



# CULTURAL CAPITAL

## AN OVERVIEW OF A NEW DIRECTION'S CULTURAL CAPITAL RESEARCH WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF WIDER RESEARCH INTO THE IMPACT OF WEALTH INEQUALITY ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN ARTS, CULTURAL AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH  
**SARAH DAVIES, A NEW DIRECTION**

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Context

We know that London is a city of extremes, not least in terms of wealth. In many boroughs the extremely wealthy live and work adjacent to the extremely disadvantaged. Different scales of familial income can have major effects on children's education achievement and indeed their life chances and social status.<sup>1</sup> At time of writing this paper, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission published its second 2014 State of the Nation report on the Government's progress made towards improving nationwide social recovery alongside economic recovery - in particular the target of reducing child poverty by half by 2020. The picture is bleak. This target is high, as are the stakes. To achieve it demands immediate action. Crucially the report recognises

to deliver social recovery on this scale will necessitate a radical rallying together of resources and sectors: "a new national effort involving employers, schools, colleges, universities, parents and charities".<sup>2</sup>

The role of families and education in enabling social mobility seems obvious: parental support and high quality curricular and extra-curricular opportunities are key to child development, academic achievement and success in later life<sup>3</sup> – however, families often face social and economic barriers. For example, recent research from The Sutton Trust highlights profound inequalities in uptake of extra-curricular activities between lower income families and those that are wealthier.<sup>4</sup> But the role of arts and culture in supporting education and even social mobility is potentially less obvious to the wider world, especially at a time when the education system favours academic subjects over more creative pursuits. Not only is 'cultural engagement' - that is awareness of and attending and participating in arts and cultural activities - an entitlement for children, recognised under

Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child,<sup>5</sup> but it has a number of potential benefits for young people. These benefits may appear hard to pinpoint and harder to prove but they are recognised and campaigned for by many education professionals.<sup>6</sup> One such outcome is the development of cultural capital; a concept originally attributed to Pierre Bourdieu who employed this to describe how cultural literacy helps confer status and sustain elites,<sup>7</sup> yet more recently closely debated by the education and cultural sectors as a tangible resource that could be of use to all children regardless of class.

The more contemporary theory is that by engaging with culture throughout childhood, young people are better able to articulate themselves, access opportunities and navigate choices as they get older.<sup>8</sup> Cultural capital, in this sense, becomes a currency, an asset and an enabler of social mobility with the potential to help narrow the gap in terms of positive outcomes between children from poor backgrounds and those from wealthier families. Whilst this idea is compelling, a lack of rigorous longitudinal data testing long-term outcomes for young people and isolating their cultural experience means that it is hard to prove this theory.

In order to develop strategies within the cultural sector, education and the wider civic realm that extend the value of cultural engagement to those who are yet to take part, it is critical to understand three things:

- **How do young people currently engage in arts and culture and is there an engagement gap between those that are economically disadvantaged and their peers?**
- **What is the impact of low engagement on poorer young people - why should this be a concern?**
- **What are the real barriers, psychological and practical, which inhibit engagement?**

## 1.2 A New Direction's Cultural Capital Research

Between December 2013 and April 2014, A New Direction (AND) commissioned research into cultural awareness and the different habits of cultural engagement between young people from lower-income families or in receipt of free school meals (FSM), and their peers.<sup>9</sup> A total of 1,689 young people across London aged 13-19 were



surveyed, from schools based in some of London's most deprived areas.

This research expands upon AND's 2013 research into the trends and drivers of engagement by young Londoners<sup>10</sup> and looks in more depth at who is taking part in terms of gender and economic status, what are they are taking part in, and why/why not. Whilst it is acknowledged that many cultural offers are free and that school provides considerable cultural opportunities, the research aimed to determine whether there is still evidence of a particular engagement gap relative to familial income status and what some of the motivations and barriers to engagement might be. Since it does not attempt to look at the impact of low engagement, some inferences are made in this paper drawn upon a review of wider research and literature, but further work is needed to really understand the web of factors which influence young people's engagement. Crucially, AND's data reveals new information on young people's varying understanding and appreciation of arts and culture depending on their backgrounds.

