

POLICY REVIEW

Lost in Translation?

Time to Shine: Scotland's Youth Arts Strategy For Ages 0-25 (2013) by Creative Scotland, published online at <http://www.creativescotland.com/resources/our-publications/plans-and-strategy-documents/national-youth-arts-strategy>

Creative Scotland's ten-year plan for youth arts, *Time to Shine* (2013), funded to the tune of £5m by the Scottish Government's Young Scots Fund, is not short of ambition for Scotland's children and young people but its worth as a strategy document is not quite as compelling. In the maelstrom of reconfiguring Scottish Screen and the Scottish Arts Council to form Creative Scotland in 2009, a "Concordant of Intent" was submitted to the new Scottish National Party's minority government. Produced by four national youth performing arts companies (NYPAC), the National Youth Choir of Scotland, The National Youth Orchestras of Scotland, the Scottish Youth Theatre and YDance (Scottish Youth Dance), the document provided a catalyst for "a national discussion on the youth arts" involving "nearly two thousand stakeholders" (p5). *Time to Shine* is the product of that national discussion and the object of this review.

The rhetoric of the Ministerial Forward to *Time to Shine* positions it as "Scotland's first ever [practical] Youth Arts Strategy" (p5). Creative Scotland's stated mission is "[t]o establish Scotland as an international leader for children and young people's arts and creativity"ⁱ (p2). Leaving aside, for the moment, the curious separation of "arts" from "creativity" as well as the hubris such a declaration may, for some, imply, the public body's aim is operationalised using three strategic objectives: participation, progression and provision. The logic underpinning the translation of the 3Ps into "Let Me In", "Help Me Shine" and "Take Me There" and imported from the animated version of the strategy (Creative Scotland, 2013), seems to have more in common with the soundtrack of *Frozen* (Disney, 2013) than the question of how "the arts" should engage with children, young people and learning.

Good evidence-based cultural policy-making processes requires the translation of complex socio-cultural research data into “practical” outcomes but the work of translating the data collected from the contributions of more than 1,700 “young” and “adult” stakeholders consulted in the process of building Creative Scotland’s strategy appears to have missed a number of steps. Metaphrog’s representation of *Time to Shine* as a sixty-eight page graphic novel renders the strategy itself more accessible but the work of translating the research data into the strategy is less transparent. In commissioning Metaphrog to transpose only the edited highlights it is difficult not to conclude that a valuable opportunity for making the everyday political work of cultural policy-making more visible has been missed.

However, as well as the executive summary of *Time to Shine*, Creative Scotland published *What’s behind it ... ?* (Creative Scotland, 2013), a one hundred and eighty-two page document outlining the consultation and research process. It cites the primary source documents consulted and provides a very useful set of appendices that, together with a bibliography, yield insights into the policy-making process. The first thirty-two pages offer a more detailed account of the scope and scale of the challenges. The assemblage of research and policy documents includes research relating to broader concerns about digital participation and cultural consumption in Scotland as well as those relating to children, young people and participation more generally. The policy documents listed include the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNESCO’s Road Map for Arts Education and a Young People and the Arts policy published in Australia in 2003 as well as a range of publications from the Scottish Government, the Scottish Executive, Education Scotland and The Princes’ Trust. The consequent ensemble of discourses assembled rather awkwardly here represents a bricolage of policy voices desperately seeking a coherent narrative frame.

The value of *What’s behind it ... ?* lies in its ten appendices and the account of the consultation’s methodological underpinning in particular. The intention to keep children and young people at the centre of the process is expressed throughout and evidenced in the partnership with The Children’s Parliament and Young Scot, the national youth information and citizenship charity for 11-26 year olds, who between them facilitated the consultation using quantitative and qualitative methods to elicit

data from its “young stakeholders”. The research instruments and the sampling strategies are described in detail but there is little new to celebrate in the approach taken to this stage of the process. Scotland has long taken a social constructivist approach to the issue of inclusion and the promotion of children and young people’s voices in decision-making processes. The Children’s Parliament is but one example of this. The data elicited in the process is of interest but again reveals little by way of new insights. What is interesting, however, is the significant gap between the data collected from these “young stakeholders” and the workstreams and strategic objectives described as the consequence. The methodology includes reference to a grounded theory approach to data analysis but there is no detail about how meaning was derived using this inductive process or indeed, how the data from both stakeholder groups was interpreted.

In contrast to the meticulously detailed research instruments developed to elicit data from the “young stakeholder” group, information regarding the “adult stakeholder” group is sparse. The approach to the consultation with this group seems sharply at odds with that taken to the younger age groups. It might have been more interesting, as well as being more straightforward in terms of developing a coherent narrative from the data, to have used the same research instruments with “adult stakeholders”. Moreover, the absence of an appendix listing those “adult stakeholders” who contributed to the consultation might be considered odd. There are numerous examples of consultation reports where publication of the stakeholder groups taking part is considered routine. This structuring absence in *What’s behind it ... ?* restricts understanding about a key element in the consultation process, that is the relative weight of evidence gathered and how this was negotiated between the various stakeholder groups to produce the subsequent workstreams and strategic objectives. The absence of a coherent epistemological and methodological underpinning to this process indicative perhaps of the gap between ethical evidence-based policy-making and that which is driven primarily by vested interests.

