

## **Cultural capitals matter, differentially: A Bourdieusian reading of perspectives from senior secondary students in England**

Ofsted, the inspection authority in England, has told schools to ensure that all students have access to cultural capital, taken as a canon of music, literature and art. In this paper, we trouble this guidance by analysing conversations with 1447 senior secondary students. The students reported that the arts offered considerable personal benefits, as well as creative self-expression (visual art) and vocational and networking skills (performing arts). By bringing Bourdieu to the dataset we offer a field analysis that shows how arts cultural capitals might follow the logics of the education field. We speculate that, despite the likelihood that these elite cultural capitals were not of equal value to all students, arts capitals and dispositions might support wider resistances to logics of practice in other fields.

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The English national inspection authority Ofsted has recently adopted the term “cultural capital”. In a January 2019 update to school inspection guidance, Ofsted announced that “quality” in educational provision meant that

“inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life. Ofsted’s understanding of this knowledge and cultural capital matches the understanding set out in the aims of the national curriculum. It is the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens, introducing them to the best that has been thought and said, and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.” (Ofsted 2019, 10)

Elsewhere in the same document, Ofsted connected cultural capital with “social justice”, “inequality” and “unfairness” (7): “So many disadvantaged pupils may not have access to cultural capital, both in the home and then in their school” (8). According to Ofsted, schools must ensure that all children and young people have access to an entitlement which included “great works of art, music and literature” (8).

The response to Ofsted’s guidance has been mixed. Schools understandably moved rapidly to ensure that they could demonstrate that they were ‘doing’ and ‘delivering’ cultural capital. Various ‘explainers’ were developed for teachers which offered interpretations of cultural capital, often citing Bourdieu (Beadle 2020)<sup>i</sup>. There was also critique - the Ofsted version of cultural capital took a “cultural restorationist” (Apple 2001) approach to knowledge and promoted elitist art forms, while at the same time stigmatising and/or denying cultural practices and forms from particular working class, religious and raced communities<sup>ii</sup>. Bourdieu (1984) himself argued that everyone possessed cultural capital (language and accent, taste in fashion, art, music, sport, food etc.) and these cultural capitals were both embodied and institutionalised (Reay 2019). There was however a social hierarchy in which some capitals were seen as more prestigious and worthy than others, as epitomised in Ofsted’s guidance to schools.

Our paper is a contribution to the ongoing debates about cultural capital and education. We offer a Bourdieusian field analysis which brings data from a large scale mixed methods study into dialogue with Ofsted’s contentions. We report discussions with 1447 students whose teachers were connected with either Tate or the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC).

Shakespeare’s work is the quintessential case of an elite, canonical cultural oeuvre. But Shakespeare also appears in popular art forms (Lanier 2002) and supports a small global cultural ‘industry’ (Shellard and Keenan 2016). Shakespeare’s plays are the only named texts in the English national school curriculum and are taught in secondary schools in either English or Drama, or both. The Bard is positioned as synecdoche for British culture and the ‘quality’ literary texts that the nation’s school children must read and appreciate. But it is also argued, and this is the position taken by the RSC, that Shakespeare belongs

to everyone, and should not be confined only to those who can afford to attend expensive productions, or to those whose proficiency in the English language allows them to engage fully with the text. Other schools in our study had worked with Tate, an art museum dedicated to collecting, conserving and showing British art and international contemporary art - building an archive which includes the 'best' of popular and avant-garde art forms. Both of these prestigious (inter)national arts organisations invest in a substantive school programme of professional learning for teachers, and participatory activities for students. These school programmes can be seen as exemplifying Ofsted's guidance about access to cultural capital. Our own position is that all children and young people should have access to elite cultural capitals, that vernacular, community and popular arts should be integral to the school curriculum, and that all art forms should be equally subject to critical socially-situated analysis and appreciative evaluation (c.f. Stevenson 2010).

Here, we engage with Ofsted's stated goal of the distribution of elite cultural capital, asking whether it is as democratising as suggested. Our analysis in this paper focuses on the cultural capitals that the 1447 students told us about. We begin the paper by discussing the educational field, offering our take on Bourdieu's theory of field, capitals, habitus, doxa and logics of practice. We then move to reporting students' conversations and to our analysis of what this data-set might mean in terms of possessing and acquiring elite cultural capitals.

### **The education field**

According to Bourdieu, the education field has comparatively modest status within the hierarchy of social fields, where constellations of economic and national and global politics and government fields dominate. However, education's modest positioning is offset by the critical role it plays in the (re)production of capitals and dispositions vital to/in other fields (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1988).

