Leading with Purpose:

Cultural Education in Practice

A NEW DIRECTION
We create **opportunity**

A collection of observations, studies, analysis and practical tools for today's cultural educators

Click this icon to return to the contents page.

Table of Contents

A Note From the CEO and Chair	**3**
A New Direction & Cultural Education Leadership: The Story So Far	**4**
Voices of Change: A Call to Transform Cultural Education	**7**
Rethinking Leadership in Cultural Education	**20**
Spaces of Possibility and Pockets of Hope	**23**
Speaking the Same Language: Defining Cultural Education Leadership	**42**
About the Authors and Contributors	**45**
Further Reading & Resources	**48**
UK Cultural Policy, 1980-2020s	**49**
Analysis: The Policy, The Impact, and The Mismatch	**55**
Recommended Reading	**57**

A Note From the CEO and Chair

At A New Direction, we believe that every child and young person deserves the chance to own their creativity, shape culture, and achieve their creative potential. We work alongside cultural education leaders, providing them with the support and resources they need to make this happen.

More often than not, the leaders we work with fall outside traditional structures. Navigating the ever-shifting landscape of government policies, funding, and support – or the lack thereof – has taught them to be creative problem solvers, connectors, and advocates, as well as educators.

Their stories of resilience and adaptability inspired this resource. We hope it will provide current and future leaders in cultural education with insights, observations, and practical tools to support them on the front lines of their work.

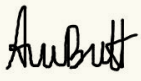
To do this, we have brought together three important voices to explore the evolution of cultural education leadership:

- **Dr David Parker** maps the complexities of cultural education leadership: what it is, why it matters, and what is needed to support those in the sector.
- **John Riches** shares and amplifies the testimonies of ten practitioners whose journeys reveal that lived experience is core to their expertise—and whose hard-won insights have created pathways for others.
- **Dr Chrissie Tiller** connects us to the radical thinkers and philosophies of the past that underpin this work in the present—and shows how this can help us create spaces of possibility for children and young people.

This resource is not a fixed manual, but a way to recognise, resource, and reimagine leadership for the future. We hope it will spark reflection, conversation, and action.

Beyond this, we invite you to add your own voice. Share your stories with us. Challenge our thinking. Help us shape what comes next—because the future of cultural education leadership won't be built by any one of us alone.

Arfa Butt (Chair)



Steve Moffitt (CEO)

A New Direction & Cultural Education Leadership:

The Story so Far

by Dr David Parker

A New Direction & Cultural Education Leadership: The Story so Far

by Dr David Parker

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.

Voices of Change:

A Call to Transform Cultural Education

by John Riches

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.

Rethinking Leadership in Cultural Education

by Dr David Parker

Rethinking Leadership in Cultural Education

by Dr David Parker

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 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.

Spaces of Possibility and Pockets of Hope

Pedagogy, Practice and Cultural Education

by Dr Chrissie Tiller

***Dr Chrissie Tiller** is an expert in collaborative and social arts practice. As a writer, thinker, theatre practitioner and educator, her work sits at the creative intersection of critical pedagogy, political activism and social transformation in the arts and cultural sectors.*

Here, she explores the critical theory and pedagogies that underpin cultural education. Aligned with the philosophy of Sankofa, she examines the works and thinking of seven educational philosophers – past and present – offering both context to their ideas and practical applications for use with children and young people. Look out for the 'Creating Spaces of Hope' box-outs throughout the piece for practical examples of these ideas in action.

Why does Cultural Education Matter?

Young people face a future where the impacts of technological advancement, the changing climate and a global move away from democratic government are already presenting new and unexpected challenges. The skills they will need to thrive personally and socially will depend less on their ability to absorb knowledge and more on critical and creative thinking and their capacity to analyse, question, interpret and evaluate new ideas, as well as to imagine, explore and investigate new possibilities.

Engagement and participation in arts and cultural activities has been shown to have the potential to foster the creative habits of mind that life in the 21st century increasingly demands: being inquisitive, collaborative, imaginative, persistent and disciplined (Lucas and Spencer, 2017). As UNESCO's recent Framework for Cultural and Arts Education notes, participation in arts and culture not only plays *'a vital role in the flourishing of human imagination, creativity and self-expression' but also provides us with a 'foundation of our values, choices and relationships with one another and with nature, endowing us with critical thinking, a sense of identity, and the ability to respect and embrace otherness'* (UNESCO, 2024: 2).

At the same time, as the report **The Arts in Schools** (A New Direction, 2023) highlights, we are witnessing a growing disparity in young people's ability to access these experiences. This inequity of provision is reflected increasingly in the lack of diversity in our creative industries and cultural institutions. As the Sutton Trust reveals in A Class Act (2024), less than 10% of our creative and cultural workforce are currently from working-class backgrounds: a percentage which has halved since the 1970s. Fresh approaches and new policies are needed to combat this downward trend if we are to really shift the dial.

The potential of cultural education to promote critical thinking, creativity and imagination across the curriculum places it in a unique position to counter the cycle of exclusion and deprivation reinforced by inequity of access. When young people participate in experiences that reflect their own stories, lives, identities and cultures, we create spaces of possibility where we can work

together to challenge and break down barriers of class, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability, sexuality and geographical location.

Pedagogy, Practice and Social Transformation

The struggle for greater equality of opportunity and fairness in educational contexts is not a new one. While the injustices facing young people today may be specific to the times we live in, there is a long and important history of educational philosophers and thinkers engaging with questions of injustice, inequality and the need for social transformation. By revisiting some of their theories and philosophies here we hope to offer insights, approaches and strategies that will help us build on that legacy. To support this, we have included box-out sections aligned to these thinkers, each with suggested actions designed to spark discussion, open debate and create possibilities.

Our primary audience is cultural leaders and arts practitioners working for the benefit of children and young people in social, cultural and educational contexts. As such, we hope this introduction to the principles of critical pedagogy and social transformation will provide a touchstone for anyone seeking to create a sector that is more diverse and inclusive in terms of whose culture it values and whose stories it shares.

Educational philosophers who have sought to challenge the status quo have inevitably influenced and shaped each other's thinking. We have chosen to focus here on those whose commitment to bringing theory and action together has ensured their voices remain relevant and continue to resonate with leaders today. As the intersectional nature of the obstacles facing many young people and the role arts and culture can play in creating those barriers becomes clearer, we have also included some of those thinkers whose theories have contributed to our understanding of intersectionality and the need for cultural democracy.

Theory, Practice and Critical Pedagogy

> ‘Without action or practice there is no knowledge … (but) we have to have a certain theoretical kind of practice in order to know also.’
> (Freire, P. 1990: 98)

Progressive Educational Theory and Practice

The notion of pedagogy or what Freire calls a theoretical kind of practice, is not something we have always felt comfortable with in the UK. Educationist, historian and political activist, Brian Simon's notorious challenge, *Why no Pedagogy in England?* (1981), was quickly dismissed by educational policy makers who insisted on the importance of pragmatism in delivering a national curriculum. Sadly, this meant we also lost a sense of the old Greek meaning of the word, which recognises the pedagogue as someone who cares for the well-being of their pupils as well as their formal education.

