



# Rethinking Leadership in Cultural Education

by Dr David Parker

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*This paper follows on from David's introductory piece and echoes John Riches' work, **Voices of Change**, featuring the testimonies of ten cultural leaders in our series **Leading with Purpose: Cultural Education in Practice**. In the article below, David applies his credentials in the space to explore why cultural education leadership matters, what makes it distinctive, and what might be needed to support those who lead in this sector.*

Leadership might not be the first word that comes to mind when we think about arts education. For many working in cultural organisations, classrooms, theatres or youth spaces, the focus is on making things happen – delivering projects, working with young people, or building partnerships with schools. But as the pressures on cultural education continue to grow, the importance of leadership has never been clearer.

At its heart, leadership in cultural education is about shaping what's possible. It's about holding on to the value of creativity and ensuring that children and young people can access meaningful cultural experiences, regardless of where they live, what school they go to, or what challenges they face. It's about finding ways to keep this work alive and thriving – even when funding is tight, policies shift, or organisations are stretched.

## Why Cultural Education Leadership Matters

Across the UK, opportunities for young people to engage with arts and culture are uneven. In some areas, there is strong local investment and a rich network of schools, venues, artists and youth organisations working together. In others, provision is fragile or declining, particularly where schools are under pressure or where cultural infrastructure has been lost.

Even where provision exists, much of it relies on the passion, resilience and hard work of individuals – those who build relationships across sectors, advocate for young people's creative needs, and keep the work going when resources are thin. These people are often acting as leaders, even if they don't use that word. They might be a museum education manager working with schools, a freelance artist co-creating with a youth club, or a teacher linking their pupils to cultural opportunities outside the classroom.

In these roles, leadership is not always about being the most senior or having a big budget. It's about influence, relationships, values and commitment. It's about championing creativity in places where it risks being marginalised.

## What's Different About Leadership in This Space?

Leadership in cultural education often happens across boundaries.

Practitioners navigate between the priorities of schools, funders, community settings and cultural institutions. They may have to translate different languages – educational outcomes, artistic practice, safeguarding, evaluation – and make sense of how to work within or around structures that weren't designed to support creative collaboration.

On top of this, many cultural education professionals work freelance or in small teams. They may not have access to formal leadership development, and their roles may not be seen as leadership positions, even when they are making strategic decisions and holding significant responsibility.

These realities mean that cultural education leadership can feel isolated, under-recognised and undervalued. Yet it is often in these very spaces that some of the most creative, inclusive and transformative work with young people takes place.

## What's Getting in the Way?

From the conversations, research and reflections behind this work, several key barriers emerge. These also align with themes that leaders explore in John Riches' piece, mentioned in the introduction above:

- **Lack of clear pathways:** There is no single route into leadership in cultural education. People often "grow into" leadership informally, without support or recognition, and may lack the

time or resources to reflect on their development.

- **Precarity and burnout:** Many practitioners juggle multiple roles, short-term contracts and underpaid work. The emotional labour of working with young people, especially in challenging contexts, adds further pressure.
- **Under-recognition of learning roles:** Education and participation work in arts organisations is sometimes viewed as secondary to artistic programming. This affects how leadership potential is seen and supported.
- **Access and equity:** Existing leadership opportunities may not be designed with freelancers, disabled practitioners, early-career professionals, or those from racially minoritised backgrounds in mind. This creates barriers to inclusion and progression.

## What Could a Broader Model of Leadership Look Like?

To respond to these challenges, we need to expand how we understand and support leadership in cultural education. This means:

- **Valuing leadership in all its forms:** Leadership is not only about hierarchy – it is about influence, care, vision and collaboration. Let's recognise the many ways people are already leading and make space for new models to emerge.
- **Creating flexible and accessible development opportunities:** Leadership programmes should be responsive to the needs of different practitioners – freelancers, in-house staff, teachers, youth workers. Modular learning, mentoring, peer networks and reflective practice could all form part of a more inclusive offer.

- **Focusing on values and relationships:** In cultural education, leadership is deeply relational. It's about trust, communication, partnership and listening to young people. Development opportunities should reflect this by supporting ethical, community-rooted leadership. In many settings, leadership is also modelled and shared with young people themselves. Whether through co-creation, youth-led programming, or mentoring structures, cultural educators have a vital role in enabling young people to lead, express, and shape their cultural experiences. In doing so, they strengthen their own practice as collaborative, responsive leaders.
- **Connecting the dots:** Many people feel they are "reinventing the wheel" in isolation. Stronger networks and knowledge-sharing between schools, arts organisations, and community spaces could build confidence, avoid duplication, and amplify impact.
- **Investing in sustainability:** For leadership to thrive, we need to address the conditions that make the work so precarious. That means fairer pay, more secure employment, and long-term investment in cultural education.

## Where Next?

A New Direction's **Cultural Sector Leadership Programme** is evolving to support sector needs and respond to this collection of essays. In 2026 we will delve more deeply into the topics explored in a **series of events**, inviting readers to discuss and reflect with peers and contributors. We invite further responses on the same themes covered in **Leading with Purpose**, creating space for a wider range of voices to contribute to the ongoing dialogue and deepen collective learning. **[GET IN TOUCH HERE](#)**

In response to *Leading with Purpose* we are offering a peer-learning programme **[Space for Exchange](#)** – a CPD offer in which peers will be paired up over an eight-month process, with the goal of strengthening cultural education leadership through connection. *Space for Exchange* gives participants permission to carve out space and time for reflection and share best practice with peers.

Through the wider programme, we will continue to promote best practice and foster inclusive creative ecologies with opportunities to explore and challenge current practice, expand knowledge and improve offers for children and young people through our popular **[Masterclasses](#)** and **[Best Practice Network](#)**.

Our three-stage professional development and leadership programme will challenge A New Direction and the wider Cultural Sector to better-define what a Cultural Leader/Educator is; explore where such leaders and educators exist and how to nurture talent; support inter-sector exchange; explore where and how young people can be better-served by cross-sector collaboration; and use the learning to support us all to advocate for change.

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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