What follows is an overview of the key findings of the Cultural Capital research, placed in the wider context of other arts, education and economic research and policy.

## BEING CULTURALLY ENGAGED

### 2.1 Engaging with definitions

AND's Cultural Capital research presents a clear picture of today's definitions of 'arts' and 'culture' in the words of young people. The survey asked all young people first to offer their own spontaneous definitions and then to tick a selection of prompts that they think best define these terms.

Spontaneous responses to the question to explain what ‘art’ means commonly included painting (41%), drawing (31%), dance (27%), music (26%) and drama (20%). Spontaneous responses defining the term ‘culture’ commonly included food and drink (28%), religion/religious events (21%) and clothing/shoes (14%). In fact it seems the majority of responses on culture could be themed around ‘self’: your background, race or religion, what you wear, your family and ‘the things that make you what you are’ collectively form 68% of responses, hinting at a strong understanding and awareness of identity. In addition, the perhaps more ‘traditional’ definitions of culture were also present: 10% mentioned art, 12% dance and 15% music.

When these spontaneous responses are analysed by economic status, the results imply that understanding and language use divides how young people from different economic backgrounds define arts and culture. Those from poorer backgrounds appear less likely to be able to answer the question – 8% say they don’t know compared to 5% of their peers when it comes to naming activities associated with ‘art’; 12% compared to 9% when it comes to defining ‘culture’. They are also less likely to use terms such as drama (17% vs 22%) singing (11% vs 14%) and art galleries (9% vs 16%) to describe ‘art’ and less likely to use the terms food and drink (25% vs 30%), festivals and carnivals (11% vs 15%) and museums (7% vs 13%) when describing ‘culture’.

When prompted on which activities young people considered were part of arts and culture, the breakdown of responses between poorer and better-off respondents remains divided. Across the board, with the exception of one prompt,<sup>11</sup> young people from poorer backgrounds appear to be less likely to classify an activity as arts and culture, e.g.: painting and drawing (74% vs 84%), visiting a museum/gallery (69% vs 79%) and crafting (69% vs 77%).

It may be that there is less of an artistic vocabulary and knowledge around the arts and culture in comparison to their peers, or it may be that a lack in more general language and articulation skills exists.

In the more traditional terms of cultural capital, having -or not having- the language to talk about something is part of the way in which class defines itself and differences manifest. In some ways this links to the cultural literacy argument expounded by Ed Hirsch that has recently been debated with education policy; that knowledge builds on knowledge and the ability to discuss shared

cultural artefacts is critical to the way in which individuals mark themselves out as ‘smart’ or not.<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, this evidence may also hint at a disconnect between our traditional understanding of arts categories versus how these particular young people engage with arts and culture today. In their paper on the learning mindsets of young people in respect of participation, Muschamp et al observed that young people engaging in leisure activities often use complex vocabulary to describe their activities and this is part of the ‘ritual of membership’ and the development of a sense of identity and bonds them with other enthusiasts.<sup>13</sup>

Are the terms we use to describe arts and culture relevant to our young audiences today?

## 2.2. Engagement in arts and culture

The Cultural Capital survey asked young people to rate their engagement in a set of arts and cultural activities in the past year; in school, during their spare time or both. Across the board engagement is fairly high, with reading and writing (38% in school, 19% spare time, 23% both), arts crafts and design (34% in school, 19% spare time, 23% both), and visiting libraries (28% in school, 30% spare time, 20% both) being some of the highest scored over all. Highest scores for activities during spare time include street arts/circus/carnival/festivals (33%), film and video (30%) and visiting historic buildings (27%). The lowest scored activity was making radio broadcasts/programmes (13% in school, 12% spare time, 5% both) however access to proper equipment and technical expertise may not be readily available, and this seems concurrent with recent research by the Child Poverty Action Group which found that costs of, and difficulty accessing, the right equipment reduced the chance to engage with certain arts and creative subjects.<sup>14</sup>

Combined engagement figures appeared high but further analysis shows that those that are less well-off consistently have lower engagement when compared with their more advantaged peers. The differences are most significant in visiting exhibitions, music activities, visiting historic places and street arts, with an average difference across these examples of over 8 percentage points. E.g. 62% vs 70% had visited an exhibition and 61% vs 71% had visited a historic building.