The social and cultural capitals prioritised in the education field, Bourdieu argued, built on the capitals of already culturally and economically privileged families. The correspondence between the capitals of those dominant in society and those recognised, valued and developed further via schooling mean that the educational "game" is skewed at the outset (Bourdieu 1991). However, the doxa - the taken-for-granted truth in the field - is meritocracy, that agents advance through the field by virtue of their own innate ability and hard work (Bourdieu, Passeron, and de Saint Martin 1995). This doxa disguises the "inheritance effect" of field logics (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). The apparently neutral processes of education are in reality practices of sorting and selection which result in different young people being differentially equipped with the symbolic capital (credentials) that they can "cash in" to obtain further and higher education and work. The end result is the (re)production of an inequitable social and economic hierarchy which seems natural and right to those who reap the benefits (Bourdieu 1977).

However, Bourdieu wrote, the field of schooling is not simply reproductive. The field is also agonistic (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Positions and the agents that occupy them are continually moving in ongoing struggles to advance in the field, but some are simultaneously dedicated to changing the hierarchies within

the field (Bourdieu 1993, 1998). Within the education field, there are a variety of agents and positions which coalesce around questions of equity, social justice and democracy; agents in these positions challenge the doxa, which capitals count and the pedagogical practices of schools and gatekeeping assessment and examination processes.

This paper offers a Bourdieusian field analysis. We bring existing understandings of the reproductive logics of the field of education into conversation with empirical data about capitals. This is not the same as an empirically based correspondence analysis of agents and positions. The paper offers the kind of thinking work which goes on in order to design such a study.

We bring Bourdieusian understandings to the wider context of our study in England. When the Conservative Coalition were elected in 2011, they moved swiftly to reorganise the field (Ball 2018). The government redesigned the examination system, the national curriculum and the inspection framework prioritising a cultural restorationist (Apple 2001), dubbed 'trad', approach. But, despite their apparent interest in cultural capital, the Conservative government holds schools accountable for their performance in 'core' curriculum subjects via a school performance measure called the English Baccalaureate (the E Bacc) (Maguire et al. 2019); the arts are not part of this mix (Neumann et al. 2020). The policy shift effected by school and family/student responses to the EBacc measure accelerated already falling enrolments in arts subjects, with Design and Technology being the biggest loser<sup>iii</sup>.

These policy manoeuvres can be understood as strategies designed to regain and consolidate pre-existing advantage (Grenfell and James 1998). As we have argued elsewhere (Thomson 2010), when there is an increase in levels of mass education across the field, those in dominant positions move to adjust the rules of the game in order to maintain their (unfair) advantage. Because Conservative examination, curriculum and inspection changes appear to have strengthened the position of those who already possess preferred cultural capitals, Ofsted's interpretation of cultural capital might be seen as symbolic violence not simply because it ignores marginalised cultural capitals, but also because it equates a description of curriculum with the processes of the (re)production of inequity (Archer et al. 2018).

### **The Tracking Arts Learning and Engagement (TALE) research**

We are not alone in our interest in what students "get" from engaging in the arts. Educational researchers interested in the arts have focused on whether working with artists over a sustained period of time produces changes in attitudes and motivation (Bamford 2009); support for students' well-being (McLellan et al. 2012); the development of 'soft skills' through the adoption of creative pedagogies (Thomson et al. 2014); and enhanced inclusion (Sanderson 2008) brought about through changes in school climate (Bragg and Manchester 2011). Researchers have also looked for cognitive development (See and Kokotsaki 2015); how to achieve disciplinary learnings and what these might be (Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lakrin 2013); and the transfer of arts learning to other curriculum areas (Martin et al. 2013). There is however surprisingly little research which asks young people directly about what they see as the benefits of their arts experiences (Thomson and Maloy 2022).

In 1995, the National Foundation for Educational Research (Harland, Kinder, and Hartley 1995) interviewed 700 young people (aged 14-24) across five regions about arts participation in and out of school. Researchers reported that young people were positive about the arts, with two thirds affirming that the arts had had an effect on them and that they “wanted some involvement in the arts in the future”. The researchers were particularly impressed by the “testaments to the personal and social benefits of arts involvement, as well as the view that the arts were a humanising and civilising force” (275.) A recent Swedish study (Furst and Nylander 2020) also focused on young people’s experiences, examining the decision of 62 students in folk high schools to choose an arts subject. The researchers report that reasons for choice were not all instrumental – while some saw choosing the arts as a “stepping stone” to becoming an artist, students also valued the opportunities their subjects afforded for the development of creativity. Some saw their arts courses offering them a chance to regain health and general well-being. The results of both of these studies overlap with our own.

Our research, a partnership with the Royal Shakespeare Company and Tate, was funded by Arts Council England. We conducted a three year study of thirty secondary schools; RSC/Tate each nominated fifteen arts-rich schools where teachers had been engaged in their professional learning programmes (Thomson et al. 2019c). While the sample was purposeful, it was nevertheless broadly representative of secondary schools around the country.

