Voices of Change:

A Call to Transform Cultural Education

by John Riches

A NEW DIRECTION
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***John Riches** has worked in the arts sector for more than 30 years. Growing up working-class in Canning Town in East London, it was an inspirational teacher who initially sparked his interest in theatre.*

This started John on a winding path from a 'failed attempt as an actor' to managing grassroots community arts initiatives and working in national institutions. He is currently freelance, as well as part-time Director of QueenSpark Books in Brighton.

John's wide array of experience provides him with a unique lens and approach to cultural education, which informs the following feature. Drawn from interviews, written submissions and direct responses to roundtable interviews hosted by A New Direction, the piece reflects the answers and views of **ten leaders** from across London's cultural education landscape:

Catherine Ritman-Smith, Head of Learning and Engagement at Young V&A in Bethnal Green

Jamie Hale, Founder of disabled-led artistic and cultural organisation CRIPtic Arts

Liza Vallance, Creative producer, evaluator, and consultant in the arts and heritage sectors

Nuna Sandy, Artistic Director of Company Three

Paul Crook, Head of Communities and Learning at the South London Gallery

Rachel Bagshaw, Artistic Director at the Unicorn Theatre

Tina Ramdeen, Associate Director of Young People at the Roundhouse

Tony Cealy, Creative practitioner and cultural producer

Shereen Jasmin Phillips, Founder and Creative Director of Applied Scripted Arc

Steve Moffitt CEO of A New Direction

"For me, a cultural leader and a cultural educator are not the same. A cultural educator is actively engaged in teaching, sharing information, and building knowledge, whereas a cultural leader might not have direct engagement with individuals, instead focusing on shaping the local cultural sector's outcomes or the intercultural narrative in their area. However, many of the best cultural educators also function as leaders, inspiring interest and change, and many of the best cultural leaders are also educators, embedded in the process of supporting, developing, and creating change for individuals and, by extension, the wider community, with a deep understanding of what people actually need."

- Jamie Hale

Building Pathways for the Next Generation

These ten leaders share a common story: they reached their positions through chance encounters, individual tenacity, and perseverance against systemic barriers – particularly those from working-class, disabled, and global majority backgrounds. Their testimonies reveal a crucial truth; that lived experience within a community is a core expertise.

By addressing and acting on the issues explored here, we can shift from a sector built on individual resilience to one that creates accessible pathways for all leaders.

Alongside the accompanying timeline and policy analysis (**found here**), this piece brings together past and present wisdom with real life experience.

Sankofa, and the 'Unwritten Curriculum'

The **Sankofa** principle – that the wisdom needed to build a better future lies in understanding the past – lives in this collective testimony. The leaders' experiences form a body of knowledge born from necessity – and a need to share it.

Their impact has been forged not *by* the system, but often *in spite of it*. An 'unwritten curriculum' – pedagogy of resilience, creativity, mutual aid and adaptability – has emerged as a result. This knowledge is not taught in schools and universities, but learned through chance encounters, combative thinking, and constant adaptation to shifting policies and political landscapes.

These leaders describe not careers, but vocations – responses to wrongs that they instinctively or experientially identified early on, even if they couldn't articulate them at the time. They worked out how to use art and creativity to affect their communities, and imagine 'how things could be, for us, in the future'. This motivation continues to drive them today – they want change and continue to advocate for it.

Characterising the Cultural Education Leader

Within AND's roundtables, there was a discussion about whether, and in which circumstances, to apply the term *leader*, or *educator*. The interviewees here varied in their responses to the question – one noted that these were labels applied to them by others, not identities they claimed for themself. However it is described, theirs are roles that are inherently hybrid, often contested, and defined more by action and ethos than by job title. For the purposes of this essay, I'll be using 'leader' to mean *cultural education leader.*

Leadership in this field is often a 'portfolio career', not by choice, but by necessity. It is not outlined or addressed within formal education, but a practice built from a combination of skills and attributes, which form part of each leader's work:

- **The artist:** making work, understanding craft, and pursuing creative inquiry.
- **The educator:** designing and implementing learning experiences, unlocking potential in others, transmitting knowledge.
- **The administrator:** understanding of budgets, funding applications, and planning.
- **The activist:** an imperative to advocate for a community, an idea, or a more equitable system, turning personal experience into public action.

