

Twinning Schools and Arts Organisations

Adapting the familiar concept of town twinning, this paper proposes a national framework linking schools with local arts and cultural organisations.

By Alison Cole and Nathan Lloyd

The Concept of 'Twinning'

The concept of 'twinning' is well established across Europe and the UK, where towns and cities are 'paired' with one another to foster cultural links, mutual understanding and social exchange. The same concept applies to 'friendship' towns, or 'sister' cities further afield. Signs erected outside these towns proudly announce their pairings and often emphasise a shared lineage or shared aspiration, and a sense of pride and belonging.

This policy looks at how we can apply the same principle to bringing schools, artists and arts and cultural organisations together – to learn from and inspire one another, and to share skills and ideas – not through a grants programme or the funding of specific outputs, but through a genuine process of collaboration and a nurturing of long-term relationships.

Signage is one of the most visible aspects of town 'twinning' – a declaration of intent, pride in place, and a way of expanding cultural horizons. An arts 'twinning' scheme could also be badged, with specially designed plaques proudly announcing the pairings of a school, say, with a theatre, musician or a museum. Such a pairing would not only provide enjoyable arts experiences, trips and memorable encounters, but it would also take children behind the scenes – providing them with mentors as well as role models for potential careers (from set-designers and animators to performers and artists, from curators and model-makers to lighting technicians).

The Principle

It is well known that engaging with the arts in childhood encourages personal and social development, aids wellbeing and improves academic

outcomes. Engaging with the arts allows children to express and channel emotions, be creative, and – almost invisibly – to build up key skills such as verbal and visual literacy, oracy, self-confidence, initiative, resilience, collaboration, resourcefulness, and invention. Above all, the arts build self-esteem.

For many children, the main way to access arts and culture is through school. The DfE's recently announced 'Enrichment Framework' is designed to galvanise this. This paper suggests that 'twinning' schools with a local or national arts organisation could provide a powerful and organic way to frame such an 'enrichment' approach. Engaging with arts professionals as well as subject teachers can be immensely inspiring – it shows children what is possible and provides a focus for teaching and cross-curricula activities.

Background

Inspirational artistic opportunities have increasingly become the preserve of the privileged few, as the quality and quantity of arts opportunities within state schools has been eroded under recent Conservative governments. Private schools invest substantially in resources, facilities and opportunities and promote a broad curriculum that allows children to pursue their passions and strengths and to build their skills and confidence. It is therefore unsurprising that recent research by the Sutton Trust shows that children from working class backgrounds are being 'blocked' from pursuing careers in the 'elitist' and 'inaccessible' creative industries, with entrants to creative subjects at degree level skewed towards those from upper-middle class backgrounds.

Providing children with mentors, encouragement and artistic opportunities is not only important to fuel the talent pipeline into the creative industries.

The arts are valuable in their own right – as interdisciplinary tools in school, or as hobbies that provide a sense of community, friendship and achievement, and as engines of personal growth. Additionally, the arts replenish our spirits and spark joy.

Twinning – by degrees

Below are some examples of arts organisations working with schools. At the 'top' end of this 'partnership' approach is London's Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE), which has literally moved into a school where it has helped achieve stunning results. Twinning arts organisations with schools, however, does not have to replicate the OAE/Acland Burghley model. After all, many schools do not have the space to embed a residence scheme. Nor may it be possible for every school to have a visiting artist due to factors such as logistical constraints or funding. But whatever model a school adopts, twinning should always be focused on community connections, increased participation in the arts, and wider opportunities for children. It can start with just a badge – a statement of intent – and develop as resources allow. Benchmarking and tools to help schools and arts and cultural organisations adopt a 'twinning' scheme should incentivise deeper and imaginative collaborations.

Case Study: Embedded 'Twinning'

The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Acland Burghley School

"This imaginative partnership takes collaboration between professional artists and the public education system into new and exciting territory in which creativity has a part to play in all aspects of the curriculum."

— Sir Nicholas Serota, Chair, Arts Council England

In September 2020 the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) moved into Acland Burghley School in north London. Since then, Acland Burghley and the OAE have fostered a close relationship that benefits both parties and the local community, with a new financial model that supports both the orchestra and the school.

