

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of wood grain, showing concentric growth rings in shades of brown and tan. Overlaid on this are several large, semi-transparent green circles of varying sizes, some of which are partially cut off by the edges of the page. The overall aesthetic is organic and textured.

A New Direction & Cultural Education Leadership:

The Story so Far

by Dr David Parker

**A NEW
DIRECTION**

We create opportunity

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Dr David Parker is well-known and respected for his expertise in research and evaluation in the arts and education sectors. His recent experience includes working as a consultant to redesign and evaluate Arts Council England's Artsmark programme for schools as well as development work on strategies and programmes for the Southbank Centre and the BFI.

Across the UK, the role of arts, culture and creativity in young people's lives is under growing pressure. From shifts in educational policy and reduced curriculum time, to cost-of-living constraints and cuts to local cultural infrastructure, the landscape in which cultural education operates is becoming more challenging.

At the same time, there is renewed recognition of the value of arts, culture and creativity. Each of these plays a crucial role in supporting wellbeing, driving inclusion, and equipping young people with the tools to navigate an uncertain world.

It is against this backdrop that A New Direction began exploring key questions of cultural education leadership:

- What kinds of leadership does this moment call for?
- How can we better support those working across the cultural and education sectors to sustain, champion and develop creative opportunities for children and young people?

This work sits within a complex and often fragmented policy environment, influenced by multiple agendas. These span education, arts and culture, youth services, and community development – each with their own institutional histories and policy levers. UK government departments and national bodies such as the Department for Education (DfE), Department for

Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Arts Council England, and youth sector funders frequently operate from distinct professional traditions, languages and frameworks. This is the case even when they share broad outcome goals around equity, wellbeing, skills, and long-term life chances.

For cultural education leaders, this makes advocacy particularly demanding: it requires navigating dispersed policy landscapes, aligning with varying terminologies and expectations, and finding common ground across sectors that are not always well joined-up in practice.

Navigating the Complexities

Our initial conversations with partners and practitioners pointed to a gap. While leadership development exists within the wider cultural sector, it rarely speaks directly to those working in education and learning roles – whether within arts venues, as freelance practitioners, or in partnerships with schools and communities. The routes into leadership for these professionals are often informal, unsupported, and highly dependent on individual initiative.

To test this further, we commissioned a series of scoping activities in 2023–24, drawing on desk-based research, sector intelligence, and a series of roundtables and interviews with cultural education professionals.

These conversations uncovered common themes:

- The complexity of operating across multiple sectors (culture, education, and youth/community), each with different values and priorities.
- The under-recognition of leadership within learning roles.
- The need for more inclusive and sustainable pathways into leadership, particularly for those from underrepresented backgrounds or freelance careers.

As the work evolved, so did our thinking about what support might look like. Rather than a single leadership course or fixed offer, a more flexible and responsive model began to take shape. Namely, an approach that could support learning across different stages and settings, as well as recognise the relational, values-driven nature of leadership in cultural education. Ideas such as structured peer networks, more formalised forms of mentorship, and opportunities for reflection and co-design have all emerged from the dialogue so far.

This is an ongoing process. As we enter a new phase of the work, A New Direction is committed to widening the conversation. We want to engage cultural education professionals, organisations, educators, funders and sector bodies in helping to shape what comes next.

The next phase of the programme will explore priorities for leadership development in the *Leading with Purpose: Cultural Education in Practice* event

series; invite contributions to this article series from current cultural education leaders; develop ideas for **Space for Exchange**, our peer learning and knowledge exchange programme, asking: **what will it take to build a stronger, more connected, and more sustainable ecosystem of cultural education leadership?**

We know that cultural education leadership is already happening in classrooms, youth settings, galleries, theatres, libraries, studios, and online. The challenge now is how we recognise, resource and reimagine that leadership for the future – something this collection of work is designed to help us explore.

A New Direction has collated the voices of experts and practitioners from across the cultural education space to share their views, ideas and insights in response to these questions. The following pieces form part of a wider body of work exploring how we can better recognise, resource and reimagine this leadership for the future. We hope they will provide context, stimulate discussion, and ultimately inspire all of us to improve the lives of the children and young people we work with.

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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