"A leader in this context is a connector. They have to be able to join the dots between very different worlds – from formal settings like schools and universities to the informal spaces in local neighbourhoods. It's about finding the connections between these often disparate spaces.

This also means being chameleon-like – to alter how you talk about cultural education depending on who you're speaking to; the way you make the case to a teacher is completely different from how you would pitch it to a funder."

- Paul Crook

A leader is an idealist as well as a pragmatist. They need to know 'how to build the case for good ideas' as well as to think about balancing the books. Leaders are often defined by their ability to operate in the gap between grand vision and less-grand reality.

Leaders have a role as 'connectors'. They provide the link between youth clubs and theatres, community activism and policy rooms, as well as marginalised artists and institutional stages. One leader described a challenge they encountered working in a large cultural organisation that was aiming to develop a more holistic youth-centred approach. Many of the staff, across multiple departments, lacked experience working with young people. This led to dissonance and distrust with the cohort the organisation was attempting to attract.

The leader, *because* of their youth work background, was able to advise, advocate for, and, over time, successfully affect a cultural change in the way the organisation worked – one that it continues to benefit from.

Whilst the interviewees generally eschewed defining themselves as leaders or educators, it is clear that they share an approach to *why* they do what they do. Theirs is a commitment to access, a belief in the power of creativity to transform lives, and a practice of *paying forward* the opportunities that they themselves received.

Based on these responses and discussions, we can land on a tentative description that encompasses a range of approaches, careers and outcomes: a *cultural education leader is a practitioner who works to shape a more equitable sector by facilitating learning and creating pathways for others.*

The Catalysing Encounter, and the Door-Opener

These leaders did not necessarily emerge via a 'cultural sector' pathway, however. Their diversity of backgrounds means that they each bring a different set of tools and a unique perspective to the sector. Here are some of their stories that illustrate this:

Nuna's youth club provided them with great, informative experiences growing up. When someone asked them, 'what can you give back?', Nuna realised they had 'just been taking', not 'giving'. As a result of this revelation, they started teaching young people dance.

Liza's lightbulb moment occurred while observing 'belly-dancing and kebabs' at a miners' benefit when she was six. She now understands this was both a political and cultural awakening– which have become indivisible factors within her advocacy work.

Tony began as an actor, but their trauma-informed practice was developed through lived experience. Rachel and Jamie both came to leadership through their own artistic practice – itself a form of activism that demands a space that still does not exist for disabled artists.

"My trajectory to becoming a leader was hugely influenced by having a portfolio career – I was a mixture of artist, educator, activist, coach, and facilitator. That mix is fundamental to who I am now – I developed skills, viewpoints, and insights I simply wouldn't have if I had just directed theatre, and which provide a richness of experience that is essential for leadership."

- Rachel Bagshaw

"Leadership isn't something I was ever formally taught – it's iterative and instinctive; I've learned to trust my gut and constantly put myself in uncomfortable spaces, where the real learning happens – and my journey wasn't a conscious career plan. I was a creative kid who didn't fit in, but I had a talent and an interest in drama. That was recognised by a teacher who took me under his wing – he saw something in me. That was the start. It's those chance encounters, being spotted and nurtured, that set you on a path, and my whole career has been built on that foundation."

- Steve Moffitt

The power of an encounter

A particular theme that emerges across the testimonies we gathered is the profound, occasionally life-altering power of a single encounter. Their journeys into cultural education leadership were not mapped out; they were often catalysed by individuals who saw potential, and who offered a key to a door that was otherwise invisible or firmly locked. These experiences – informal, personal, and altruistic – were often not with a formal mentor, but a pivotal individual whose intervention was instructive, and/or transformative:

> Shereen described an early post-show encounter with a cultural figure she greatly admired. After Shereen explained she'd spent their last twenty pounds on a ticket, the artist gave her twenty pounds and said, 'When you make it, pay it forward'. Many years later, having got a job working with that same person at the Young Vic, Shereen returned the money, and asked them to 'pay it forward' again. The episode embedded in Shereen a philosophy of leadership that is about understanding the impact you can have on others at all times, and how generosity of intention and practice can help to build positive legacy.

