



Speaking the Same Language:

Defining Cultural
Education Leadership

by Dr David Parker

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Cultural education leadership is a complex ecosystem encompassing a variety of roles, job descriptions and philosophies. In this final piece, David explores this broad landscape, emphasising the importance of clear, inclusive language to describe the work its leaders do. He reminds us of the common commitment that unites them: 'enabling others – especially children and young people – to access and shape culture meaningfully.'

The cultural education sector encompasses a wide range of practices, settings, and roles. To support collaboration and coherence across this diversity, it is important to establish a shared language – one that recognises the richness of the field while offering clear, working definitions. The terms below are not intended as fixed or final but as a common point of reference to inform programme design, partnership working, and sector development.

Cultural Education

Cultural education refers to the broad range of learning experiences through which children, young people, and communities engage with arts, culture, and creativity. It includes activities that nurture artistic skills, cultural understanding, personal expression, critical thinking, and imagination.

This definition encompasses both formal and informal learning settings, from schools and colleges to youth clubs, museums, libraries, theatres, galleries, and digital platforms

Cultural education can be:

- **Disciplinary** (e.g. learning a specific art form)
- **Interdisciplinary** (e.g. using creative practice to explore history or science)
- **Experiential** (e.g. attending performances or exhibitions)
- **Social and political** (e.g. using the arts to address community issues or identity)

We draw on the **Cultural Learning Alliance's** articulation of cultural learning as something that is broad, inclusive and developmental – enabling children and young people to create, participate in, and reflect on culture, both past and present. We also recognise Arts Council England's framing of cultural education as a core entitlement and a driver of social equity and civic participation.

Cultural Educators

Cultural educators are the people who design, deliver, support or enable cultural learning. They work across a wide range of roles and contexts and may be based in schools, local authorities, arts organisations, museums, libraries, youth services, or freelance practice.

Cultural educators include:

- **Teachers and subject specialists:** particularly in art, music, drama, dance, design, and media
- **Education and learning teams in cultural institutions:** learning producers, engagement officers, participation managers
- **Freelance artists and facilitators:** delivering creative programmes with young people across school and community settings
- **Youth workers, community organisers and heritage workers:** integrating arts-based practice
- **Cultural leaders, creative practitioners, producers and/programmers:** developing programmes, partnerships, and policy

Cultural educators often work across sectors, translating between the priorities of schools, cultural institutions, communities and funders. They combine artistic skill with pedagogical sensitivity and frequently bring lived experience or community connection to their work.

What unites cultural educators is their commitment to enabling others – especially children and young people – to access and shape culture meaningfully.

Participants/Learners

In cultural education, the primary participants are most often:

- **Children and young people:** typically aged 0–25, from early years through to post-16 and youth contexts
- **Communities:** including adults and intergenerational groups, especially in informal and community-based settings

These participants are not passive recipients, but **co-creators**, audiences, critics, and contributors to culture. Good cultural education places their experiences, identities and aspirations at the heart of programme design.

Terminology should be flexible and context-sensitive:

- In formal education, the term learners or students may be used
- In community or youth contexts, participants, co-creators, or young creatives may be more appropriate

In all cases, the term should reflect an active, respectful relationship between educator and participant – emphasising agency, inclusion and mutual learning.

Leadership

Cultural education leadership does not refer to a single role or position, but to a set of practices, values and responsibilities exercised across the ecosystem. It is often distributed, shared and situational, emerging wherever individuals or organisations take responsibility for shaping the conditions in which cultural learning can flourish.

Effective leadership in this field is characterised by a commitment to enabling others. Leaders work to create the time, space, relationships and structures that allow children and young people, practitioners and partners to engage meaningfully with

culture. This includes advocating for access, supporting quality and safeguarding the integrity of creative and cultural practice.

Good cultural education leaders typically demonstrate the ability to:

- **Hold purpose and values clearly:** articulating why cultural education matters and whom it is for, particularly in relation to equity, inclusion and participation.
- **Navigate complexity across systems:** working confidently at the intersections of education, culture, youth, community and policy, and translating between different professional languages and priorities.
- **Build and sustain partnerships:** recognising that cultural education is collective work requiring trust, reciprocity and long-term relationship-building.
- **Support and develop others:** including practitioners, educators and emerging leaders, through mentoring, collaboration and professional learning.
- **Balance artistic integrity and educational intent:** ensuring that creative practice remains meaningful while being responsive to learners' needs and contexts.
- **Respond adaptively to constraint:** making thoughtful decisions within funding, institutional and structural limitations, while continuing to advocate for better conditions.
- **Listen and learn continuously:** drawing on evidence, lived experience and participant voice to reflect, adapt and improve practice.

Cultural education leadership is not confined to senior roles or organisational authority. It may be exercised by teachers, artists, producers, youth workers, coordinators, freelancers, senior managers or chief executives. What unites these

forms of leadership is a shared responsibility for stewardship: caring for cultural education as a public good, and for the people, practices and partnerships that sustain it.

Closing Note

These definitions aim to reflect the lived realities of those working across cultural education. They are intended to build bridges between professional domains, encourage recognition of varied leadership forms, and support a shared understanding as the field continues to grow and evolve.

At A New Direction, our Cultural Education Leadership programme is inclusive of all those working across these contexts—whether in schools, cultural institutions, community settings, or freelance practice. We celebrate and work with cultural educators in all roles and settings, recognising the diversity of experience and leadership that sustains this vital field. With this in mind, A New Direction invites our partners to co-create these definitions with us – adapting, extending or refining them as part of an ongoing, inclusive conversation about cultural education leadership.

This article is part of A New Direction's Leading with Purpose: Cultural Education in Practice, a series exploring the evolution of cultural educational leadership, insights, observations, and practical tools. You can read them all here:
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