisation and being the very best you can be. Sadly, the state of the UK's Arts education wasn't and isn't presented with the same optimism. After discussing this with other delegates I did get a sense that their opinion was that Arts education in the UK, especially Drama, used to be held up as an example of excellence to the world. Now this no longer seems to be the case.

During the week we were lucky enough to attend the Schult Theater at Ernst-Reuter Schule. I quickly realised how far from home I was when we simply walked onsite of the school, unchallenged, no reception, DBS checks, red tags or chaperone. Students were more than proud to share their performance work with us and the staff even prouder. Firstly, a drama production titled *Total Surveillance* explored a totalitarian near future which covered topical themes of data and privacy. Following this was a Music masterclass, demonstrating the building bricks of a musical ensemble.

After attending a Drama workshop and a UNESCO talk we witnessed AfroRaiz perform a South American dance and music performance which, simply on the face of it, was inspiring in itself. Their story and message surpassed their performance, though, as we were told of the strangle hold on both their cultural identity and ecological challenges that they face. It was clear that Brazilian cultural identity has suffered due to past dictatorships and as a result arts education is more important than ever. Most young people have little or no knowledge of their roots and cultural identity. The few that do, have relied on arts education funded though global organisations.

This was the perfect preamble and encouragement needed for the following IDEA meeting. The International Drama and Education Association assembled with strong opinions about the value of drama in education globally.

This led us, Aine (Chair of National Drama), myself and Sam Cairns of the Cultural Learning Alliance, to complete the Drama, Theatre and Young people manifesto. Within this we identified the



need to place value on drama within the UK's curriculum and to ensure high quality training for educators in drama, including those in a primary setting. I, for one, will be sending a copy to all of the candidates who are standing for election in my constituency.
I urge you all to do the same. The full manifesto can be downloaded at www.dramatheatremanifesto.co.uk

The conference closed at the great Emperor's Hall with Music, Dance and Drama which transcended beyond any language barriers between the delegates. The final drama performance called *Out, End, Over – I've had enough* presented by Riedberg Primary School took the effects of divorce and broken families and slapped it round the face of the audience. We were left dumbfounded and humbled by the words and actions of a handful of young people. It honestly put everything into perspective. Science, maths, technology, they all have their place; but none of them deal with the emotional conflict that the performers grappled with that night and all of the lessons leading up to it. We must globally continue to rethink what we hold as important within our education systems.

After this there was only one thing left to do on the final day: the *Frankfurt Declaration*: an agreement by all of the delegates establishing what happens next. One thing was abundant, the *Seoul Agenda* hasn't worked, not because it's flawed but because it wasn't communicated.

Since returning I have also been inspired to set up a Devon Drama network group called Drama Education across Devon and to run a South West Arts Conference at Great Torrington School next summer. We will be inviting all teachers of the arts in the South West and anyone else involved with arts education of young people to attend a full day and evening of talks, workshops and performances.

While in Frankfurt, myself and four other practitioners also formed an international Youth Theatre company called Pretzel Theatre. This is a collaboration between the UAE, China, New Zealand, Canada and the UK. Pretzel Theatre's aim is to improve understanding between young people across the globe through a collaborative creative theatre making project. Through the use of digital technology, young theatre makers will explore cultural differences and personal similarities to create a local theatre performance. With the guidance of skilled facilitators, all professional teachers, students will creatively collaborate virtually with students from around the globe.

Please follow our project over the next 12 months on Twitter @PretzelTheatre

I am more than aware of the extra 'give' needed to take on these new ideas on top of my day to day teaching, planning, marking, rehearsals, shows and musicals; but, like I have said, it was more inspirational than I hoped it could be.

There is so much value in the arts in education and we need to be advocates before teachers for it to survive. ■

The Frankfurt Declaration

WAAE and its national associations' networks in countries around the world calls upon:

1. All education leaders, policy leaders and civil society to acknowledge that the arts, in their diversity, and arts educators play a critical role in fostering and transforming humanity,
2. UNESCO, leaders in civil society and policy leaders to recognise and resource arts education as a vital pillar for fostering and nurturing a culture of sustainability in society, where arts educators work with young people in order to develop artistic practices and 21 C competencies that bring about sustainable development as outlined within the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals,
3. Arts educators and other educators to form collaborative partnerships with governments, civil society, professional organsations and communities to establish local specific action plans that contribute to the UNESCO sustainable development goals and to understand and transform the present ecological collapse and its impacts on the social, cultural, economic and spiritual lives and institutions of all peoples throughout the world. The Frankfurt Declaration celebrates the unprecedented arts performances linked to climate change movements led by children and young people throughout the world. It asserts arts education as a right for all towards the nurturing of a paradigm of solidarity, cooperation and good living,
4. UNESCO to continue and strengthen the advocacy and support for the implementation of the Seoul Agenda at local, national and international forums.
5. UNESCO to evaluate the progress of Arts Education according to Seoul Agenda in all their member states.'

www.insea.org//docs/waae/WAAE-Frankfurt-declaration.pdf

Please download this and share this with the arts educators you work with. Discuss it and create your actions from it. Yes, we want politicians to do the same but we can do our bit too.

We were inspired to complete a Drama Manifesto to take to parliament.



Mark Pluckrose is the Subject Lead for Performing Arts (Drama and Music) at Great Torrington School in Devon. He is also the Director of Pike and Musket Productions, a theatre and film company for young people. Purpose built studios and rehearsal spaces along with a professional recording studio and dedicated team of staff have led to the Performing Arts being the highest achieving and most successful department in the school, which was shortlisted as School of the Year by *The Stage* publication.