When the orchestra's lease at London's Kings Place was coming to an end, it presented an opportunity to rethink their business model entirely. The OAE already had strong relationships with Camden schools as part of their education programme, and when their appeal for a rehearsal space led to a response from Acland Burghley, personnel from both parties met to tour and discuss the available spaces at the school. The rest is history. Through imaginative thinking, a desire to contribute to and be fully part of a community, the belief that the arts should be accessible, and the hard work of passionate, dedicated staff, the OAE has been successfully embedded into everyday life at Acland Burghley.

With mentorship from OAE musicians, staff and invited creative industry experts, students from Acland Burghley participate in programmes that build their musical, technical and production skills. New opportunities for pupils created by the partnership to date include access to concerts and rehearsals, creating joint school events (musicals, concerts, open days etc) and a young producers' programme, in which pupils gain professional experience in a wide range of production elements, including lighting, sound, set design and building, stage management. According to an evaluation undertaken since the orchestra moved into the school, the GCSE pass rate in music rose from 24 per cent to 77 per cent after two years of the OAE moving into Acland Burghley and in summer 2023 the school registered the highest attendance in Camden. Since then the collaboration has gone from strength to strength.¹

¹ [oae.co.uk/full-of-surprises](https://www.oae.co.uk/full-of-surprises)

In the past year alone (2024-25), 621 of the 1,200-strong aged 11-18 student body engaged directly with OAE projects. This included a flagship project, Breaking Bach – a collaboration between Olivier Award-winning choreographer Kim Brandstrup, student dancers from Acland Burghley, professional dancers and musicians from the OAE. Breaking Bach premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2025.

"[Breaking Bach] was one of the most inspiring things I have ever seen – an absolute assertion of the value of embedding arts and music in the curriculum of all schools, and a transformative experience for those taking part."

–Sarah Crompton, The Observer

In the 2024-25 academic year, the OAE and Acland Burghley provided pupils with opportunities, including:

- Year 7 introduction: a whole year-group introduction to the orchestra for 180 new Year 7 students. Pupils get to meet OAE musicians, hear Baroque music live, and take part in participatory music making. Ahead of the introductory sessions, pupils with additional needs took part in preliminary workshops, so they were already familiar with what would be happening in the whole-year workshops.
- 21 students received support with their GCSE music compositions.
- 58 students with year-round varied Special Education Needs or Disabilities (SEND) received specialist music-making support as part of the OAE's Musical Connections programme.
- 23 students took part in the weekly Young Producers programme, which offered weekly sessions and special events focussing on: training in

and professional engagements carrying out lighting, stagecraft, event production, film-craft, costuming, photo and video editing, budgeting and management. Two Young Producers completed work experience placements at Garsington Opera.

- 131 students attending OAE performances and rehearsals (as well as 534 local residents to the schools, 41 members of Acland Burghley staff).
- Multiple weeks-long work experience opportunities with OAE, working with OAE staff in production, administration, marketing, comms and fundraising.

The partnership also provides financial benefit for both the OAE and Acland Burghley. For the OAE, renting office space within a school environment saves the organisation £21,464 - £32,515 pa; renting rehearsal space within the school saves £15,840 - £18,735 pa. In both cases this rent goes directly to the school, supporting their finances. There has also been a 26% increase in philanthropy for the OAE since the move to Acland Burghley.

The embedding of the OAE into everyday life at Acland Burghley School follows a similar initiative in Germany, when, in 2009, the **Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen** moved into Bremen East comprehensive school, a secondary school on a housing estate with a reputation for poverty and crime.

This arrangement similarly occurred when the orchestra was looking for new rehearsal premises, and the school happened to be in the midst of a renovation. A series of programmes to bring together musicians, pupils and school staff was arranged. Pupils can attend rehearsals, and musicians and pupils eat lunch together. Since the OAE moved in, the school's results have improved, drop-out rates have fallen, and the atmosphere in the school has been transformed. However, staff at the orchestra are keen to

point out that it is not the musical element of the orchestra's residency that is important: "the value of our project lies in the long and persistent groundwork and the feeling of trust that has developed between the children and the musicians".²

Inspired by the OAE's move to Acland Burghley, Arts Council England-supported dance company **ZooNation** moved into Robert Blair Primary School in Islington in 2024.