Leading European pedagogues, including Montessori, Reggio Emilia and Piaget, have all shaped our understanding of the need for more child-centred approaches to learning. But it is US reformer and philosopher John Dewey's vision of education as part of a crucial social framework where young people learn best through doing, and working together in groups, that has probably had most influence on current educational thinking. His advocacy for arts and culture as an extension of all human experience, rather than something separate and unique, has also been an important influence on our understanding of their work in shaping who we are as individuals and how we work together as communities.

We do not learn from experience ... we learn from reflecting on experience.

- (Dewey, J. 1933: 78)

John Dewey

Setting out his belief in experiential forms of teaching in *My Pedagogic Creed (1897)*, Dewey argues formal education should simply be part of a wider social process through which young people learn about the world. Rather than seeing it as a preparation for future living, he urges educators to recognise young people's potential as agents of change within their communities. Dewey proposes that by actively engaging young people in doing, the learning space can become a process of living in itself, enabling them to challenge the injustices they see in the outside world.

Developing his ideas further in *How We Think (1910)* and *Democracy and Education (1916)*, Dewey underlines the contribution education can make to building a robust democracy by encouraging young people to become thoughtful, critical thinkers rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

This means committing to actively involving young people in the learning process through:

- **Learning by doing:** including giving them space and time to reflect on their experience
- **Interactive learning:** ensuring they can contribute to the learning experience
- **Discussion and dialogue:** empowering them to value their own ideas while learning to listen and respect those of others
- **Interdisciplinary teaching:** promoting learning across subject boundaries by choosing shared issues and themes that connect more directly with young people's own lives

We have come a long way from the learning by rote Dewey was struggling to oppose. Few cultural educators or arts practitioners today would disagree with Dewey's basic premise of the need to engage young people more directly in the learning process or in the value of creating time for reflection as part of that process. Nor would most of us object to his notion that everyone should have the possibility to be an artist as well having the capacity to enjoy art. Yet so much of what we offer young people

access to in terms of arts and culture can still seem distanced from their own lived experience and the communities that Dewey wants us to see them as valuable members of – especially when certain forms of knowledge and particular forms of art and culture (from music, drama and dance to visual arts) appear to be valued above others.

Ensuring young people have the possibility to engage with arts and cultural experiences where they see themselves represented and their communities reflected, Dewey would suggest, is a crucial way in which we can begin to challenge the hierarchies that still

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Ensuring young people feel their own communities and cultures are respected and matter is one of the crucial ways in which we can offer them a sense of belonging.

Consider these approaches:

Inspire young people to see their communities and neighbourhoods, including their own homes, as rich resources of creative and cultural expression by encouraging them to capture some of these in any way they choose, including sounds, music and words as well as visual images.

Invite them to consider how they might share or curate these, helping others to understand the meaning and value of their choices by explaining why these particular forms of creativity have resonance for them, reflecting on their similarities and differences in response to the same neighbourhood.

Work with them to identify, record, and map everyday acts of creativity and imagination that exist across their neighbourhood: from graffiti in the streets, to local cafés and restaurants, spaces for creating music or dance to community gardens, murals, window displays in homes and shops.

Create space for them to share this mapping with their local community, either working with local galleries or museums or creating digital guides that people can add to.

Empower them to understand how they can draw on their own sense of what has meaning and value to respond to work they encounter in more formal arts and cultural settings.

The educator also has the duty of not being neutral.

- (Freire, P. 1990: 180)

Critical Pedagogy Paulo Freire

Dewey's thinking on the importance of engaging young people more directly in the learning process and encouraging them to draw on their own experience resonated powerfully with Paulo Freire when he found himself teaching impoverished peasants in Brazil in the 1960s. What he also began to realise was the impossibility of achieving the equality he sought for them within educational systems that remained so resolutely hierarchical.

Freire was not alone in believing that a more radical approach would be needed if change was to happen at a systemic and structural level. Ivan Illich's ideas in *Deschooling Society* (1971), Gramsci's work on hegemony and Vygotsky's arguments about the role of education and culture in perpetuating inequality all influenced his thinking. Rejecting what he called the banking model of education – where objective knowledge is deposited by the one who knows (the educator) into the minds of those who do not (the young people) – he argues this approach simply reinforces existing power structures. Instead, he proposes what he calls consciousness raising.

If formal education is inherently social and political in its commitment to upholding the status quo, then Freire insists educators cannot be neutral. Places of learning need instead to become spaces of possibility by building young people's capacity for critical thinking and engaging them with real life injustices and problems. This means not only understanding the barriers and boundaries that impact the lives of the young people we work with but also seeking ways to work with them to challenge them. Building on Dewey's call for learning to engage actively with the wider process of living, Freire proposes it must also become a practice of freedom, where those whom the system has marginalised or excluded are inspired to imagine a world where things are different.

Setting out these beliefs in what has become a seminal text on teaching as a tool for social transformation, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)*, and his later *Pedagogy of Hope (1992)*, Freire argues compellingly for educational practices that:

- **Encourage shared inquiry:** through collaborative learning processes where educators and young people tackle this issue of creating a more equal world together
- **Value young people's lived experience:** as a crucial source, enabling them to understand they can draw on it to create new knowledges
- **Create space for dialogue:** where the educator or facilitator is no longer seen as 'the-one-who-teaches' and knows the answers, but becomes a co-learner

- **Question dominant narratives:** connecting the learning space to the world outside, enabling young people to envisage a more just and equitable world

Using the language of shared inquiry, collaboration and dialogue, Freire speaks directly to the importance of valuing and trusting young people's creative power and their ability to respond imaginatively and perceptively to social injustices. Through a shared process of posing problems and welcoming everyone's responses learning spaces can become the pockets of hope he suggests they should be. Cultural education can play a pivotal role in creating such spaces.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Ensuring young people feel their ideas are respected and valued is an important way in which we can open up spaces for meaningful dialogue.

Consider these approaches:

Draw on Freire's concept of problem-posing by encouraging young people to propose social injustices or issues they would like to respond to through their own creative work and/or examining the responses different artists have made to these issues.

Share further examples of cultural expression that touch on these issues by arranging (or hosting) visits to museums, galleries, theatres, music spaces that have exhibitions, collections or performances that offer particular insight into the issues they have chosen to explore.

Foster the concept of collaborative and collective solutions by encouraging them to work in pairs or small groups, posing questions for each other about ways they might tackle a particular injustice or issue, including reflecting on how effectively different artists have responded to these issues in the past.

Invite an artist or group of artists whose work touches on their chosen themes or issues to co-create a piece of work with them that captures or challenges their thinking.

Discuss how and why they might use the work that results as part of a display, a placard, a flyer, or a campaign to draw attention to a particular issue and provoke further questions.

I think if I had to put a finger on what I consider a good education, a good radical education, it wouldn't be anything about methods or techniques. It would be loving people first.

