# Caring for Cultural Freedom

### AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE'S CULTURAL LEARNING

Report by Dr. Nick Wilson and Dr. Jonathan Gross at King's College London





## Key ideas and definitions

## **Cultural ecology**

Emphasis on understanding interdependency, co-development, complexity and change inherent in the cultural sector as opposed to viewing culture as a set of 'offers' or 'provision'.

## Cultural capability

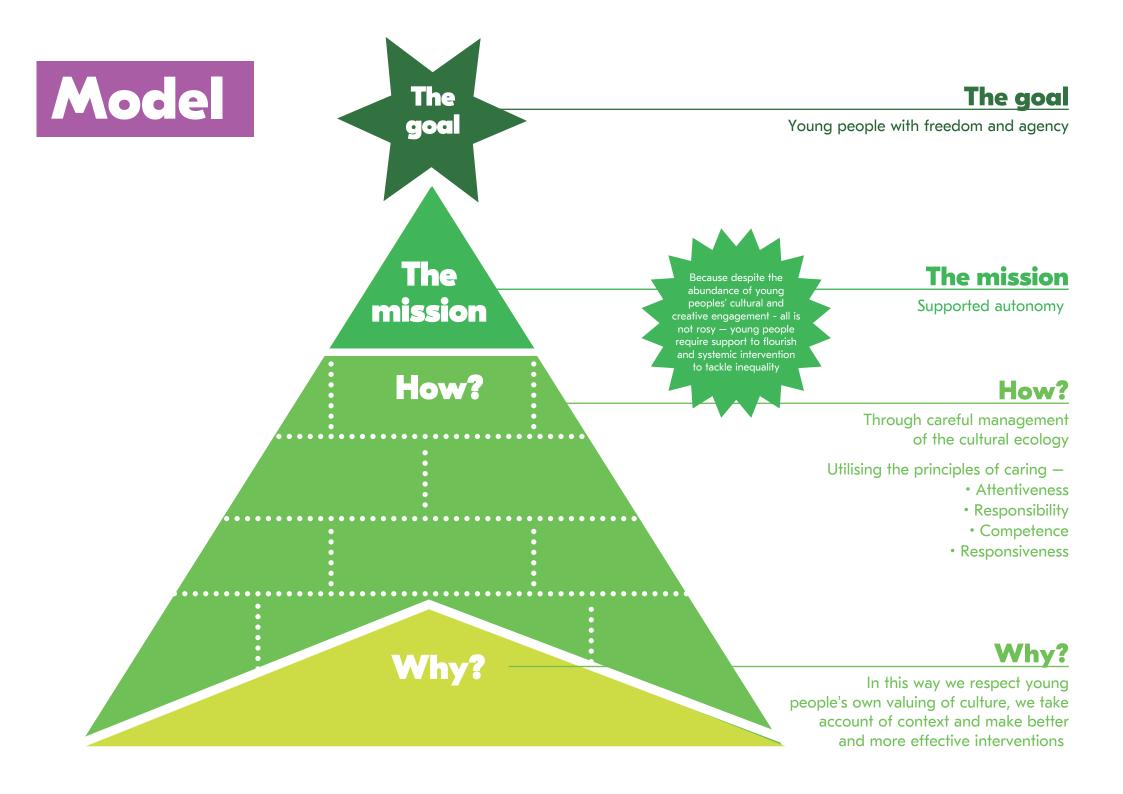
The substantive freedom to (co-)create versions of culture — the ability and the opportunity to engage with and make culture as valued and defined by the individual.

### Cultural democracy

Only through all having the capability to engage with and make culture can democracy in a civic sense be realised — an issue of rights, agency and voice.

## Caring and the ethics of care

The practices of care (being attentive to need, taking responsibility for those needs, being competent at care-giving and being responsive to feedback) can help us understand how to manage a cultural ecosystem, tending and cultivating, rather than imposing or demanding. As an active process, always with ethical implications, care without appropriate attentiveness, responsiveness and respect can lead to (cultural) domination and possessiveness.



#### How do young people in Harrow feel about their place and creative lives?

Young people's

lives are regimented

and orientated around

school work, high

degree of stress

Importance of family, sport, games, friends, parks, relaxing, shopping especially spending time with family

Often art is seen as the treat that has to be put aside in favour of more useful pursuits

#### Place is crucial

- home, parks, cafes, the cinema, shopping centres — young people often not very mobile and perceive their place differently to adults

#### **Identity and self**

and countering alienation - Whose culture? Who is reflected in the dominant cultural norms taught in school?

is crucial for engagement

#### **Aspects of** cultural agency

- Freedom to choose means choices have to be on offer
- Information and pathways young people need to know about what is possible not rely on their own experience
- Goals and incentives useful tools for engagement
- Confidence, embarrassment and vulnerability — all play a part in enabling or stopping engagement and all can be addressed
- Confidence and selfhood tools to experience the works and make better choices
- Freedom to become who you are headspace and time to be creative and build self knowledge
- Being treated as a whole person with a cultural life beyond school or home
- The importance of being listened to is crucial for real agency
- Skills in potential recognise what you are good at and take this into your life

Co-produced knowledge is essential

There is no single bird's eye view of cultural learning — instead concentrate on building systems for ongoing production of knowledge with multiple views expressed

Psycho
-geography is
important

Where things happen matters to young people who are highly localised and attuned to issues of safety

Democratic governance is a key long-term challenge

How to link attentive and responsiveness to governance for the long-term?

Make partnership working adaptable and clear

Pay attention to systems and structures of partnership and collaboration

Potential of creative citizenship and positive deviance

Build on the strengths in communities and with individuals and empower them to be able to shape cultural possibility for themselves What might supported autonomy look like in practice?

Tipping points
/opportunity costs
can be mitigated

Careful thoughts needs to be given to how to encourage and nurture creative pathways and the 'organisation of interest' at key moments in the life of young people

Mentoring to cut through inequality

Building meaningful relationships based on trust can help support those young people who might otherwise be left behind Safe spaces and holding environments

Creativity can only happen in safe spaces where young people feel free to be themselves

Spaces of listening

Need to be attentive to the views and needs of young people for the young person

## Challenges going forward

Let go of the idea of mapping and a single bird's eye view — instead refine processes of ongoing engagement and discussion

Give up idea of 'deficit' - children and young people 'lacking access to great art' and embrace young people's valuing of creativity and art in their own terms

Engage with the complexity of the ecology — friends, parents, carers, the media — all have a strong influence on young people's creativity but how are they recognised as part of the story?

Hierarchies are re-balanced to put the adult in the caring/tending mode — challenge the status of professionals

Ecologies need careful management through distributed leadership — where will this come from and who will pay?

Overcome vested interests, path dependencies and the disciplinary 'labour of division' — and, instead, teachers, arts organisations, youth workers, parents, policymakers, etc. to see themselves as having very connected roles in enabling the supported autonomy of young people recognising that this is a genuinely shared endeavour"

#### Method



Give up the single mapped viewpoint and embrace multiple perspectives



Mixed methods - no one perfect method



About distributed knowledge



Creating Think about 'openness' - possibilities and potential dependency



Local authority is key



Is there a local 'backbone' organisation? Can one be created?

#### **Methodological Principles**

#### How?

Local authority as critical player

Role of back bone organisations

#### What next?

Consideration of how to generate sustainable knowledge production

Longitudinal work Large-scale data

Action research

Research into the nature and possibilities of creative citizenship

#### Harrow process

Semi structured interviews with life history elements — adults, 18-25 year olds, secondary school students

Focus groups with students (years 7-13)

Questionnaires with school children and parents

Asset based community development workshop