Our research asked how secondary teachers made their professional development learning into classroom pedagogies, and what opportunities and benefits were then afforded to students. We prioritised individual experience and meaning-making, favouring processual value over properties attributed to a particular performance or event (O’Brien 2015). In seeking to understand how young people saw their arts engagement, we took their words as being those of expert witnesses, possessed of valuable knowledge and capable of articulating their experiences (as per the ‘new’ sociology of childhood, see Qvortrup et al. 1994; Hallett and Prout 2003). We did not seek to simply reclassify students’ words into singular and pre-determined categories (Smith 1990), but rather to recognise and value their meaning-making. It is for this same reason that we make extensive use of quotations in this paper. All quotations are from different students and represent major themes.

Our research archive consists of: transcribed interviews with two teachers in each school each year (n=164 interviews) and focus group conversations (n=323) with Year 10-13 students who had chosen arts subjects (n=1447); classroom observations, documents and photographic records. In the second and third years of the project, we conducted a survey of all Year 10-13 students, regardless of what course they were doing (n=4,477). The survey looked at cultural participation and engagement and had questions in common with the national DCMS survey “Taking Part”; we were thus able to compare students in arts rich schools with their peers (see <https://researchtale.net> for full research reports and survey results). This paper draws primarily on the focus group interviews, observations and field notes but makes reference to these other data.

We conducted a phenomenological analysis of all conversations, opting for an approach specifically designed to foreground researcher processing and interpretation, eschewing quasi- scientised processes of coding in favour of drawing out units of meaning, general themes through the use of memo-ing and composite summaries (Bryman and Burgess 2015).

## **Students' views of their arts education**

Our focus groups were with senior secondary students who had chosen to maintain their arts studies. They had all had rich experiences of arts education earlier in their school. Many had elected to carry on with more than one arts subject. We report here on why they thought the arts in general were important as well as the reasons they gave for their choices of visual or performing arts. We address two themes in common between the students: (1) personal development, and (2) the cultural value of arts. We then move to one theme which relates specifically to visual arts (3) creative self-expression, and another to the performing arts (4) vocational/professional learning and networking. We first of all describe the theme, illustrated by quotations from students that typify the corpus, then comment on cultural capitals, mobilising literatures and Bourdieu.

### **1. Personal development**

Students overwhelmingly told us that being a teenager was difficult and studying an arts subject helped them to address their emotions. The arts allow you to express your feelings - *helps me to deal with tricky emotions; It's helped me grow as a person; You can literally get it all out; Being able to voice your emotions is so important.* Arts media, genre and platforms, used to explore feelings, afforded a growing sense of identity - *When I express myself better I know who I am better.*

The students made connections between the pedagogies used in their arts subjects and their personal development. Their arts subjects:

- work with the whole person, recognising and using everyday knowledges and experiences - *You involve your daily life in your drama piece... with your other subjects you are not so much doing that.*
- offer daunting challenges - *In Drama we have had opportunities to stand in a 900 seat auditorium and perform...once you can do that you can do a lot more.* Achieving ambitious goals in turn builds self-belief - *I know it's a cliché but I didn't think I'd be able to do it.*
- not simply allow, but demand, that students offer their own interpretations - *I didn't like being told what was right and wrong. I know it's only Shakespeare but we came in the room and they said you can read this text and have your own opinions - it was really good.*
- expect students to be independent learners - *You can do what you want to do and not what you are told to do; you find your own way of doing things.* The move to independent learning is carefully scaffolded by teachers - *They give you guidelines of what you have to have completed by a certain point and they let you get on with it, instead of telling you every single step.* Learning independently often requires new approaches to self-management - *Manage time well. Art takes so long. Planning. Trial and error.*

- require students to work collaboratively with others, to negotiate processes and manage conflicts - *You learn how to cope with other people. You are in a close environment for a number of weeks and you might get annoyed with certain people but you learn how not to show it.* Students see this as something potentially transferable to other aspects of their lives - *team work skills ... it's about everybody being involved.*
- offer activities which are 'outside' as well as 'inside' school - *In the holidays when there are no classes or anything I play my viola constantly; Most of my hobbies are what I study in school; A lot of what I do outside of school is related to art and that then links back to school.* Many of the students were engaged in arts as a life practice not just a subject, as the TALE survey confirmed (Thomson et al. 2019c).
- teach vocational and social attitudes and competences - *The only subject I can think outside of Art that teaches creativity and empathy is History. Inside Art you learn how to critique. ...we learn how to sit and you go "This part of your work, that is amazing, that is a good foundation but you haven't really executed it well". You need those skills in work and board meetings, what other subject do you get that in?*

Art practices were used to explore, identify, articulate, explain, communicate and take charge of 'selves'. Arts education contributed strongly to the ongoing formation of a disposition to be self-managing and responsible. Young people were disposed to this practice in relation to themselves, others and their activities. This "emotional capital" (Reay 2001) can be understood as subjectivation advantageous for life in a risky, highly modernist society (Giddens 1991).