- (Horton, Myles. 1990: 177)

Myles Horton and Paulo Freire: We Make the Road by Walking

In his later years, Freire reflects on education as a practice of freedom with activist and educator Myles Horton. Recorded at Horton's Highlander Folk School, which provided an educational grounding for leading figures in the US civil rights movement, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change (1990)*, offers rich insights into their shared belief in encouraging participation and collaborative practices. It also underlines their commitment to a constant cycle of theory and practice, action and reflection upon the world to transform it – what Freire calls praxis. Bringing about a more just world, Freire explains, can be as simple as recognising that everyone deserves to be respected and listened to. The intentional integration of theory and practice, action and reflection is what enables us to bring that about.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Often, as Horton and Freire suggest, simple gestures can be the most effective in opening up possibilities for change. Space, and where people place themselves within it, can be an important signifier of where the power lies in any learning space or cultural setting.

Consider these approaches:

Examine how the space you work in is usually set out and where you normally place yourself within it. Then try out different solutions, asking for responses from the young people you work with to see if there are ways they feel would suggest greater openness or facilitate a more equal exchange of ideas.

Ask young people to propose their own ways of organising a space and trying these out through a collaborative process of 'action and reflection, reflection and action'. Encourage them to think how simple changes of position can change how power is perceived and to then consider what difference this might make to whose voice is listened to in discussions.

Invite them to visit existing public spaces, including cultural institutions, and then discuss how they might be reshaped or re-envisioned to challenge existing power structures and promote greater access and participation.

Engage them in collectively imagining a public space or cultural institution where everyone would feel welcome and everyone's culture feels equally valued.

The classroom, with all its limitations remains a location of possibility

- (hooks, 1994:207)

Engaged Pedagogy

If *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as Freire confesses to Horton, can be a dense theoretical read, *We Make the Road* by Walking embodies their passion for bringing theory, action and storytelling together to respond collectively to what is needed to bring about change and learning from the reflective process that follows. By consciously interweaving her own story and experience of marginalisation with theory and critical thinking about power, class, race and gender, activist and educator bell hooks builds on this by developing a praxis focused on creating the space to imagine new possibilities.

bell hooks

Already deeply involved with black feminist politics, thought and social transformation when she writes *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom*, hooks opens her book with a playful rebuke to Freire for his use of 'he' and 'him' in his early written texts. At the same time, she acknowledges the formidable contribution he made to her own transformation. What she proposes her feminism brings to the table, along with a commitment to love as a central part of the reflective process (which she has learned from Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Han) is a certainty that well-being is as important as intellectual growth if we want to bring about real change.

Arguing for an even more 'holistic model of learning', which she names engaged pedagogy (1994:21), hooks insists it will never be enough to simply understand the theory. It must lead us to meaningful action. By creating spaces and possibilities for young people to imagine what a fairer, more just world might look like, hooks argues, we can develop their critical thinking and help them understand what they might need to do to make that world a possibility.

Asking educators to be braver in their commitment to challenging and dismantling the oppressive and exclusionary systems that impact so many young people, she suggests:

- **Being more vulnerable and open:** enabling the young people we work with to understand that individual stories and lived experiences can be a powerful resource and a rich form of knowledge
- **Creating spaces of collective possibility:** imagining what the notion of transgression might mean in terms of breaking down barriers and boundaries
- **Appreciating the imagination:** as the key to developing critical thinking
- **Forming learning communities:** where everyone feels invited and able to contribute and everyone accepts responsibility for ensuring that others can do the same

Developing her belief in the importance of building community as part of making learning a more holistic process, hooks is passionately unequivocal in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* about the importance of teaching with love. She advocates 'combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust' in order 'to create the best climate for learning.' (hooks, 2003: 134)

'What we cannot imagine', hooks insists, 'cannot come into being' (2003: 194). It is this insistence on the potential of the shared learning space to be a place of radical possibility and hope that makes hooks' ideas resonate so powerfully in the context of cultural education. If we believe that art and culture have the capacity to, 'illuminate our inner lives, enrich our emotional world, teach us compassion and engage us in a dialogue about values' (Arts Council, 2021), it feels crucial that we work to ensure every young person has access to spaces where this can happen.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Building learning spaces where everyone feels their contributions are treated with love, care and respect, as hooks suggests, may mean bringing a little more of ourselves into those spaces.

Consider these approaches:

Speak openly with young people about the challenges and barriers they face, especially if you have faced similar barriers, or by inviting members of their communities to share their own stories and histories of social transformation.

Imagine together how power might be shared more equally by drawing on music, song, film, visual art, literature or other cultural expressions from different contexts and cultures to develop their own creative responses.

Encourage hildren and young people to think collectively about what transformation might look like if the spaces they jointly inhabit – like schools, clubs, or cultural institutions – set out to actively build community by becoming more inclusive and caring places.

Raise children and young people's voices by creating opportunities for them to share their lived experience, their thoughts and ideas for social transformation with those in power. This could be done through discussions, debates and public meetings as well as exhibitions and sharing of their creative responses.

Intersectionality

> Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.'
>
> (Crenshaw, K. 2017)

Practitioners who would be drawn to intersectionality as critical praxis seek knowledge projects that take a stand; such projects would critique social injustices that characterize complex social inequalities, imagine alternatives and/or propose viable action strategies for change.

– (Collins and Bilge, 2020: 56)

Radical thought and the struggle for social transformation rarely occur in isolation. They almost always emerge through a collective response to systems and structures that marginalise, exclude and oppress. What hooks' experiences as a black, working-class woman, brought to her pedagogy, alongside her insistence on the power of care and love, was an insistence on the need to recognise the intersecting and overlapping ways in which oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality and dis/ability impact young people's lives. If community, hope and love are to be at the centre of making change, as her later book *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* suggests, she believes it is crucial that we understand the intersectional nature of discrimination and disadvantage.

Intersectionality as a framework and a tool for action

While the term intersectionality was first used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe the way black women's experience of the overlapping impact of racism and sexism had gone unrecognised in US anti-discrimination law, the concept emerged many years before. As early as 1851, Sojourner Truth posed the question, 'Ain't I a woman?' to insist African American women's unique experiences must be central to the fight for women's rights. It was an argument reinforced later by the Combahee River Collective's determined exposure of the 'interlocking', 'simultaneous' and 'manifold' nature of 'racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression' (1977: 1).

Since then, intersectionality has provided a framework to acknowledge the interlocking nature of oppressions. Its more recent focus on individual identity rather than systemic oppression has, however, led to its strong roots in political activism being neglected. Educator and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins suggests this distancing from its history has meant it has still not realised its power as a critical tool for social change.

Patricia Hill Collins

Echoing many of the principles and values of Freire, Horton and hooks, educationalist and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins highlights how creating space for different knowledges and experiences to be shared can enable young people to imagine alternative realities and resist unjust power structures. For Collins this means drawing on intersectionality to highlight the systemic and structural inequalities many young people face even before they enter places of learning.