The catalytic encounter is often not just a 'nice thing to happen' – it is an essential intervention and act by someone with capital – social, institutional, knowledge-based or financial – choosing to spend it on someone without it. These 'door-openers' do not just offer opportunities – they demystify the path and provide a counter-narrative to the message that says, 'this is not for you'. Recognising this, our leaders' careers are largely dedicated to 'paying it forward' by reinvesting in others.

Tips for Leaders: What Does This Mean for You?

Think about the chance encounters that helped you advance in your career:

- Who has opened a door for you in your career?
- Now, who can you open a door for?

Look around your organisation and network:

- Whose potential might you be overlooking?
- Can you make one intentional, proactive intervention this month?

(If applicable) Audit your organisation's early-career opportunities (internships, assistant roles, etc):

- Are they paid fairly, and accessible to those without pre-existing financial support?

"My approach to leadership is that you're not there to be liked or agreed with all the time, but you have to be very clear with your reasoning for any decision you make, so that you can sleep easy with yourself. I am not perfect, I'm still learning – when I mess up, I will put my hands up and say, 'You know what, I did that wrong, that was my mistake.' I think we as leaders need to be able to say that more, to be able to fail in public, and be a bit more honest about that."

-Shereen Jasmin Phillips

Navigating the 'Unknown Unknowns'

Whilst these encounters provided momentum and/or opportunity, they did not provide a roadmap. Jamie used the term the 'unknown unknowns' for this context. It speaks to the many unexpected challenges that face each leader, *which in themselves could not be foreseen*. These might include the unwritten 'rules of the game' – ranging from social cues, networking protocols and professional conduct – to codified elements, such as tax and employment law. More than one leader alluded to the complete lack of guidance on 'freelance life, tax returns and pension planning'. These challenges – whether bureaucratic, institutional, or interpersonal, represent a steep learning curve for the leaders.

This landscape of hidden knowledge creates a fundamental divide in routes to cultural education leadership, astutely identified by many of the interviewees. For those from middle-class backgrounds, who are non-disabled, and with inherent access to social and cultural capital, leadership can often be a path one can *fall into*; for those from working-class and/or other marginalised backgrounds, it is a path that must be *fought for*. For example:

> Nuna is grateful for the development of alternative methods of communication that bypass these systemic barriers. For example, Company Three allows for video submissions or voice notes for first round job roles. Nuna was grateful when a large funder changed their 2nd round stage to in person meeting to answer questions. With her undiagnosed dyslexia this gave her the opportunity to convey her passion and ideas to funders more effectively than traditional written applications could.

> Tony overcame barriers to collaboration with criminal justice agencies by focusing on his own community in South London. He developed programmes on 'boyhood to manhood and sexual health' which were so effective that he attracted attention from researchers and health services. Creating such compelling content and value in a pocket outside more traditional pathways meant that 'the system' was forced to engage with Tony, on Tony's own terms.

> Rachel shifted from leading rehearsals in a wheelchair to using a beanbag to sit, lie, and relax upon – this simple shift led to, 'transformed room dynamics, and improved the overall experience for everyone involved. [The] actors take rest when appropriate; people relate to each other differently; the outcomes are more collegiate, and as a result more powerful'.

> Rachel built on the insight gained to, over time, develop systemic change across all aspects of the organisation that they now lead.

A number of leaders testified to how their working-class background is key to the success of their practice. They know, and are trusted by, the community from which they emerged, a quality that their more 'privileged' colleagues cannot achieve.

We can see that the leaders' unique experiences and perspectives – whatever the roots of their own marginalisation were – can offer 'advantages' to themselves, and the sector.

"We cannot build a diverse and sustainable workforce if people cannot afford to live. The cultural education sector is one of the lowest paid in the entire creative industries. Passion shouldn't be a substitute for a living wage. If we want to attract talent from all backgrounds, we have to be able to pay people properly."