Young people were enmeshed in practices of time, project and interaction management. Research (e.g. Deer 2003) suggests that being disposed and capable of organising your 'self' is important for progressing through the education field, going from school to further and higher education. Self-managing practices and emotional capitals are also important in the arts field where market logics dominate and where every artist must to some degree engage in competitive and entrepreneurial practices (Becker 1984; Grenfell and Hardy 2007). Additionally, team work and successful collaboration are linked with building social capital, with finding and becoming part of socio-cultural-economic networks which are significant in advancing position in all social and economic fields (e.g. Montgomery et al. 2020). However, being disposed to interpret and think independently may prove problematic in fields and positions where the dominant practice is following orders and working under close supervision.

## 2. The cultural value of the arts

In line with their views of their arts subject as having significant personal benefits, students saw the trend for schools to marginalise arts teaching as one which unfairly limited choices. *Try and keep creative arts in schools! Yes. Do not take them out. We need them! I think it is important for kid's development. It is something different. It is not in the mould. It gives people a chance to explore, find who they are.* The capacity of the arts to explore a self was particularly important for students already on the edges of schooling. *A lot of children in the younger years are very reliant on the arts as a form of avoiding getting into the*

*wrong crowd. It's a good form of guidance and after-school thing that stops them from going down a bad route. Keeps their concentration, focus and it's unfortunate that people don't see it that way. They see it as an unnecessary thing on the side. But really it helps so many people. At senior secondary level, students asserted that they ought to be able to take the subjects they were interested in, unimpeded by poor career advice, restricted timetabling or lack of school subject funding.*

Relatively few students (less than 50) offered reasons for valuing the arts that were societal in nature, although we assume that at least some of the benefits that were ascribed as personal might also be seen as collective. Of the societal reasons, the most common was related to the quotidian nature of the arts - *People don't realise how important the arts are in society today. If you removed the arts, you'd have to stop watching TV or reading magazines; Everything we have is a form of art. It has been designed. It reflects everything of the time, politics, everything.* We took the implication of these comments to be that it was important for young people to both study the arts as an everyday human activity, and to prepare them to make the art that enriches everyday life - *Where are you going to get architects and stuff from? It's literally such a big part of everyday life and I think no one realises. It'd be stupid getting rid of the arts!; There are loads of jobs out there that you need Art for and a qualification is a good tool to have; it shows that you are creative.*

Other reasons given were:

- The arts entertain – *I get it, we need doctors, we need lawyers. But at the end of the day the doctor is going to watch Coronation Street or is going to the theatre. Your doctors and lawyers need to be entertained. And the arts can entertain in ways that other activities do not - No other subject can move people like the arts. When you go to a theatre you can get lost in this incredible world that has been created around you, and you can get fully immersed in it.*
- The arts are educative, they teach us who we are and who we might be - *The arts aren't just about entertainment, they are about education, information, giving political opinions"; We've always had the arts. It's not something new. We've had them for hundreds and thousands of years. They provide knowledge of the past as well.*
- The arts create social bonds – *brings people together, engages other people with other people's stuff. One of my favourite things is when I hear something that my friend has done and I really like it. It makes you go "That's great". It makes you more communal.*
- The arts are essential for well-being and mental health – *Art is such a fantastic way to make people engage, to have awareness, especially in this day and age, where it is a really hard thing to have. It focuses you on something that is not there but that can be made by you. The fact that it is made by you and you have taken in and then you're putting out again is quite a sense of gratification and achievement, to create and actually make something. To take in and then push out. For mental health it is just because of that one thing alone. That sense of, I've made something.*
- The arts are integral to the development of cities – *Our whole society is based on the arts and it's not appreciated. Quite a lot of artists go to a place and the business follows. But then they have to move on again, because it gets too expensive to live there.*



- The arts offer the less privileged a platform and process to express their views – *the arts have always been a way to stick it to the government... I think cutting the arts at state school level stops students being able to fully express, in a dramatic kind of way, their views on things that are going on. But it doesn't affect private schools such as Eton with their three theatres because they do it themselves. By them cutting funding for the arts, schools like this one, I think it is a way of making sure we don't fully express what we want to express.*

The students we spoke to did not generally engage in “defensive instrumentalism” (Belfiore 2012) – they largely did not reproduce some of the broader public conversations about the social purposes of the arts. Students did not talk about the importance of the creative industries to the economy for instance, as do arts organisations and artists. Nor did they talk about art and culture as an entitlement, as did their teachers, and in a more selective way, Ofsted.