She proposes that theory and practice must come together to build strategies for meaningful change, placing her hope in educators and cultural leaders prepared to:

- **Focus on social justice:** addressing the impact unequal power structures have on so many young people's lives
- **Validate different forms of knowledge:** enabling children and young people to understand and recognise the value that their different lived experiences bring to any learning context
- **Embrace self-reflexivity:** continuing to question their own privileges and understand their place within the intersecting oppressions Hill Collins calls the 'matrix of domination' (1990)

Embracing self-reflexivity, as Collins suggests, enables us to recognise the roles we may unknowingly play in perpetuating unjust power structures. By explaining the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal levels at which power operates, the matrix of domination offers us an

important critical tool to map the complex ways in which class, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability and geographical location intersect to marginalise or exclude. It also offers us a means of countering the impact these different levels of exclusion or marginalisation have on the lives of the individual young people we work with. Thinking intersectionally then becomes an integral part of what Collins calls taking a stand: being prepared to address overlapping systems of power by ensuring all young people have equal access to the social advantages and benefits that an education rich in arts and cultural experiences offers.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

Adopting an intersectional approach is crucial to enabling ourselves as educators and cultural leaders to understand our own biases and prejudices, as well as those of the institutions we work with. It also strengthens our capacity to question and challenge these. Consider these approaches:

Commit to being more self-reflexive at a personal level and encouraging it within the teams you work with. You can do this by asking yourself and those you work with, to take a moment after any meeting or shared event to recognise what you've noticed and what you've learned. For example, think about how far everyone was able to contribute to the discussion and whether there were invisible barriers or biases that might have held you or other people back. Then consider what you as an individual or a team might try to do differently another time.

Challenge discrimination and bias whenever you see it, especially in learning spaces, and being prepared to question diversity initiatives that feel little more than tokenistic or that are, perhaps unwittingly, reinforcing existing oppressions and inequalities.

Ensure cultural education programmes reflect the diverse and complex experiences of the young people we work with, including thinking carefully about the artists we engage to work with them, the communities we connect to, the narratives that are shared, and the artistic and cultural expressions we promote.

Encourage young people's own understanding of intersectionality by inviting them to consider their own identity through engaging with the work of artists from a range of backgrounds who focus on self through portrait, collage, mapping, video, clothing, and multi-media – especially those who challenge existing stereotypes through their work.

Empower them to create work that explores their own cultural identity in whatever form they choose –from visual or verbal expression to sound, music, and movement – inspiring them to look at the different groups and communities to which they belong.

Create space for them to discuss what they have learned about themselves and others through this experience, and to consider how they might share these reflections within or outside their own groups and communities.

Cultural Democracy and Cultural Capital

> Culture is Ordinary: and that is where we must begin’
>
> (Williams. R. 1989)

Thinking more consciously about the ways in which culture can exclude and marginalise inevitably leads us to the notion of cultural democracy. This means ensuring power is shared more fairly and that everyone has the possibility to enjoy, own, critique, make, produce and share the art they choose. Importantly, Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu have drawn on their working-class backgrounds and experiences of exclusion to combat the systems and structures that reinforce inequity by placing certain 'high' forms of arts and culture above others.

Raymond Williams

Opening with the contention that culture is 'ordinary', Williams argues – in a similar way to Dewey – that art and culture should never be considered as separate but as something rooted in the beliefs, practices and experiences of ordinary people leading everyday lives and making meaning of those lives. Culture cannot and should not, Williams goes on to insist, ever be something that belongs to a privileged elite who deign to share it with the rest of us. Yet so many cultural policies, supposedly aimed at widening participation and access, have continued to begin with that premise. Embodied in concepts such as Arts Council England's Great Art and Culture for Everyone (2013) is the suggestion that greater equality only comes about through the democratisation, or sharing of access, to those elite or 'high' cultural forms found in our traditional concert halls, opera houses, galleries or museums.

Advocating instead for what we have come to know as cultural democracy, Williams insists everyone should have the opportunity to take part in the creation of meaning through their own forms of art and cultural expression, which they engage with on their own terms. Rejecting the need for that to be mediated by existing elites or hierarchies, he argues for systemic and structural change that begins from the ground-up rather than being top-down, and which acknowledges the contribution everyone can make to creating our shared cultural landscape.

This inversion of current power structures has radical implications. If we accept Williams' definition of culture as ordinary and, as such, a basic right to which everyone has equal access, it follows that resources should be shared equally. This requires those in leadership roles in cultural institutions and policy making to be prepared to let go of some of that power and work toward more inclusive and open forms of decision-making. Inviting diverse communities, including young people, to be part of the co-creating, curating and commissioning of work alongside taking on more active roles within governance, is central to this transformation.

Pierre Bourdieu

Recognising that greater democracy and equality is unlikely to come about while power and privilege remains in the hands of certain social classes, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu began to identify what he calls cultural capital as one of the main ways in which dominance is preserved and maintained. Accepting that economic capital or assets are clearly important in maintaining the social order, Bourdieu asserted that cultural capital plays an equally crucial, albeit more subtle, role. Closely linked as it is to family background and the networks and connections this so often affords, it offers those who possess it access to and familiarity with those high forms of culture, such as opera, classical music, ballet, museums, galleries, theatres and literature

that Bourdieu labels as legitimate.

He divides cultural capital into three states, which he identifies as:

- **Objective:** the possession of objects, such as books or art
- **Embodied:** the language and mannerisms that come from this
- **Institutionalised:** the educational and social advantages these habits offer

The ability to be comfortable in discussing art and culture with others often gives young people the confidence to succeed within our current educational systems and future employment. Cultural capital then becomes one of the main drivers of inequality in a system where such knowledge is valued above other forms of experience.

Ofsted has recently proposed challenging this inequity by offering all young people the possibility to develop their cultural capital by introducing them to an existing canon of literature and other art forms that exemplify 'the best that has been thought and said' (2019: 43). In ignoring Bourdieu's insistence that cultural capital is almost always intertwined with economic privilege, this approach runs the risk of reinforcing existing inequities.

By ensuring all young people have access to rich and diverse forms of cultural expression and encouraging them to question who gets to make work, where and how it is shared and who is able to interpret it or give it value, cultural education has the possibility to confront imbalances of power and interrogate whose cultural capital has worth.

Creating Spaces of Possibility

When planning cultural education sessions to develop young people's sense of their own cultural capital, consider these approaches:

Discover more about the diverse forms of cultural expression that young people, their families and communities already engage in. Uplift the cultural capital this offers them by inviting artists and other makers who represent those communities to share their work and creative practices.

Share examples of artists, poets and writers from diverse backgrounds who use their own traditions, heritage and languages within the contemporary work they make. Encourage young people to experiment with similar approaches in creating their own work.

Ensure they have opportunities to visit a wide range of cultural venues, including those smaller more local spaces that may be more reflective of their own history, identity and cultural backgrounds as well as accessing more traditional institutions.

Promote reflection and discussion as part of young people's creative processes and as part of their response to what they see in cultural venues, encouraging them to feel confident to ask questions, pose problems and draw on their own knowledge and experience to articulate their views.

Invest in quality resources for all young people, including exploring what might be shared between educational establishments, cultural institutions and libraries to ensure that every young person has access to the 'best' in making, curating and sharing their own work.