- Tina Ramdeen

"For a long time, I had a barrier. The image of a boss or a CEO felt corporate and cold, but I'm reactive, creative, visual, and playful. I worried that if I became a leader and learned to do everything 'correctly', it would fundamentally change who I was. My question was, 'Does this mean I have to resign myself to becoming a different person to lead?' But you can bring the two together – you can find creative ways to handle spreadsheets and reframe responsibilities. I've come out of it being the boss I hoped to be – proving you don't have to sacrifice your core self to lead effectively."**- Nuna Sandy**

The Challenges of 'Othering'

In addition to the barriers mentioned above, some leaders' experiences, challenges and outcomes were, and are, specifically related to their race and ethnicity. These were rarely instances of overt racism, but a draining undercurrent of othering and gatekeeping, which in turn can include hyper-visibility *and* invisibility:

> Catherine described the experience of being 'one of the few people of colour in rooms of cultural leaders.' She also faced 'assumptions about her age and capabilities', a common experience for black women who are not often afforded automatic authority.
>
> Shereen self-defined as a 'reluctant activist'. Her advocacy wasn't a choice, but a necessity imposed by a sector that would not otherwise change.

With 'whiteness' still prominent as a default institutional culture, for some leaders there is the constant, cognitive labour of modulating language, appearance and behaviour to fit into the dominant culture of an organisation, and the sector.

It is worth noting that leaders having to surmount any of these barriers can be described as having to work a 'double shift' – both doing the job they are employed to do in addition to surmounting the visible and invisible barriers within a sector often built on white, non-disabled, middle-class norms. For leaders that are, say, black, disabled and working-class, we can imagine a triple – or even quadruple – shift where the mental labour of navigating disability access is compounded by that of navigating racial bias.

Any and all of these challenges can be further compounded by money issues. On a personal level, one leader recounted that their parents had to remortgage their house to fund their education. From an institutional viewpoint, many disabled creatives rely on support systems like the Government's Access to Work scheme, which is a) difficult to navigate, and b) currently under threat.

Forging Bonds and Support Networks

The interviewees' responses to the various and numerous barriers they face speaks to a need for belonging and collegiality that is a hallmark of the sector.

For Nuna, this was about networking with other artistic directors. Jamie noted that they picked up skills largely through mistakes, and that the disability arts sector is very mutually supportive. This informal network of peers became a primary source of knowledge, replacing the lack of formal institutional support.

The 'marginalities' described above have compelled these leaders to respond not by waiting for change, but by building their own solutions and parallel infrastructures. The outcomes and impact of these voices that come from outside traditional mainstream routes into the cultural sector are not just a useful addendum to its make-up. Potentially, they are key to the vitality, practice and ongoing legitimacy of the sector itself. However, we should note a potential cumulative impact on the individuals' well-being. The energy spent on such solutions is so tiring. It diverts from creativity and leadership itself.

Tips for Leaders: What Does This Mean for You?

Reflect on the visible and invisible barriers to leadership in your work or organisation:

- Are there any 'unknown unknowns'?
- Is there a hidden curriculum?
- What are the unwritten rules of access, conduct, and advancement?

Work with your team to create and share a simple 'survival guide' to address these questions and provide good governance. For example:

- Formalise your hiring processes. Be sure they are not reliant on personal referrals from team members to ensure you are casting the widest net possible for the right candidate.
- Define how decisions are made and determine who is responsible for what.
- Spell out internal processes, including a list of who to ask for help on what issues (from IT to funding bids).
- Update this list regularly and involve new and recent starters (and external consultants, if appropriate) to ensure it remains accurate and up to date.

A Career in Cultural Education

The rise of 'portfolio careers' mentioned earlier is not always a choice, but a necessary strategy for survival. For many leaders it has become the only viable route to achieving impact and effectiveness as a cultural education leader.

The hybrid nature of this approach is not for everyone and can be exhausting. A number of interviewees spoke directly to experiencing burnout resulting from an immense pressure to overwork – a response that can be attributed to not fitting in to established frameworks, resulting in a need to 'prove oneself'.