We strongly suspect that the relative absence of discussion about the production, value and place of the arts is an effect of the workings of the education field, in particular, the relatively recent demise of subjects such as Art History and Performance Studies (Johnes 2017). It is not clear where, in the current national curriculum, all students can get to grips with critical questions of culture, particularly of the arts field. Being able to articulate the societal role of art and artists “beyond school discourse”, as Bourdieu (1993, 231) puts it, is one way of creating distinction in the field, for example a process of distinguishing between apparently similarly qualified students in higher education interviews. And might it also be related to advancement in other fields? We wonder if it is significant that arguments about the arts and their purposes are largely restricted to particular positions in educational, arts and government fields - to artists, arts organisations, arts policy makers and arts researchers? Could teachers and students mount more powerful defences and critiques of the arts and be more reflexive about their own practices if the curriculum did more than deliver knowledge about officially valued cultural capitals, and instead held these capitals up to critical and historically situated analysis? Arguably, a situated societal view of culture and cultural education could be important cultural capital for all students (Addison and Burgess 2021).

While we did not get answers to these questions from our corpus, we did learn more particular cultural capitals by looking separately at art and drama students’ conversations.

### **3. Individual creative self-expression (visual art)**

Whether asked about their reasons for choosing an arts subjects, their arts experiences, or the reasons arts were important in the curriculum, the vast majority of visual arts students talked about the crucial importance of individual creative expression. Some students enrolled in Drama or English spoke of the value of individual interpretation of given texts -*English has been the only subject that’s allowed me to be able to interpret different attitudes. All the teachers we’ve had and all the plays we’ve studied – they’ve all prompted us to have our own different attitudes to stuff.* But Art students said that *Art helps people to express their own ideas, their own views.* Furthermore, the processes

of self-expression were an object of study themselves - *Art is a journey. In Physics, it's a bit like coming into a film halfway through, other people have made a lot of discoveries and you are working with some givens... you are being asked to work something out based on an assumption, and that one thing links to another. But in Art I am trying to understand my creative process, my entire way of doing things.*

The students described their Art practices as individualised, but this singularity was also understood in democratic terms:

- the arts are not an elite practice, everyone can make art - *Once you start creating your own work, you become an artist.*
- failure to ensure that everyone is able to express themselves has negative consequences -*You have the freedom to express yourself in a positive manner and no other subject lets you do that. And if it's not important for people to express themselves then you're effectively creating a dictatorship.* It is thus important for those in power to ensure that individuals are free to express themselves through the arts -*I hear stuff like Art's not important and I'm like, well it is important to some people, but it may not be important to you.*

Students had different views on why self-expression was connected with democracy. While some saw politics in Art as a question of individual expression and rights -*We have a joke that we all have our own thing. Casting, folding paper, miniatures, defying government* - others disagreed. They saw that Art offered them the opportunity to become politically well-informed -*My art is very political. I don't want to just spread messages, I want to fully understand.* Other students saw Art as a means of answering back, and thus to change power relationships and hierarchies -*The art that is promoted is probably art that comes from middle-class society, where it's art that represents white people in really heroic roles. It's not for mainstream people. I try to do representation, like painting Muslim women who are not depicted in art at all. And I'd like to stamp their place in history to be honest.*

Art as self-expression is doxa in the fields of art and in school art education. Expressivism, as Biesta (2017) dubs it, is critiqued for failure to engage in debate about whether all forms of self-expression are equally morally justifiable. Because the education field is charged with teaching about ways to be and become, such failure is significant. As Biesta puts it, referring to the way in which expressivism could be used to justify racist or sexist art,

... the educational concern can never be about the expression of voice, creativity and identity as such, but has to engage with the far more important and also far more difficult question of the right voice, the right creativity and the right identity (14)

Biesta argues that expressivism in itself is insufficient to underpin an art curriculum, even though the individual creative project is the signature pedagogy of the secondary art programme in England (Thomson and Hall 2021).

A Bourdieusian approach to creative self-expression raises additional questions. As doxa, expressivism misrecognises the workings of the education field. In the

case of the subject Art, the co-located 'truths' of creativity and self-expression obscure the field's sorting and selecting logics. Rather than merit being the 'ability' and 'effort' required to pass various tests and assessments which measure the (re)production of valued disciplinary and linguistic capitals, merit in Art is seen as individual, original, creative expression. Selection occurs via teacher judgments about the deployment of art capitals in questioning and making, materialised in artefacts.