Looking back to move forward

In times of political turbulence and growing economic, climate and humanitarian crises such as those we are living through, it can be difficult to be certain where we might uncover those 'pockets of hope' that Freire speaks about. When Freire asked Myles Horton how he set up a folk school that became so central to the civil rights movement in the US, Horton told him it was simply about being there, opening up the space and understanding that those whom the system oppresses are also the ones who have the deep knowledge needed for social transformation.

The mythical bird that often depicts Sankofa is portrayed as looking over its back while holding an egg in its beak. For the Akan people of Ghana who created this concept, it symbolises the need to sometimes look back and see what we can learn from the lessons and struggles of the past to inform our future actions. It has also become a powerful symbol of reconnecting with cultural heritage and reclaiming cultural identity as part of that growth. Each of the educational philosophers and thinkers presented here have sought to engage with different historical struggles for social transformation through bringing theory and practice together to tackle inequity and injustice. While we acknowledge that many of these struggles continue, we hope – like the egg that offers insights and learning from the past – that their ideas will offer wisdom and inspiration that we can build on to face current challenges.

In creating spaces where questioning and critical thinking are fostered, where trust, respect and care are centred and young people feel confident to draw on their own experience and imagination to define the kind of world they would like to live in, cultural education can begin to offer them pockets of hope. By supporting them in understanding how they can be part of building that fairer, juster world, it can also turn spaces of learning into the locations of possibility bell hooks insists they can be.

Bibliography

Arts Council England. (2013). *Great Art and Culture for Everyone.* (2nd ed.) Available at: **‹www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/ files/download-file/Great_art_and_culture_for_everyone.pdf ›.**

A New Direction. (2023). *The Arts in Schools: Foundations for the Future.* Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Available at: **‹www.anewdirection.org.uk/the-arts-in-schools›.**

Bourdieu, P. (1986). 'The Forms of Capital' in J. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research of the Sociology of Education*, (1st ed.). Westport: Greenwood. 241 – 258.

Collins, P. H. (1990). Black feminist thought in the matrix of domination. In P. H. Collins (Ed.), *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and Politics of Empowerment* (221–238). Unwin Hyman.

Collins, P. H. and Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Combahee River Collective. (2007). A Black Feminist Statement. *In The Essential Feminist Reader*, E. B. Freedman (ed.). New York: Modern Library. 325–330.

Crenshaw, K. (2017). On *Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. New York: The New Press.

Dewey, J. (1897). My pedagogic creed, *The School Journal,* LIV (3). 77-80.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we Think.* Available at: **‹https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/37423›**

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Seabury Press.

Sutton Trust (2024) *A Class Act*. Available at: **‹www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A-Class-Act-1.pdf›**

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.* London: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope.* New York and London: Routledge.

Lucas, B. and Spencer, E. (2017). *Teaching creative thinking: Developing learners who generate ideas and can think critically.* Crown House Publishing.

OFSTED (2019). *School Inspection Handbook.* Manchester: The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. **‹www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif/school-inspection-handbook-for-september-2023›** [Accessed 6 January 2025]

Simon, B. (1985). Why no pedagogy in England? In B. Simon (Ed.), *Does education matter?* (pp. 77-105). Lawrence & Wishart.

UNESCO. (2024). *Framework for Culture and Arts Education.* Available at: **‹www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/02/WCCAE_UNESCO%20Framework_EN_0.pdf›**

Williams, R. (1989). 'Culture is Ordinary'. In Gable, R. (ed.) *Resources of Hope: culture, democracy, socialism*. London: Verso. 3-14.

Speaking the Same Language:

Defining Cultural Education Leadership

by Dr David Parker

Speaking the Same Language: Defining Cultural Education Leadership

by Dr David Parker

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.

About the Authors and Contributors

Authors
Listed in order of works

Dr David Parker

David currently works as a freelance consultant specialising in the design and evaluation of arts-based and creativity focused education initiatives. His clients include the Southbank Centre, the Saturday Club Trust, the British Council, Tate Modern, Arts Council England, the Imperial War Museum, Arts Council Wales and the British Film Institute.

Prior to this, David was Director of Research at Creative and Cultural Skills from 2012 – 2015. He mapped future skills needs of the creative and cultural industries. From 2004 – 2012 David was Director of Research for the Creative Partnerships Programme, the UK government's flagship creative learning investment. This work is summarised in his book Creative Partnerships in Practice (Bloomsbury, 2013).

Previously, David was a researcher at the British Film Institute from 1999 – 2004 where he took a particular interest in the uses of moving image media in the teaching and learning of literacy.

John Riches

John began working as a youth arts worker in east London in the early 1990s, and arrived at a core conviction early on – that the most vital, rich and authentic creative outcomes emerge from within communities, rather than within traditional cultural institutions and spaces. He subsequently took that practice to English National Opera and the National Theatre/Art of Regeneration, before turning freelance over 20 years ago.

Since then, with a particular interest in 'non-mainstream' routes to both creative practice and qualifications, he has held numerous roles for Trinity College/Arts Award, A New Direction – as a fundraiser, project manager, editor and adviser – and many others. In addition to his current freelance roles, John is the part-time Director of QueenSpark Books in Brighton.

Dr Chrissie Tiller

Chrissie is a writer, thinker, practitioner and educator whose work sits at the intersection between critical pedagogy, political activism and collaborative and social art practice. This includes initiating and leading practice-based artist educations across the EU, Nordic countries, Central and Eastern Europe, Palestine, Turkey, Uganda and Japan and acting as advisor on arts and social change for the EU Commission, British Council, Council of Europe, European Cultural Foundation and the Goethe-Institut. From 2004 -2014 she initiated and then led the MA in Participatory and Community Arts at Goldsmiths, London University.

Following a 3-year Fellowship at the Technological University, Dublin to explore her practice and writing through the lens of the intersecting oppressions of gender and social class, she was recently awarded her Doctorate. Chrissie currently acts as critical friend to a number of arts organisations, including Heart of Glass, Liverpool, TekstLab, Oslo and The Agency, London.

Contributors

The ten leaders who took part in Voices Of Change: A Call To Transform Cultural Education

Catherine Ritman-Smith

For over 20 years, Catherine has led creative learning programmes in a variety of cultural settings including the Design Museum and Somerset House. She is currently Head of Learning and Engagement at Young V&A in Bethnal Green.

Jamie Hale

After building a freelance consultancy and performance career since 2017, in 2021 Jamie Hale also founded CRIPtic Arts, now one of the UK's most exciting disabled-led artistic and cultural organisations, carrying out research, developing creatives, and staging performance.

Liza Vallance

Liza is a creative producer, evaluator, and consultant with over 20 years' experience in the arts and heritage sectors. She is passionate about using creativity to empower communities, amplify underrepresented voices, and make the case for investment in arts and culture as a driver of social change.