Despite the rhetoric of keeping its “young stakeholders” at the centre of the process, the outcome of *Time to Shine* is depressingly familiar. Its creative industries framing ensures the data elicited by The Children’s Parliament and Young Scot, collapses into four uninspiring “practical” and top-down workstreams and three equally uninspiring

strategic objectives. The poverty of imagination (not to mention creativity) signified by the outcomes of the consultation, and in sharp contrast to its stated ambitions, evident from the outset by the paucity of the literature the process draws upon. The appendices make clear there are no direct international comparators “with which to compare Scotland’s youth arts ecology or national strategy (p171)”. Technically that may be the case but the consequent claim “that this [youth arts strategy] is an entirely new development in the international arena” (p171) may be a hollow claim. Most telling perhaps is the strategy’s early surrender to the normative evident in its declaration to “focus on the recognised Creative and Performing Arts” (p43). The question then becomes for whom is it time to shine?

A discussion of the myriad examples of exciting research exploring the role of lived culture in children and young people’s everyday lives in the communities in which they always already participate, not least in the sphere of media and new literacies, is outside the scope of this policy review. It should not, however, have been outside the scope of *Time to Shine*. The intention of the consultation with the “young stakeholders” is described as “always to make children curious, ask questions and create a dialogue and so in all our work we create spaces within which children’s own view can be formed, reflected upon and recorded (p73)”. In my own research work with children, young people and media cultures (Burn et al, 2010 Parry & Powell, 2012, Powell, 2014) I have never met a child who needs to be *made* curious. In that particular regard, they come ready-to-go.

In a three-year mixed methods ESRC research project funded to explore the development of media literacy in children and young people aged 5 to 16, *Developing Media Literacy: Towards a Model of Learning Progression* (RES-062-23-1292) and its follow-on knowledge exchange project, *Developing Media Literacy: From Research to Practice* (ES/J010308/1), our conceptualisation of literacy framed literacy as social and situated. Literacies thus are multiple and vary according to time and space, but are also contested in relations of power. A broader notion of literacy “is concerned with cultural and communicative competencies, irrespective of the medium in which they are exercised ... a view of literacy which sees it in social, cultural and political terms and not simply as a set of technical or intellectual skills” (Buckingham, 1993, p26). The role of creative production in the process of

developing media literacy was central. Equally important, however, was the role of critical analysis in *enabling*, rather than “enriching”, children and young people to develop their informal curiosities into formal knowledges and skills using pedagogy developed in media education (Powell, 2014). If reference to criticality is difficult to find in *Time to Shine*, reference to the creation of new knowledges is even more so and it is here that the work of “creativity” has so much more to offer.

Finally, Creative Scotland did not have to look very far afield for historic precedents to its strategy for youth arts. Two examples from the work of Scottish Screen’s predecessor, the Scottish Film Council, in the 1930s and 1980s both achieved Creative Scotland’s ambition for Scotland to establish itself as “an international leader” in its exploration and development of the role of “the arts” (film in the case of the former and media more broadly conceptualised in the latter) in children and young people’s everyday lives (Powell, 2015). In neither of these examples, however, did the Scottish Film Council (1934-1997), constituted as a cultural *and* an educational organisation, set out with the aim of international leadership. Dave O’Brien (2014) criticises the failure of effectively linking cultural and education policy in current public policy-making. In the work of the Scottish Film Council historically, however, curiosity about the relationship between culture and education and the possibility of developing new knowledges and skills through the participation of children and young people in new cultural forms was at the root of its international successes. In both cases, the intermediary role of a federally organised grass-roots group of teacher activists, the Scottish Educational Film Association (SEFA) with its 5,000 members in the 1930s and the Association for Media Education in Scotland (AMES) in the 1980s was pivotal to the success of both initiatives. *Time to Shine* was already well passed its sell-by date before it had even started. Creative workers expressed their frustration with formal education “Adult stakeholders also spoke of some challenges in accessing schools with their cultural offer (p11)” and children and young people expressed their resistance “to be arted at” (p13).

Perhaps the most useful work Creative Scotland can do to develop an innovative vision for its “cultural offer” in the two most significant spaces where children and young people encounter “the arts” and “creativity”, at home and at school, is in the arena of knowledge exchange and impact in partnership with research academics. We

need a better understanding of how children and young people in Scotland participate in everyday cultures (de Certeau, 1988, Jenkins, 2006). A youth arts strategy that grows organically from that understanding in partnership with curious cultural and education sectors open to the prospect of developing new knowledges and skills, may stand a better chance of being of international interest. The evaluation of such a strategy will be more compelling if it is measured in the ordinary and everyday routines of young people's livesⁱⁱ. Creative Scotland must demonstrate to children and young people, their communities and their schools that the exchange value of its cultural offer is worth trading for.

References

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ⁱ Children and Young People's Arts is defined as "Young people aged 0-25, engaging in any creative, expressive or cultural activity in any environment"

ⁱⁱ The AHRC-funded *Understanding Everyday Participation* project is an example of this type of work although its participants are aged 18+