



CULTURAL CAPITAL

THE FREEDOM TO BE YOURSELF

A RESPONSE TO AND'S CULTURAL CAPITAL RESEARCH

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If you are passionate about equity of access to the best arts and culture for all young people across London, regardless of background or economic circumstances, then have a look at A New Direction's (AND) Cultural Capital research.

Published this month, the research sheds more light on the extent to which wealth inequality plays a part in preventing young people from being able to take part in arts and culture. It highlights that, 'young people from low income backgrounds take part less in every category of arts and culture than their peers, and in particular have less engagement with regular clubs or extra-curricular activity.'

The research helpfully identifies some of the social, physical and economic barriers that lead young people to choose not to take up opportunities. Many of the barriers are likely to be regularly considered by those developing arts and cultural projects and activities, such as cost, transport and lack of the right equipment. However, it is the psychological barriers highlighted by the research that I find most revealing. One of the explanations as to why young

people didn't engage in cultural activities included, 'It is not part of who I am.' I think that part of this answer lies in the fact that young people, like all of us, have a strong sense of identity and we may need to get to know them better. Spending time with friends and feeling welcome are also given as key motivators - things that help us all feel comfortable, valued and not judged by others.

It strikes me that every art gallery, theatre, library, school community or cultural organisation in the capital with a remit to be open to all, could helpfully ask itself, 'Who are the young people in our area that are not engaging with us?' and 'Why does it matter to us?'

The start of the journey for any organisation that describes themselves as 'open to all', needs to be whether you think inclusion is possible, followed by a commitment to understanding and working with young people to remove barriers to participation for each as valued, unique individuals.

I have learnt from many years of being with young people through experiences as audience member, maker and leader, that you need to start with a willingness to create an inclusive environment that encourages the development of self-esteem and meets the needs of young people to be valued, safe and to have a sense of belonging. In the words of one young participant on Arvon's (M)Other Tongues programme, a place where, 'you can think about yourself, you could be yourself, truly yourself.'

In my experience, if young people can see that you value their cultural identity and heritage and are committed to quality and depth of engagement in participation then they will trust the process. Trust comes from getting to know young people, and often relies on links with local partners including schools, arts, youth and community and support organisations that know and are trusted by young people themselves. It is not enough to create an offer and get the word out, it is about the quality of the invitation and whether young people feel that they can trust you, particularly if you are working with them to introduce them to something new.

The Cultural Capital research centers on 13-19 year olds. AND also highlights Muschamp et al's study that suggested primary children from poorer backgrounds tend to label themselves as people who 'do' or 'do not' take part, and once this mind-set is fixed it is hard to shift. There is certainly a need to develop targeted provision for 13-19 years olds, but it is also clear that that we need to work together across the city to target arts provision to children under 11. We need to have a citywide conversation about both universal and targeted offers. In developing targeted interventions, one focus might be on transition from primary to secondary to help prevent negative views of children from poorer background becoming entrenched.

I look forward to engaging with AND's inquiry and working with partners across sectors to develop our targeted offer to those young people who may face challenges in their lives or have limited access to the arts.



ABOUT BECKY SWAIN

Becky is Head of Learning and Participation at Arvon. The Arvon Foundation runs an annual programme of residential creative writing course and retreats for schools, groups and individuals at four rural writers' houses in the UK. Formerly Learning Manager for Creativity, Culture and Education (2010 - 2011) and Learning Manager for Creative Partnerships (2004 - 2009). She was Education Office for UCL, Bloomsbury Theatre and a Secondary School English teacher in Newcastle (1995 – 2001). Becky is a Clore Fellow (2009).

WE ARE INVITING COMMENTS FROM PARENTS, YOUNG PEOPLE, CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS, ACADEMICS, THOSE WORKING IN EDUCATION ETC. WHICH HELP CONTRIBUTE IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, FOR CAMPAIGNS AND ACTION THAT CAN HELP BUILD MORE EQUAL ACCESS TO THE ARTS AND CULTURE FOR ALL CHILDREN YOUNG PEOPLE IN LONDON.

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