Nuna Sandy

As Artistic Director of Company Three, Nuna has directed *This Cit* at the Park Theatre and two sold out runs of *#BlackIs…* at the Pleasance and New Diorama Theatres. Prior to joining Company Three, Nuna was a member of the Olivier award-winning company Boy Blue Entertainment, ZooNation: The Kate Prince Company, and one of the founding members of the dance group Plague. She worked as a teacher, choreographer, movement director and Facilitator for companies including Lyric Hammersmith and London Studio Centre. Nuna has also choreographed performances at Sadlers Wells, Barbican Centre and The Place.

Paul Crook

Paul is Head of Communities & Learning at South London Gallery (SLG), where he leads innovative programmes with schools, families, young people, and local residents. Previously, as Young People's Programme Manager, he worked with SLG's youth collective, the Art Assassins, and led *The Signs Project* with residents of Sceaux Gardens housing estate. He has also held the role of Curator: Youth and Community Programmes at Whitechapel Gallery. Trained as an artist, Paul began his career working in a youth centre before moving into gallery learning.

Rachel Bagshaw

Rachel is a theatre director with over 20 years' experience encompassing education, participatory, new work and classical texts across the UK and internationally. She has been Co-CEO and Artistic Director at the Unicorn Theatre since 2023. She was previously Associate Director there from 2018 to 2023, and an Associate at the National Theatre from 2022 to 2024.

Alt Text: Rachel Bagshaw, Artistic Director of the Unicorn Theatre, smiles in her wheelchair in the foyer. She is a white woman with blonde hair and is wearing a black dress.

Image Description: Rachel Bagshaw, Artistic Director and Co-CEO of the Unicorn Theatre sits smiling in the theatre's foyer. Rachel is a white woman in her late '30s, with shoulder length blonde hair. She sits in her wheelchair and wears a black dress with buttons. Behind her is the Box Office and Tuck Shop with shelves.

Tina Ramdeen

Tina is the Associate Director of Young People at the Roundhouse. She is passionate about providing equitable access to high-quality creative opportunities, creating progression pathways that diversify the creative industries, and empowering young people to use creativity to drive social change. Tina has worked extensively in the youth and education sectors and advises cultural organisations on policy and practice for engaging young people.

Tony Cealy

Tony is a creative practitioner and cultural producer who uses the arts to create dialogue about social, economic, and political issues. He works in partnership with governments, advocacy organisations, and community groups to co-create programmes, projects and events that support people to navigate uncertainty and complexity, and to drive policy change through participatory processes that are joyful, creative and accessible. Tony co-designs a range of community led workshops, performances, projects and programmes focused on empowerment and social change. **www.tonycealy.com**

Shereen Jasmin Phillips

is an award-winning multidisciplinary creative and senior leader of Vincentian heritage. She is currently Founder and Creative Director of Applied Scripted Arc, which was founded to offer independent script consultancy and writing development programmes, alongside creative engagement projects for the wider community. She recently served as a literary and artistic adviser on To Sir, With Love – A New Musical, which was performed in concert in November 2025 at the Gillian Lynne Theatre in London. Previously, Shereen was the Creative Director of Taking Part, the Young Vic's Creative Engagement Department, which she led from 2019 – 2025, delivering free programmes for thousands of young people and adults in Lambeth and Southwark each year.

Steve Moffitt

has worked as part of the cultural education sector for 40 years and is a passionate advocate for high quality practise. Steve has been CEO of A New Direction since 2008. In previous roles, Steve led on delivery of the Creative Partnerships programme in London, was Head of ENO Baylis at English National Opera, Artistic Director and Associate Director of Theatre Venture, and a drama practitioner with Community Arts Workshop. Steve was awarded an MBE for services to Arts and Culture in the 2024 New Years Honours list.

Further Reading & Resources

UK Cultural Policy, 1980–2020s Timeline and analysis

by John Riches

*The following timeline – and its companion piece, '**The Policy, The Impact And The Mismatch**'– represent a snapshot of the political climate from the past 40 years. While creative and cultural education is now an established field, it is still a relatively new concept. This timeline tracks its evolution and explores the key influences that have shaped its development, including their impact on the careers of the ten leaders who have contributed to this work.*

At the time of publishing, we are just over halfway through the 2020s and change is happening at what seems like a record pace. Rather than rendering this analysis obsolete, it serves to illustrate the increasing challenges leaders face in navigating a political climate driven by short-term decision-making.

The 1980s: Thatcherism, Marketisation & Resistance

- **Political Context:** Thatcherism, neoliberalism, a focus on individual agency as opposed to collectivisation.
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **Education Reform Act (1988):** Introduced the National Curriculum, standardised testing (SATs), and league tables, shifting control from local authorities to central government and parents.
  - **National Curriculum (from 1989):** Initially included Art and Music as foundation subjects, though the curriculum's prescriptive nature was criticised for limiting creative teaching.
  - **Introduction of Local Management of Schools:** Schools became responsible for their own budgets, forcing hard choices that often sidelined arts provision.
- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **Arts Council England (ACE)** budget cuts; increased pressure to demonstrate economic value and attract private sponsorship.
  - **Section 28 (1988):** Prohibited the 'promotion of homosexuality' by local authorities, creating a chilling effect for LGBTQ+ cultural discourse in schools and arts organisations.
  - **Cultural Response:** Proliferation of community arts movements, independent venues, and DIY culture in opposition to the mainstream. Groups and collectives such as the Black Arts Movement gained momentum, creating space for marginalised voices.

The 1990s: 'Cool Britannia', Social Inclusion & the Creative Industries

- **Political Context:** John Major Conservative government, then New Labour (1997), 'Third Way' politics, 'Cool Britannia', social inclusion agenda.
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **National Lottery (1994):** Created new funding

streams for the arts (e.g., NESTA) but also began a shift towards project-based, competitive funding.

- **Dearing Review (1994):** Slashed per-student funding for universities, beginning the marketisation of Higher Education.
- **New Labour government elected (1997):** Embraced the arts as tools for social inclusion and economic growth.
- **Creative Industries Mapping Document (DCMS, 1998):** Formally defined the 'creative industries' and placed their economic value at the heart of government policy.

- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **NESTA (1998):** Established with a National Lottery endowment to support innovation across science, tech, and the arts, including a proactive learning programme.
  - **All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture & Education (NACCCE Report, 1999):** Landmark report arguing for creativity as a central purpose of education for all young people, directly influencing future policy.
  - **Sure Start (1998):** Incorporated creative play in early years interventions.

The 2000s: Accountability, Partnership & Fragmentation

- **Political Context:** New Labour entrenchment, with a focus on targets, public service reform, and accountability.
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **Every Child Matters (2003):** Framework for holistic child development, which cultural organisations were encouraged to support.
  - **Tuition Fees Introduced (1998, raised 2004 & 2006):** Market logic firmly embedded in Higher Education.
- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **Creative Partnerships (2002-2011):** England's flagship

creative learning programme, placing artists in schools in areas of need. Developed the role of the 'Creative Agent' as a broker between education and cultural organisations.

- **Find Your Talent (2008-2010):** Pilot programme for a universal cultural offer for children.
- **Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE) (2008):** Charity established to deliver Creative Partnerships and export its model internationally.
- **The 'McMaster Review' (2008):** *Supporting Excellence in the Arts* shifted ACE's focus from "social inclusion" back towards "artistic excellence," creating tension and confusion in the sector.