The barriers and potential underlying reasons behind these differing levels of engagement are explored later in this paper.

## 2.3 How do young people use their spare time?

AND's previous research into cultural engagement (2013) revealed the important role of schools in ensuring children and young people are provided quality arts and cultural experiences, which could lay the foundation for lifelong habits of engagement.<sup>15</sup> However, AND has gone on to explore cultural engagement outside of school in more depth in this new study.

The latest data on the activities young people are engaging with in their spare time is illuminating. It demonstrates clearly that these young Londoners prefer to develop their own individual strategy for engagement in arts and culture, outside of structured groups and programmes offered by clubs, centres, arts organisations or after school provision. For example, 63% of those who reported visiting a library did so by themselves compared to 15% who had visited a library as part of an out of hours school club, and 56% of those who had reported visiting a historic place did so of their own volition compared with 19% who had visited a historic place as part of a class/course run by an arts organisation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, arts organisations' courses gained their highest scores as the main place where young people engaged in dance, theatre and drama, and arts activities (of those who reported doing these activities 34%, 33%, and 28% respectively, did so as part of an arts organisation's activity), although in these cases young people were still more likely to do these particular activities independently.

Nearly half (49%) of the young people reported to be members of a group or club where they take part in activities outside of school. This includes sports clubs, church groups, after school clubs, scouts and guides where young people are mainly taking part in sports and games (49%), music (29%), homework and drama (22% in each case) and trips, film and arts (20% in each case). Attendance is very regular: 83% attend their clubs once per week or more (14% nearly every day). Further analysis shows that 35% of young people from lower-income backgrounds belong to a group/club, compared to 47% more advantaged young people, indicating that many are not accessing the additional opportunities on offer. All of the young people surveyed mentioned that spending time with friends was a motivator for attending groups/clubs, however socialising and having a safe place to spend time outside of the home appear to be particularly strong drivers for those who are less well-off.

It is evident then that clubs and groups play an important role in providing cultural engagement opportunities and socialising opportunities in young people's spare time. However, they often come at a cost which may be beyond the means of some families.

## UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS

The survey explored barriers to taking part explicitly, asking the respondents to select reasons that best describe why they are not likely to take part in specific activities. Past research into London's cultural participation has broadly described barriers to engagement in three ways: social, physical and economic.<sup>16</sup> At first glance AND's research seems to support this categorisation:

- **Social barriers:** young people's engagement decisions seem greatly influenced by opportunities for spending time with friends: 69% said this would motivate them a lot/somewhat; 20% stated they are not likely to visit a library because their friends wouldn't and 17% wouldn't visit a museum or gallery for the same reason. This is recognised in previous research, by AND<sup>17</sup> and other researchers and charities, where young people from lower income backgrounds in particular report the importance of opportunities outside of school to socialise and make friends.<sup>18</sup>

- **Physical barriers:** young people appear to be concerned about the physical accessibility, geographic location of arts and cultural venues and the familiarity of these areas. They say that museums and galleries, arts centres and theatres are difficult to get to (19%-24%) and they are in an unfamiliar area (16%-24%).

- **Economic barriers:** Two factors appear to be at play here – there are differences in pocket money between FSM children and their better-off peers which may prevent them from participating, and there is a skewed perception of cost of arts activities across the whole group which is presenting a barrier. The evidence shows that young people in receipt of FSM are less likely to receive pocket money (61% vs 76%) and feel less able to ask for money to do things they like (67% vs 74%). Fears surrounding the cost of arts and cultural experiences clearly exist and a significant number of young people stated that cost was a substantial reason for not attending the cinema or theatre. In



many cases opportunities may be subsidised or free but it is likely that these particular young people are not aware of support available to them. Additionally, when asked to estimate the price of arts/culture tickets, many were unable to do so.<sup>19</sup>

