Expanding Access to Creative Careers: Starting Early, Starting Together

By the age of seven, children are already facing limits on their future aspirations in work, according to a report from the OECD International Economics Think Tank. Even in primary school, they begin to form assumptions about what kinds of people belong in certain types of jobs, including those in the creative industries.

If we want to create equity in creative career pathways for the next generation, we must begin by engaging with children early, but also with the adults around them. Parents, carers and teachers act as key gatekeepers to a child's aspirations. They help shape what's seen as possible.

I recently had the privilege of participating in **Space for Change**, a peer learning initiative with A New Direction, focused on equity in creative career pathways for the next generation. As part of the programme, we explored best practices, discussed industry challenges and co-developed solutions designed to keep young people connected to arts and culture while addressing barriers to entering creative professions.

One of the core questions we asked was: Why don't more children and young people have access to the information they need to consider creative careers? Is it a lack of awareness among adults about what these careers involve? Are creative industries perceived as non-viable or inaccessible? Do teachers and parents simply not know what local arts organisations offer?

Our enquiry led us to deeper, more systemic questions:

- How do arts and cultural activities support personal and professional development?
- How can we address misconceptions adults have about creative careers?
- What do creative career pathways actually look like inside cultural venues?
- How can school partnerships play a more strategic role in this work?

What we hear from parents and educators

Through conversations with parents, students, young adults, school career leads and museum programme managers, a complex picture began to emerge. Many genuinely appreciate the passion and fulfilment that creative careers can bring to their children's lives. While financial stability remains a common concern, they also recognise that pursuing a creative path can lead to a deeply enriching and meaningful future.

However, hesitation often stems from a lack of clear information, limited visibility of opportunities and uncertainty around funding and progression within the industry. Without accessible guidance, many parents and teachers feel cautious about encouraging children to consider creative professions.

We found that concerns typically fell into recurring themes:

- **Financial concerns** - worries about income stability and long-term security.
- **Career uncertainty** - lack of clear job paths and structured growth.
- **Social and cultural expectations** - creative careers may not be widely accepted.
- **Limited industry knowledge** - parents may not understand job opportunities.
- **Fear of rejection** - concerns about competitiveness and setbacks.
- **Education and investment** - doubts about the value of creative degrees.
- **Need for a backup plan** - encouraging alternative careers for security.

These insights highlight the importance of demystifying the creative industries and building confidence in the sector - not just among young people, but among the adults who support them.

Designing a Playful Solution

As part of this process, I co-created a game with a group of Year 6 students called **Creative Careers Challenge**. Since then, I've played it with primary school pupils, older students aged 16—24, and even with adults working in learning departments across cultural organisations. Each time, it's sparked rich discussions, new perspectives and real, practical takeaways.

The game is designed to be playful, interactive and highly adaptable, something that can work equally well in a classroom, a workshop, or a team strategy day. Ideally, it's played by a mix of students, parents, teachers and arts organisations, creating space for shared insight and collective problem-solving. It helps players explore the value of arts participation, brainstorm strategies to expand professional networks and think creatively about how to bridge the knowledge gap around creative careers. Most importantly, it gets people talking.

Why a game?

I've worked in schools for many years, and I've seen how strong partnerships between schools and cultural organisations can shift perceptions, transform communities, and even enhance a school's reputation. But to do that work effectively, we need tools that are accessible, engaging and built for collaboration.

The game presents real-world challenges and opportunities related to creative career development. It invites participants to become problem-solvers, to step into the shoes of students, educators and cultural leaders, and imagine bold new possibilities. Along the way, it facilitates team building, supports oracy and reflective feedback, encourages writing, and even incorporates role-play challenges to deepen engagement. Every time I play it, I'm struck by the innovative ideas that emerge. It's a testament to how powerful interactive learning can be.

Moving Forward

These insights highlight the importance of embedding career discussions within arts workshops to make job roles more visible and approachable. Co-designing programmes with schools and young people increases engagement and relevance. And showcasing the full spectrum of creative roles — not just public-facing jobs, but behind-the-scenes careers — helps make the implicit, explicit.

Even under increasing pressure, schools and projects can foster a powerful sense of belonging. When young people feel seen, supported and part of a wider creative community, they're far more likely to imagine themselves in these spaces and to believe those futures are within reach.

If we want to build a future where creative careers are visible, viable and valued, we need to start early. We need to empower children with knowledge and equip the adults in their lives to support their aspirations. This game is just one tool, but it's a start. It shows us what's possible when we approach equity not just as a goal, but as a practice — one rooted in play, in partnership and in purpose.