The 2010s: Austerity, Decline & Re-evaluation

- **Political Context:** Coalition government (2010), then Conservative, era of austerity, massive public spending cuts.
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **Austerity Budgets (2010 onwards):** Drastic cuts to local authority budgets, leading to the decimation of youth services and local arts provision.
  - **English Baccalaureate (EBacc) (2010):** School performance measure that excluded the arts, leading to a dramatic decline in GCSE and A-Level entries in creative subjects.
  - **National Curriculum Review (2014):** Further marginalised arts subjects.
- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **ACE's National Portfolio:** Became an even more critical lifeline for organisations, but also a source of strain due to increased pressure to deliver outcomes with less money.
  - **The Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2019):** Major report (ACE/ Durham University) making

an evidence-based case for creativity in education as a matter of social justice and economic necessity.

- **The 'Valued & Visible' campaign:** Led by the Cultural Learning Alliance, it was a sector-wide response to highlight the impact of the EBacc on creativity in education.

The 2020s: Pandemic, Crisis & Strategic Renewal

- **Political Context:** COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, cost-of-living crisis, increased focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).
- **Policy & Ideology:**
  - **Cultural Recovery Fund (2020-2021):** Government lifeline to prevent sector collapse during COVID-19.
  - **ACE's Let's Create Strategy (2020-2030):** Ten-year strategy focusing on 'Creative People', 'Cultural Communities', and a 'Creative & Cultural Country' – an attempt to support a synthesis of artistic quality and inclusivity.
  - **Removing the EBacc (2025)** – To benefit the study of arts and creative subjects. Arts organisations and trade bodies lobbied to end the EBacc attainment measure, which places a premium on the study of traditionally academic subjects including English, Maths, a language, and a science.
  - **Curriculum and Assessment Review (2024 – 2025)** The Government commissioned Professor Becky Francis CBE to convene and chair a panel of experts to conduct a review of the curriculum and assessment system in England, including qualification pathways, across the primary, secondary and 16-19 phases.

- **Funding & Sector Response:**
  - **Creativity Collaboratives (2021-2026):** A direct recommendation of the Durham Commission, testing models for teaching for creativity in schools across England.
  - **Ongoing Challenges:** The legacy of austerity and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis; the reform of crucial support systems like Access to Work; attacks on EDI – whilst presently more prevalent in the US than the UK, an emboldened right-wing will, in time, be attacking one of the core tenets – equity of access – of the Cultural Sector.

Analysis: The Policy, the Impact, and the Mismatch

by John Riches

It bears emphasising that the experiences of the ten leaders outlined in the **companion piece** and the sector in general (myself included) have often been the result of, and in response to, a policy environment that, for decades, has created instability rather than support. These barriers were not random misfortunes – they were the direct outcomes of shifting political policies and ideologies. As the timeline above indicates, cultural education leaders have needed to develop adaptive survival strategies to navigate the resulting challenges – either in pragmatic defiance, or in pioneering practice; sometimes both.

Here are a few examples detailing how this has played out:

The Market-Driven 80s/90s: Some of the leaders interviewed began their work in the shadow of the Education Reform Act (1988), which introduced an element of market competition into schools. The ERA fundamentally changed the purpose and management of schools by introducing the National Curriculum. This standardised what knowledge was 'valued' and, inevitably, narrowed the focus onto core, examinable subjects. Local Management of Schools, forced schools to manage their own budgets, making them run like small businesses, while League Tables created a public ranking system based on exam results, incentivising schools to prioritise resources towards subjects that would boost their position.

The direct consequence of this market logic was that non-core subjects like drama, art, and music were increasingly viewed as dispensable frills. They were the first to be cut when budgets were tight, as they were seen as less likely to contribute to a school's league table position. It also led to a loss of specialist art teachers, further diminishing the quality and availability of creative experiences for young people.

With arts provision receding inside schools, creatives across the country set up shop outside of them. Their work on housing estates, in youth clubs, and in community centres wasn't just an alternative; it was often the only access point to creative activity for entire communities of young people.

The Social Inclusion Era (New Labour): The policy focus on the Creative Industries and programmes like Creative Partnerships spawned a new language of 'social inclusion' and access. Cultural education leaders learned to frame their work within this agenda, securing funding by demonstrating how they reached marginalised communities. This era opened doors but also began the shift towards project-based, outcome-driven funding that led to increased administrative burdens.

The Austerity Shock (Post-2010): The austerity programme nearly eliminated youth services in many areas. It drastically cut local authority funding, and led to the widespread collapse of arts organisations and the infrastructure they relied upon. The human (and, ultimately, sectoral) cost of this policy was clear from one leader's recounted experience: returning from maternity leave in 2010, they found that their entire professional network had 'disappeared'. This was a generational loss of opportunity, a political approach that permanently altered career trajectories, and in short time erased hard-built infrastructure.

Government initiatives, even well-intentioned ones, often fail due to a clumsy mismatch with reality. The Access to Work Scheme is a prime example of this. It is a vital lifeline, but its inflexibility around travel and freelance work frequently makes it a problematic barrier. A policy designed to enable disabled workers often ends up adding another layer of bureaucratic administration to navigate.

Subsequent to the changes wrought by the ERA, we can link the further decline in art teachers to the increase in tuition fees (2004 and 2006) and the introduction of the EBacc in 2010 (which was later scrapped in late 2025). These policies – respectively, further embedding

market logic into education, and privileging STEM subjects – systematically strangled the talent pipeline that the sector depends on, forcing leaders to combat the downstream effects of upstream decisions.

When the policy goal shifted from 'social inclusion' back to 'artistic excellence' following the McMaster Review (2008), leaders had to pivot again – a youth theatre project was no longer necessarily just about building confidence and self-esteem, it was about 'nurturing new artistic talent' and 'developing bold new work'. A community archive project was now about 'ambitious creative exploration of heritage'. Cultural education leaders constantly have to be aware, and ahead, of the ideological game they are forced to play, as illustrated by one leader's response to another strategic change, over a decade later:

"A key moment was when the Arts Council's 'Let's Create' strategy dropped. Suddenly, my phone didn't stop ringing. Organisations that had been happy with their traditional audiences realised they had to widen access and do meaningful participatory work to keep their funding. It finally created space for the kind of disruptive, community-focused practice I'd been doing for years, giving it a bit of mainstream coverage." **– Liza Vallance**

This constant dance – decoding the latest priority, mitigating the impact of devastating cuts, and spending creative energy on administrative survival – has been a reality of leadership for these leaders. It is an indicator of a system that has often failed to provide a stable framework to work within, requiring them to become expert navigators of its failures instead.

Future leaders should not, however, see in this narrative a blueprint for how things must be. Rather, the foreknowledge of the type of pressures, change and challenges that they may face provides a context within which they will develop their own responses, and continue to build a more equitable sector.

Tips for Leaders: What Does This Mean for You?

Can you identify any policy barriers that are stopping you from achieving your, or your organisation's, aims?