However, the capitals acquired in school Art may play out differently for different students. Some teachers in the (name) study told us that higher education Art Schools appear to select young people who not only possess a portfolio of interesting work, but also particular embodied cultural capitals: young people who can talk about their own art practice (creative self-expression) in relation to other art and artists, those who also "look and sound arty". Paradoxically, artiness may involve questioning the very institution they are being interviewed for – as Bourdieu puts it, " Art Schools expect those who attend them to be interested in an art constituted against Art Schools." (Bourdieu 2001, 8). Working class and BAME students in particular may not easily be able to suppress their desire to make the next move in the field and assume the disinterested philosophical stance necessary for elite higher education (see personal accounts in Rose 1989; Bennett 2004).

There may be a "fit"(homology) between the Art School and particular youthful embodied cultural capitals that exceed the symbolic capital of exam results (Bourdieu 1993, Ch. 8). The community and popular capitals deemed interesting and relevant in school Art projects may not have the same cachet in Art School entry procedures where the capacity to legitimate them through discussing art logics, using a wide range of art linguistic capitals, may be deemed more important (Friedman 2012; Peterson and Kern 1996). Further education, which has lower status in the tertiary education field, may of necessity value more highly the cultural capitals required for success in school visual art subjects.

Many students studying Art told us they did not want to go to Art School. They were however worried about how Art might be viewed for university entrance more generally. For a short period, advice from the elite Russell Group of universities was not to use subjects outside of the EBacc for entry to any courses. This advice was changed, in part as a result of our own (name) project data, which included students' reports of the ways in which their schools and families had attempted to dissuade them from choosing arts subjects because of the universities' admission advice. Research in the US (Elpus 2018) on college entrance suggests that there is no adverse effect of including creative arts subjects among those used to gain admittance, but also no positive effect. The same may be true in the UK, although there is no substantive research on this particular topic. Bourdieusian logic leads us to suspect that in the most elite universities and courses, where entry is not only by marks but also by interview, the cultural capitals from studying an arts subject may be an advantage. And as elite universities and courses are disproportionately taken up by students from privileged schools and families (Reay 2017; The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission 2019), we have a strong hunch that, in this particular context, arts capitals may play out to further advantage the already advantaged.

Arts dispositions and capitals can of course be used in different ways. While they signify a “cultured person”, they also support contestation of relations of power. The “unknowing” and questioning disposition that is highly valued in the Art field (Fisher and Fortnum 2014) may support Art students to resist the dominant pedagogies of the national curriculum (Thomson et al. 2019b, 2019a) but may also support oppositional practices beyond education. We return to this point in the conclusion of the paper.

#### **4. Professional and vocational learning (performing arts)**

Unlike the TATE programme which offers immersive professional development to teachers, the RSC works with schools, teachers and students. The RSC bring tools and techniques used in the professional company into schools, advocating and teaching the use of rehearsal room pedagogies (Neelands 2009; Winston 2015). All of the students who had been involved in the RSC programme told us about personal benefits (see (1), and the particular advantages of the ensemble performance-based approach. Students reported the benefits of this pedagogy for their comprehension of plot and language – *It's the language everybody finds a bit hard. When you read a part and you have no idea what they are saying unless you go through it and you'll be like "Oh yeah, it makes sense now"; It's much more understandable to me and whereas I used to hate it, now I don't 'cause I understand the text, I understand what he is trying to get across. It's taught me quite a lot about Shakespeare.* The rehearsal room's full-bodied engagement with text brings additional insights into character, theme and dramaturgy – *When you act something out, you can put your own interpretation and you can see what kind of feelings that character is feeling.; It opens up your eyes - ah, Shakespeare in this scene is trying to depict let's say, Iago as malicious. But when you're not really acting it out it is hard to picture where that character is coming from.* Being an audience for RSC productions brought additional insights into the play's potential meanings (c.f. Yandell, Coles, and Bryer 2020).

These capitals were of benefit to the students in their subject learning, but the benefits differed according to which subject. The RSC programme secondary school offer is to Drama and English Literature students, both subjects where Shakespeare might be studied. Students generally had a very clear perception of the hierarchy of subjects within which they were located – *I was having a conversation with my uncle and I was talking about university and what course I'm going to do and he said to me, "Oh but you're going to take Drama at A-level aren't you?" I said "Yeah". He said "You want to be careful of that because some universities don't accept it when they look at your entry requirements. And I just think that's silly. That's how you can tell Drama isn't seen as a serious subject. It's seen as something fun that doesn't take much.*

While the RSC capitals and practice on offer were the primary object of study in Drama, they were only part of what was required in English. The subject English requires additional learning: close analytic reading of the text leads to understandings about literary composition and aesthetic qualities, exploration of Shakespeare as theatre-maker in Elizabethan society leads to understandings about the role of the arts and the artist in their own and future society/ies (Olive 2015). The RSC programme thus offered mainstream Drama capitals while English teachers had to do more to cover those required for subject success –

*We learn a lot about Shakespeare's context and his influences in the text and how they are shown in the way he writes. Whereas poetry is a bit more, a lot is unseen extracts so you just do it first annotating and then we find out a bit more about it ... she (teacher) gave us the questions to help us annotate it and we used those for both Shakespeare and poetry. There are a lot of similar things regarding structure, narrative voice.* Additionally, since drama-associated capitals were not directly assessed in English exams, prioritising acquisition of the exam symbolic capital may have meant that the RSC engagement was time-limited (Schupak 2018).