The research also points at two other barriers to engaging in arts and culture:

- **Language and awareness barriers:** It may be that a low level of awareness of opportunities exists – particularly of those that are subsidised as identified above – but this is likely to be affected by a lack of a cultural language and/or clear definition of arts and cultural activity. From the research one can intimate that it is particularly evident in those from lower-income families that there is a lack of understanding or language skills to articulate a definition of arts and culture with which they might engage. But this is also about asking ourselves, is there a disconnect between traditional definitions of arts and culture/cultural habits versus current definitions and current activities? Are we measuring cultural engagement using outdated understanding that is irrelevant to today's young people?

Overcoming a lack of awareness of cultural opportunities and activities available to young people outside of school may seem simple. Surely many people and agencies can influence young people to take part in arts and culture, including schools, family, and we have seen that friends/peer groups play an important role. However, research from the education sector identifies the difference that parents' socio-economic backgrounds can make on children's engagement in activities outside of school and consequently their academic success. For example, in the DfE study 'Performing against the odds',<sup>20</sup> engaging in extra-curricular activities is noted as one of the things that enables children to succeed in education. Typically for higher socio-economic groups extra-curricular activity was

seen as a general part of education and development and parents sought out these opportunities almost as a matter of course. For lower socio-economic groups, extra-curricular activity was more likely to be perceived as 'fun' and therefore a low priority in educational terms. It was found that children from lower socio-economic groups who were perceived to be 'succeeding against the odds' often had parents who promoted extra-curricular activities in spite of financial hardship.

A low prioritisation of arts and culture by parents may or may not be the case for the Cultural Capital survey group but parental attitudes and habits were not within the parameters of this research. However if this was a contributing factor, it is not being consciously recognised as these young people did not identify disinterested parents or parents not being able to take them as the main reasons why they themselves were not spending time at arts and cultural events and activities. Understanding the psychological motivations and barriers may go some way to further understanding young people's decisions around engagement.

- **Psychological barriers:** Young people have a very strong sense of identity, as demonstrated in some of their own unprompted definitions of what 'culture' meant to them. One of the significant explanations as to why they don't engage in cultural activities includes 'It is not part of who I am' (28% of those who specified they were unlikely to attend arts centres gave this response, as did 27% for museums/galleries and 37% for sports centres). This reinforces past research into audience development and cultural provision which has often found public attitudes to the arts include 'it is not relevant to me'.<sup>21</sup>

To understand these psychological barriers better in terms of socio-economic status, the research by Muschamp et al, mentioned earlier, provides further insight. The study looked at the differences in attitudes and behaviours between children in receipt of FSM and those who were not, particularly in respect to engagement in education and out of school activities.

They found that for the FSM children who were not engaging in out of school activities, self-exclusion was a significant factor over and above the fact poorer children were also typically experiencing more practical barriers than their peers (cost, transport, lack of right equipment, space etc). These children had a clear sense of self

as ‘non-attende’ – someone who simply would not do things like swimming, ballet, football. This was particularly the case for the Year 9 pupils whereas the Year 6 pupils retained a sense of potentially aspiring to take part in things in the future even if they still saw this as remote from their current life possibilities.

#### **4. What can we do as a sector?**

AND’s research findings show that levels of engagement in arts and culture differ depending on FSM and familial income status. But why should this concern us? Youth participation in the arts should be an entitlement for all, but should entitlement alone be our focus or can we do more? Research shows that poor children are four times more likely to become poor adults as other children.<sup>22</sup> Could, or indeed should, arts and culture play a role in reducing this outcome and increasing life chances for children from low-income families?

There is evidence that enriching the education experience through arts and culture can support educational progression and enable young people to gain a broader experience of life.<sup>23</sup> There is increasing support for cultural literacy as an enabler of social mobility.<sup>24</sup> There is also renewed focus on the development of certain qualities within education, such as resilience and discipline which are said to ‘build character’. Can we make the case that youth engagement in arts and culture could help develop these skills?<sup>25</sup> Can an expanded, contemporary notion of Cultural Capital be developed to encompass three ways in which arts and culture can clearly provide for young people? It supports education progression and contributes to broader experiences; it develops cultural literacy; it can facilitate the development of soft skills that are transferable and key to success in later life. If we embrace this, it provides a clear purpose for the sector in an uncertain landscape.