What actions can you take to raise awareness or help the sector overcome these barriers:

- Work with other organisations to identify work-arounds or successes you've had in the face of these challenges
- Draft a letter or statement aimed at local representatives highlighting how these policies are negatively impacting the work achieved in communities.

Are there any policies that can benefit your organisation?

- Attend a local government surgery or Q&A session to learn more about policy changes. There may be opportunities (grants, funding pots, programmes, etc) that can support the work you organisation is already doing – or new areas of focus adjacent to your work where your skillset can help the government to meet their goals.

Recommended Reading

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

A foundational account of education as a dialogic, emancipatory practice, informing contemporary thinking on participation, voice and power.

https://files.libcom.org/files/Paulo%20Freire,%20Myra%20Bergman%20Ramos,%20Donaldo%20Macedo%20-%20Pedagogy%20of%20the%20Oppressed,%2030th%20Anniversary%20Edition%20(2000,%20Bloomsbury%20Academic).pdf

Freire's seminal work reframes education as a dialogic process rooted in critical consciousness, agency and shared inquiry. He challenges hierarchical models of knowledge transmission, arguing instead for learning as a practice of freedom shaped through participation and reflection. For cultural education leaders, the book provides a foundational ethical framework for thinking about voice, power and participation, particularly in work with marginalised communities.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.* New York: Routledge.

Explores learning as a site of cultural, political and personal transformation, with relevance beyond formal education settings.

www.routledge.com/Teaching-to-Transgress/hooks/p/book/9780415908085

Hooks explores education as a site of cultural, political and personal transformation, foregrounding the role of identity, care and lived experience in learning. She advocates for engaged pedagogy that values mutual learning and challenges dominant power structures. The book is especially relevant for cultural education leadership in its emphasis on inclusive practice, relational authority and the moral responsibilities of those who shape learning environments.

Holden, J. (2006). *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy.* London: Demos.

A landmark text for cultural leaders, reframing culture in terms of intrinsic, instrumental and institutional value.

https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/Culturalvalueweb.pdf

Holden's influential analysis critiques narrow instrumental approaches to culture and introduces a three-part framework of intrinsic, instrumental and institutional value. He argues that cultural organisations must articulate their public purpose more clearly to sustain legitimacy and trust. For cultural education leaders, this text remains central to understanding how cultural value is constructed, communicated and defended within public systems.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A. and Linsky, M. (2009). *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership.* Boston: Harvard Business Press.

Positions leadership as enabling adaptive work in complex systems rather than exercising authority or control.

www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/practice-adaptive-leadership-tools-and-tactics-changing-your-organization-and-world

This book distinguishes between technical problems and adaptive challenges, emphasising leadership as the work of mobilising people to learn, change and navigate uncertainty together. Heifetz and colleagues focus on how leaders can hold tension, protect experimentation and resist the pull toward false certainty. The text is particularly useful for cultural education leaders operating in complex, under-resourced and politically contested environments.

Robinson, K. and Aronica, L. (2015). *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education.* London: Penguin.

A critique of standardisation and a call for creativity as a systemic capacity, resonating across education and cultural sectors.

www.penguin.co.uk/books/259286/creative-schools-by-aronica-ken-robinson-and-lou/9780141978574

Robinson and Aronica critique standardised education systems and make the case for creativity as a core human capacity rather than a marginal add-on. Through international examples, they argue for systemic change driven by purpose, personalisation and cultural relevance. For cultural education leadership, the book provides a widely accessible argument for embedding creative learning within mainstream education reform if that is a stream of activity they wish to explore.

Durham Commission on Creativity and Education (2019). *Creativity and Education.* London: Arts Council England.

A UK policy synthesis linking creativity to education reform, economic resilience and social mobility.

www.artscouncil.org.uk/durham-commission-creativity-and-education

This report brings together evidence from education, business and culture to argue that creativity is a core capability for economic resilience, social mobility and lifelong learning. It positions creativity not as an enrichment activity, but as a systemic requirement for education reform, calling for curriculum, assessment and workforce development to better support creative capacities. For cultural education leaders, the report provides a strong policy mandate for partnership working between schools and cultural organisations, and for advocating creativity as a public good.

OECD (2019). *OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030: Conceptual Learning Framework.* Paris: OECD Publishing.

Frames creativity, agency and co-creation as core outcomes for education systems and civic life.

www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/

The framework sets out a future-oriented vision of education focused on learner agency, co-creation and the capacity to navigate uncertainty. It emphasises the role of creativity, critical thinking and collaboration in enabling individuals to contribute to social and civic life. For cultural education leadership, the framework offers an internationally recognised language for aligning cultural learning with broader system goals and for positioning cultural education as central, rather than peripheral, to future skills agendas.

Centre for Cultural Value (2020). *Measuring the Value of Culture: A Report to DCMS.* Leeds: Centre for Cultural Value.

Provides a robust framework for understanding cultural value, participation and evidence in policy and leadership contexts.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/measuring-the-value-of-culture-a-report-to-the-department-for-culture-media-and-sport

This report responds to longstanding challenges around evidencing the value of culture by proposing a plural, context-sensitive approach to evaluation. It argues against single-metric measures and instead emphasises participation, lived experience and public value. For cultural education leaders, the report provides a critical foundation for developing proportionate, learning-led evaluation practices that respect cultural complexity while meeting policy and accountability requirements.

Glossary of Terms

Critical Pedagogy – an approach to teaching and learning that seeks to confront and transform social injustice by empowering students to understand the systems and structures that oppress them and recognise how they might contribute to a fairer and juster world.

Cultural Capital – an explanation of the ways in which power and domination are transferred and maintained within a society, through ensuring ownership and access to cultural objects, familiarity with the languages and habits that accompany this, and the confidence and networks this bestows on those who possess it.

Cultural Democracy – the principle that everyone should have the possibility to decide what they mean by culture and what forms of arts and culture have meaning and value, as well as determining where it takes place, who makes it, who experiences it and who has access to the means of cultural production.

Engaged Pedagogy – a holistic approach to teaching and learning that creates space for students to contribute their own experiences and knowledge from outside the classroom so that learning becomes a shared process.

Hegemony – the domination of the social or political values and ideas of one powerful group over others so that they become accepted.

Intersectionality – the understanding and acceptance of the complex and cumulative ways in which different forms of oppression including gender, race, age, class, sexual identity, religion, dis/ability, overlap and often amplify each other.

Matrix of Domination – a framework for understanding the ways in which different oppressions and domains of power reflect the particularities of a given time and place, enabling us to recognise that individuals or groups can experience both privilege and disadvantage in different contexts.

Sankofa – a Ghanaian word to explain the concept of learning and drawing on knowledge from past struggles to move forward and inform future actions

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:
www.anewdirection.org.uk/research/culturalsectorleadership

@anewdirectionldn
@anewdirection_ldn
@anewdirectionlondon
a-new-direction-london
www.anewdirection.org.uk

A NEW DIRECTION
We create **opportunity**

Published by A New Direction May 2026
Design by **thirdperson**