The necessity to constantly switch hats presents its own challenges. The artist may mourn the time 'lost' whilst working at their desk; the activist feels they are not on the front lines enough; the educator longs for deeper engagement with learners that is constantly interrupted by administration and fundraising. This isn't merely a work-life balance issue – it points to a struggle to maintain a coherent sense of professional self while being pulled in multiple directions at once.

That said, some – the author of this piece among them – will thrive in the fluid nature of a 'portfolio career'. The hybridity can be energising and stimulate creativity as the cognitive shift between hats necessitates new ideas, collaborations and responses, alongside a better understanding of others – all of which can be factors in effective leadership.

Some leaders have observed a positive shift within Gen Z, identifying a growing number of people who prioritise wellbeing, personal happiness and work-life balance, whilst challenging exploitative workplace cultures and placing less emphasis on job security. This shift may be the beginning of a challenge to the sector to create roles that allow for a more integrated, and therefore sustainable, sense of self.

"There are so many young people graduating into this sector, with not enough work for them to develop a career... so you have to find a niche, come up with things that are not the norm, be innovative in finding ways that art can tackle the way the world is today – maybe look to sports, to science, to politics, and develop ideas alongside them – maybe this is something that sector leaders can encourage?" **– Tony Cealy**

The future of leadership within the sector may depend on embracing this shift in our approach to work. Supporting the whole human, rather than celebrating or romanticising their struggle. While outlining a definitive route into cultural education leadership is beyond the scope of this essay, it is fair to say that in the current climate, emerging leaders are facing challenges that our contributors did not encounter at the start of their career.

"There are immense structural sector challenges now that I didn't face. With education so standardised, it's hard to be yourself, and when applications can be polished by Chat GPT, job applications have exploded from 20 to 250...from my perspective as a hirer, it's just a much harder environment to give someone a try, and for them to find the space to create themselves"
– Catherine Ritman Smith

Tips for Leaders: What Does This Mean for You?

Prioritise the well-being of your workforce:

- Audit the 'portfolio pressures' on your team:
  - Where are you relying on unsustainable effort?
  - Can you restructure roles, or share administrative burdens?
- When new roles are created, are they realistic in terms of what you are asking of candidates?
- (If appropriate) When writing a new job description, challenge every element. Ask yourself – 'Is this essential, or just how it's always been done?'
  - What can you/your team learn from other organisations?

Addressing the Issues – Collective Tips

In the spirit of Sankofa, this section collates decades of learning to help inform the sector and future leaders. Generally speaking, our contributors indicated that circumstances for emerging leaders are 'in some cases better, in some areas worse' – but that overall that the climate is harsher now than it was for them. They point to a more risk-averse sector, dismantled infrastructure, a post-COVID contraction in jobs, and a landscape that is more 'siloed and lonely'.

Despite these obstacles, they have shared specific suggestions that begin to address a number of the issued addresses in this piece:

1. **Fund community, not just projects:** The need for long-term, funded peer networks is a common thread emerging from the experiences of marginalisation described by several leaders. Jamie explicitly called for this for disabled leaders, arguing that a space to come together would have an 'enormous impact'.
2. **Create protected spaces:** Shereen's vision for protected spaces for experimentation could address the issue of risk-aversion that is stifling innovation. These would consist of areas where failure is recognised as a necessary part of research and development, free from the immediate pressure of delivering quantifiable outcomes or public performances. She

would allow the practice-based research that underpins initiatives like ACE's Creativity Collaboratives to flourish.

In a similar vein, Tina suggests dedicated festival spaces where young people can come together to share their work. She explains that 'we must celebrate the 'first draft' – the grassroots, the journey, the unpolished – and create a culture that values and honours the creative process itself'.

3. **Open doors, share knowledge:** Paul advocates for a 'job swap programme' to build networks and provide valuable learning experiences. Tina – echoing Tony above – suggests looking to other fields such as sports for inspiration, particularly around clear pathways and funding for leadership development.

(Author's note): Might combining the two – job swaps with other sectors – throw up some interesting learning?