But what of art for art’s sake – must the work of the arts and cultural sector be valued in terms of its benefits and the purpose it serves? And what of freedom of choice – should more young people take part or should we simply be ensuring that there is equality in provision and that more young people are made aware of the opportunities available to them? Shouldn’t we be more respectful of young people’s cultural choices? Or can we really afford to ignore the value of the experience of arts and culture in and outside of school for its potential for improving life chances and consequences for young people?

In AND’s interviews with headteachers of London secondary schools, the importance of arts and culture in education was validated further – the provision of these opportunities is seen as ‘vital’ in closing the attainment gap between those from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers. One headteacher maintained that through experiencing the wider world through the vehicle of arts and culture, students can gain new confidence in their choices, greater knowledge and language skills and can be enabled to become fully rounded and confident people, successful in any chosen pathway.<sup>26</sup> This is a necessity of social mobility, and the arts and culture sector could play a key part.

The Cultural Capital research identified a number of key barriers to young people engaging in arts and culture, including social, practical and psychological barriers. Muschamp et al’s study suggests young people from poorer backgrounds have the propensity to label themselves as people who ‘do’ or ‘do not’ take part, and once this mind-set is fixed it is hard to shift. Can we consider intervention strategies around the transition from primary to secondary which might help normalise extra-curricular activities for children from poorer backgrounds before negative views become entrenched?

AND’s research also suggests that young people may have a different definition of arts and culture to traditional ones commonly used. AND’s previous ethnographic study supports this, revealing that there are no limits to what forms young people’s landscape of creative activities – this depends on the young person and their sphere of interest; it can embrace beauty and make-up, graphic design, street dancing, political demonstrations, writing poetry, computer animations and cookery.<sup>27</sup> As a sector do we need to reconsider our definitions of practice? Once we open out our classification of arts and cultural engagement, is the picture as bleak as it seems?

What the Cultural Capital research provides us with is a picture of young London’s engagement with arts and culture today – and how this is likely to be linked to economic circumstances. Whatever our opinion on the benefits of arts and culture for young people, we as a sector can play a role in shaping their engagement and honouring their cultural entitlement.

AND invite responses to this research. We want to explore what new trends people are noticing in engagement, what the implication is of high or low

engagement and what we can do to enact change. Importantly, we want explore whether, by being able to access the wealth of arts and culture in the city, young Londoners can have better outcomes in the future regardless of background or status.

**For young people are OUR capital.**

**WE ARE INVITING COMMENTS FROM PARENTS, YOUNG PEOPLE, CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS, ACADEMICS, THOSE WORKING IN EDUCATION ETC. WHICH HELP CONTRIBUTE IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, FOR CAMPAIGNS AND ACTION THAT CAN HELP BUILD MORE EQUAL ACCESS TO THE ARTS AND CULTURE FOR ALL CHILDREN YOUNG PEOPLE IN LONDON.**

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### **About Sarah B Davies**

Sarah B Davies is a researcher in arts, culture and education. A New Direction commissioned Sarah to undertake a review of relevant literature and provide an overview of key findings from the Cultural Capital study within the context of wider research. This paper has been developed in consultation with A New Direction to provide a starting point for discussion with the arts and culture and education sectors.