The RSC programme also offers a number of avenues through which individual students can develop and show their “passion” and “talent”. In addition to school-based performances, RSC “hub school” teachers and selected students visit and support other local schools. All schools in the programme have the opportunity to perform an extract from a play in regional showcases from which some schools are selected to perform in the RSC’s theatre in Stratford upon Avon. Some individual students are also selected to become national ambassadors for Shakespeare and the company (Tate make a similar offer to a small number of young people through the Tate Collective). Being an ambassador brings additional master classes and more visits to Stratford.

Visiting Stratford to see the home of an elite national theatre company always impressed students – *We went on to Stratford-upon-Avon, the actual theatre itself. We went up there. We saw their version of Romeo and Juliet. To see that stage, that was insane. The special effects, the stage, the cracked floor. I was like wow. Even my technical theatre teacher was like "I've never seen this before. How are they even doing it"?; I was taking moments out where I just like sat back, just looked around at everyone, seen how many people were engaged with it, were enjoying and it was just a beautiful moment.* Such magical moments create theatre audiences, and reinforce the value of this form of cultural capital, precisely as the current national curriculum advocates. Visiting Stratford and experiencing a professional performance is however still something beyond the majority of students in England, although it may be a regular occurrence for students from privileged families where such practices are common and taken-for-granted.

Some students got to be more than audience members with backstage passes; they had prolonged access to the company. For those selected to be part of the “inner circle” the Stratford experience offered additional capitals. Some got very close to their desired future – *I want to be an actor when I am older so being the ambassador, getting to meet other people that have done what I want to do, being with people that want what I want ... the fact that I'm able to talk to these actors that have done the experience that I really want to have, and they give me so many pointers, it is just so great for me.* Not all students wanted to be actors, and the Stratford experience offered insights into associated arts occupations – *We learnt how theatre works as one collaborative machine 'cause there are so many different components and they are all important. So you immediately think the actors are the most important thing but without other parts it wouldn't work at all. 90% isn't acting; Me, L, and M went to Stratford-upon-Avon for the RSC. L did marketing, M did costumes and I did stage management. We went for five days. We got to learn the roles that we chose. We got to meet professionals.* The ambassador programme offered additional

social as well as cultural capital - *We got to meet other people from around the country* and this new network could bring additional personal benefits - *a sense of belonging, that we should be here.*

The RSC programme, which deliberately ensures a wide spread of schools and school mixes in its programme, and of students in its various selective programmes, may not translate into cultural capitals that count equally for all students. Success in Drama might variously be of advantage in general university study. Drama and Performing Arts are offered, as they are in schools, as separate degree subjects and as part of the subject English Literature. Drama languishes near the bottom of the higher education disciplinary hierarchy, together with Media Studies, while English is much closer to the top because of its associations with canonical literature (Ladwig 1996). Drama is more likely, although not exclusively, to be offered as an award in higher education institutions lower in the prestige league tables. The capitals gained through RSC school partnership programmes is likely to be advantageous in all of these instances, but it is the other symbolic capitals - general entry scores combined with class, gender and race - that are likely to carry most weight particularly with the more prestigious courses and institutions (Brooks 2003; Barker and Hoskins 2015).

Most of the students we spoke to had little sense that successful acquisition of the cultural capitals from the school subject Drama might not translate into access to elite Drama schools, or that the road to acting via reading English at university is far from straightforward. The students who wanted to work either as actors or in associated occupations seemed to have little idea that the performing arts are dominated by white middle class alumni of a narrow range of high-fee independent schools (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020). Recent scholarship on the creative industries suggests there is no meritocratic pathway leading from schools to further and higher arts education (O'Brien et al. 2016). Careers in the performing arts in particular are, as Friedman et al evocatively put it "like skydiving without a parachute" (Friedman, O'Brien, and Laurison 2016).

Nevertheless, the capitals acquired via engagement with the RSC may have other cashable capitals. References to the Bard are common in the English context, and can be found in everything from everyday speech, pub quizzes and tabloid newspapers to political speeches, and popular films and television programmes. Understanding this intertextual referencing does afford some critical understandings of mainstream meaning-making practices which are an important prerequisite for cultural citizenship (Thomson et al. 2020). These capitals may equally support the "Shakespeare industry" (Shellard and Keenan 2016).