4. **Value labour fairly:** Tina also suggests benchmarking salaries against other sectors (like youth or education) in a direct challenge to the culture of vocational poverty that the sector has tolerated for decades. This is not just about fair pay. The escalating precarity of housing and life costs, combined with low wages, actively drives younger people and those without independent wealth away from cultural careers in cities, systematically excluding diverse voices and entrenching privilege.

5. **Validate diverse learning:** Catherine proposes a 'Cultural Passport', which would provide a record of skills and experiences gained outside formal education. These could range from trying food in a Spanish restaurant, to watching Indian films, to attending local arts projects, festivals or exhibitions. This could help to combat the focus on 'qualifications' that can currently gate-keep cultural careers, empowering individuals to articulate the full scope of their experiences and capabilities.

6. **Fix essential support systems:** Rachel's specific policy demand is to reform and reliably fund essential programmes like Access to Work. We need to recognise that this this is not a luxury, but part of a fundamental infrastructure for disabled leaders. Reforms would include making the scheme flexible enough for freelance and project-based work as well as ensuring that assessments are conducted by people who understand cultural practice. Reliable funding would remove the constant anxiety that a rejected application could end a career, providing the stability that true access requires.

7. **Support young people as cultural leaders – and Entrepreneurs:** Steve advocates for much better involvement of young people in discussions about 'what next?' – shifting the focus from seeing youth as a demographic to be engaged, to valuing them as essential partners in shaping the sector's future. He also suggests widening the net when it comes to thinking about where the next generation of leaders might come from, recognising that the skills many leaders exemplify – resourcefulness, initiative, building organisations from nothing – are entrepreneurial in nature. The key distinction to make between the two is that this cultural entrepreneurship is not for personal profit, but for community and public benefit.

8. **More public speaking training:** As Paul succinctly outlined – 'Public speaking is a skill that I was never formally taught, but it's been absolutely vital. It started in art school during the 'crits' – having to stand up, be vulnerable, and talk about your own unfinished artwork to

a critical audience is a unique and solid training. I've had to hone it for everything from running workshops, to having to convince a teacher why an exhibition is worthwhile, to advocating for my work in museums. It's why we offer public speaking training to our trainees – because it's essential, and often the key that unlocks everything else.'

Taking Further Action

The suggestions above warrant further discussion across the sector. There is another area for discussion that – as a result of my own bias reflected through the questions I asked – emerged as a theme throughout many of the interviews: *lived experience within a community is potentially one of the most vital qualifications for leadership within it.*

These leaders did not enter their communities as outsiders; they emerged *from* them. Their work and their advocacy are important precisely because their 'marginality' is their expertise – their 'insider knowledge' is what allows them to build trust, understand need, and create work of authentic value.

The sector often treats this rootedness as a happy accident, or a niche concern, but in actuality the challenge is to create pathways that actively privilege and professionalise this lived experience, one which aims to genuinely shift the embedded power relations – to stop asking how we can help leaders from marginalised communities fit into the existing sector, and instead begin to outline how the sector can be reconfigured to recognise that their deeply-rooted practice is the model for its future. Across the sector, this could manifest as:

- **Funding streams** specifically for community-anchored leaders and organisations, assessed by peers from similar backgrounds.
- **Apprenticeship and training schemes** that identify and nurture talent within communities, rather than waiting for it to navigate its way to traditional gateways.
- **Governance models** that cede real power and decision-making to representatives of the communities that an organisation seeks to serve.

Author's note:

With such a small sample size, this piece does not claim to be a comprehensive account of the history of, or challenges facing, the sector; furthermore, it is not even a full account of the individual experiences of the interviewees – there are multiple essays that could have been compiled from what were stimulating, wide-ranging exchanges. However, I'm not a neutral observer; the questions I chose to ask, the themes I've highlighted, and the analysis I offer are inevitably shaped by my own experiences and bias.

The Cultural Education Sector is much larger, more developed and vastly more diverse than when I first began working within it. Many of the topics discussed above have remained constant over the years and decades and it is well past time to properly address them. We invite you to add your views to those of the leaders who contributed to this piece by sharing your responses, views and feedback with us.

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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