## **ENDNOTES**

1. A number of recent research reports reinforce this, for example: 'Parent Power? Using money and information to boost children's chances of educational success' by Prof B. Francis and Prof. M. Hutchings.
2. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, State of the Nation 2014 Report.
3. A report by Tess Ridge, 2001, brings together compelling research into the positive impact of participation on child development. "The Everyday Costs of Poverty in Childhood: A Review of Qualitative Research Exploring the Lives and Experiences of Low-Income Children in the UK".
4. Reinforced by a recent report in brief: 'Extra Curricular Inequality' published by The Sutton Trust, 2014.
5. UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, 1989. [http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC\\_PRESS200910web.pdf](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf)
6. This is evident in A New Direction's research into the impacts of arts and culture on young people, which involved interviews with 5 headteachers and senior staff from five London schools. The majority of these headteachers had taken bold steps to protect the arts in GCSE choices, challenging government led curriculum reform. (2014)
7. Bourdieu, P., 1984, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. In Bourdieu's terms, the concept of cultural capital suggests that appreciation of the arts is part of a learned process - not a pre-

disposition or artistic leaning. It is a process of inculcation enacted through the educational system and through the 'family milieu' (for middle class families). Formal education (and institutions) further place value upon certain cultural forms above others and promote some forms of cultural expression as more 'refined' than others. Crucially, however - these learned attitudes are presented back as natural and innate; imbuing the individual with a sense of distinction from those perceived to be less culturally refined.

8. A New Direction employs this definition as part of its call for responses to an Inquiry into inequality of access to culture for children and young people in London, 2014.
9. The study used FSM as a proxy for economic disadvantage but also acknowledged that many families who may not qualify for FSM may still be poor. Therefore young people are classified as 'disadvantaged' if they (currently or previously) receive FSM or both of their parents are not working.
10. Bunting, C., 2013. Cultural Engagement by Young Londoners: An Introduction to Key Trends, Drivers and Challenges, A New Direction
11. The exception is sharing pictures on social media, which is more likely to be considered part of arts and culture by those from lower-income backgrounds (42% vs 32%)
12. Hirsch, E (1988) Cultural Literacy, what every American needs to know. Vintage.
13. Muschamp, Y., Bullock, K. Ridge. T and Wikeley, F. (2009) 'Nothing to do, the impact of poverty on pupils' learning identities within out-of-school activities'. British Educational Research Journal Vol 35.
14. Farthing, R., 2014. The Cost of Going to School, from Young People's Perspective, Child Poverty Action Group, p.10-11.
15. Bunting, C., 2013. Cultural Engagement by Young Londoners: An Introduction to Key Trends, Drivers and Challenges, A New Direction
16. The Mayor of London's Cultural Capital report (2004) referenced these three broad categories of barriers to cultural engagement as part of a cultural strategy for the city.
17. For example 'My Culture, My London', an ethnographic piece of research by AND (April 2014).
18. For example R. Farthing's The Cost of Going to School, from Young People's Perspective (2014). 57% of young people surveyed from lower income families missed out on school trips due of the cost involved and felt that this impacted on their chances of socialising and making friends. Farthing infers that opportunities for socialising are increasingly important 'further down the income scale'. (p.16-17)
19. AND's research into young people's perception of costs seems concurrent with research into parental attitudes towards providing arts and cultural experiences for young people based on their economic capacity. For example, R. Farthing's The Cost of Going to School, from Young People's Perspective (2014, Child Poverty Action Group) and Prof B. Francis and Prof. M. Hutchings' Parent Power? Using money and information to boost children's chances of educational success, (2013, The Sutton Trust). This is missing a footnote in the document
20. Performing against the odds: developmental trajectories of children in the EPPSE 3-16 study. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/183318/DFE-RR128.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183318/DFE-RR128.pdf)
21. For example MORI, Visitors to Museums and Galleries in UK, for MLA, 2001.
22. Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, State of the Nation 2014 Report, p.6.
23. For example, Prof B. Francis and Prof. M. Hutchings, 2013. Parent Power? Using money and information to boost children's chances of educational success, The Sutton Trust. P.34.
24. Hirsch, E (1988) Cultural Literacy, what every American needs to know. Vintage.
25. Character and resilience manifesto, all party group for social mobility.
26. A New Direction's research into the impacts of arts and culture on young people, 2014.
27. In previous research it emerged that what young people require from an artistic experience is highly interactive, not limited by traditional definitions that imply 'high' art. They engage in new ways, using new media and are highly creative in activities not captured by traditional classifications of art. My Culture My London, A New Direction, 2014.