### **Students, cultural capital and arts learnings**

This paper puts to the test the recent Ofsted guidance on the necessity of universal access to cultural capital, interpreted as a canon of literature, art and music. Through extensive use of students' own words in combination with Bourdieusian field analysis, we have raised doubts about the Ofsted assertion that the acquisition of elite cultural capitals will redress historical educational and social inequities. Far from negating the value of elite cultural capitals

acquired by inheritance, school cultural capitals are more likely to logically map onto subject hierarchies, institutional gatekeeping, and family position to consolidate the status-quo. We have also shown a field “effect” - that students largely attribute individualised value to their arts education experiences and that relatively few are able to discuss the role of arts and artists more generally.

This is not an entirely surprising analysis, and one which now bears empirical testing out through specific agent-position studies. However, our analysis does raise another possible line of research related to the more general field of power and the field of cultural production.

Bourdieu (1993) argued that the logics of arts education are to legitimate particular forms of taste born of privilege; by implication these forms exclude other taste preferences which are designated as inferior. Access to elite cultural capitals via education means learning to value distinctive aesthetic codes which are sanctioned within the education field, but originate within the field of cultural production. And the field of cultural production, Bourdieu argued, is divided into a restricted sub-field of production, where scarcity and fierce competition is synonymous with quality, and a sub-field of production at scale where economic capital and market logics prevail (e.g. see his work on television, 1996). Of course, the field of cultural production is now significantly changed from the late twentieth century field in Bourdieu’s France. We have only to think of the further development of the global arts market, the growth of everyday digital communications which have placed the means of production in the hands of those who would previously been mere cultural consumers and the growth of celebrity cultures where ‘likes’ and ‘influence’ are new forms of field capital. The students in our case study schools were embedded in these changes.

How are students from arts-rich schools positioned in relation to the field of cultural production? Is lack of access to arts courses in further and higher education and careers all that happens, all that matters?

We do not have space in this paper to explore this question. However, we do note that school students who have had “continuous and prolonged, methodical and uniform training” homologous with the mass production subfield (Bourdieu 1993, 232) – those who value creative self-expression, are unafraid to perform and are used to working collaboratively - have the disposition (inclination and know-how)(Skeggs 2004) necessary to take part in the expanding subfield of cultural production. They could, if they chose, engage in their arts practices without having to be situated in an institution. They could potentially cash in their cultural capital to make something of a living. A few might indeed be able to parlay ‘likes’ into ‘cool hunting’(Kenway and Bullen 2001), celebrity status and significant economic capital (Wood and Skeggs 2011), as well as popular acclaim (Sternheimer 2014). Some may even make the sideways move into the restricted subfield and find themselves exhibited in galleries and performing in award winning films and with elite orchestras. Who is ‘selected’ out, and how this happens against the odds, is a matter for further research and something we are pursuing ourselves.

We also wondered about the imbrication of the cultural production subfield with the political field (Mohamed and El-Desouky 2021). We are curious about whether those students who told us about their interest in politics may be

disposed, as well as equipped, to apply their arts education to counter-field cultural production. It may seem a stretch to say that studying Shakespeare might lead to wider political activism, but it is not beyond the realm of the possible that the pedagogies used for "access" to "great art" might produce dispositions and capitals that support politically resistant moves (della Porta and Diani 2018). That proposition is another tantalising research project in waiting, and a much longer discussion in which we are not the only researchers with results and analyses to contribute.

Whether arts capitals have resistant potentials is, in our view, a more interesting line of thinking than that offered by the Ofsted rationale for an arts education, and one much more in line with thinking in the arts field itself (Kester 2011; Thompson 2015). As Bourdieu put it, the potential value of universal access to key cultural capitals is that all might participate in the "struggle for forms, which is the life and movement of the artistic field" (Bourdieu 1993, 266).

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<sup>i</sup> For example see <https://premieradvisory.co.uk/cultural-capital-introduced-in-ofsted-inspection-framework/>; <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/what-is-cultural-capital/>; <https://www.tes.com/news/what-does-ofsted-mean-cultural-capital>.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/sep/03/ofsted-plan-inspect-cultural-capital-schools-attacked-as-elitist>; <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/blog/a-lack-of-research-how-ofsted-misrecognised-cultural-capital-social-mobility-inspection-poverty/>.

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iii See data from Ofqual on GCSE <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/results-tables-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-results-in-england-2020> and commentary <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/arts-gcse-entries-stable-but-not-recovering-after-years-of-falling-numbers-while-a-level-entries-continue-to-decline/>.