Case Study: Embedding Artists in a 'Pupil Referral Unit'

London's Chisenhale Gallery and London East Alternative Provision (AP)

London East AP provides an alternative school setting for pupils who are experiencing difficulties in a traditional school environment and need supportive and tailored alternative provision. Chisenhale Gallery is working within its Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in Tower Hamlets and Newham, embedding two artists over a calendar year in two schools and supporting original research around the effectiveness of arts interventions in such settings.

"In a mutually enriching process, the artists [including artist and filmmaker Edwin Mingard] will shape their practice to the setting and curricula, whilst the art teachers share expertise in working with diverse groups of young people in an unstable context. A series of 'creative socials' at Chisenhale Gallery will bring together art teachers from PRUs, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities departments (SEND) and mainstream primary and secondary schools to communicate across educational silos." [<https://chisenhale.org.uk/what-we-do/social-practice>]

² BBC News, [The orchestra fine-tuning the performance of school students](#), 22 April 2015.

This partnership has led Ofsted inspectors to recognise the high-quality artistic output of the schools and comment on the unique relationship that had been formed between the gallery and the school. Art-teaching in these contexts is also about lifelong learning.

Chisenhale Gallery has received the following feedback following a recent Ofsted inspection:

"Ofsted loved how the work and workshops – like the art exhibitions – were woven into the curriculum. It's not just about you guys come, deliver a workshop, and leave – but also how it feeds into students' coursework, supports their qualifications, as well as self-esteem, experience in the world, development of character, resilience that they need – everything else we are trying to achieve here."

Case study: 'Twinning' with Artists Across Art Forms

Andria Zafirakou and Artists in Residence

While working as an art and textiles teacher at Alperton School in Brent, Andria Zafirakou won the \$1 million Global Teacher Prize, having been nominated by pupils and staff. 35 languages are spoken at Alperton school, with the majority of children from economically impoverished backgrounds and exposed to gang violence. Many children arrive at the school with limited skills required for learning.

As a member of the senior leadership team, Zafirakou had redesigned the curriculum to ensure it resonated with her pupils. In her own art classes, she brought in an artist in residence to inspire her pupils; this is one of the

reasons that the school was awarded specialist status in the visual arts.³

In her award acceptance speech, Zafirakou said:

"The arts teach students how to think creatively, which will be important for the jobs they are likely to do when they leave school. They also teach resilience, and that perseverance can pay off. For students the arts provide a sanctuary, a place where they can safely express themselves and connect with their identity. We know that students that spend more time on the arts can become more successful in the rest of their subjects too. My students are evidence of this, they thrive. Look at our results for a curriculum that embraces the arts."

With her \$1m prize money, Zafirakou set up 'Artists in Residence', an ambitious scheme aiming to improve arts education across state schools, by "providing students not only with inspiration and practical advice, but with living examples that a creative career is possible". The Artists in Residence initiative also attracted grants from Arts Council England and other charities. Artists in Residence aimed to facilitate partnerships between schools and artists from a variety of professions within the creative sector, including architecture, fine arts and craft, design, film, TV, radio and photography, literary arts, music and performing arts. It connected schools with local artists, who committed to spending a day with students, with the aim that this would lead to a longer-term partnership.

Zafirakou has spoken passionately about the importance of art as a subject in school. As reported to a Guardian journalist, in 2018, when asked by the then-Schools Minister, Nick Gibb, whether she would become the new face of a teacher recruitment drive, she said:

³ Global Teacher Prize, [Andria Zafirakou 2018](#), 2018.

*"I don't think this government has done enough to support the arts... you introduced the EBacc. The British fashion industry has some of the best designers in the world, yet you killed the textiles curriculum. My curriculum. Where will the designers of the future come from now? In my world, I teach children who often have English as a second language... and the arts are one of a handful of subjects, alongside maths, that give them a level playing field."*⁴

Case Study: A Government-funded 'Twinning' Initiative

Creative Partnerships (2002 - 2011), delivered by Arts Council England

Creative Partnerships was a flagship creative learning programme. A government funded initiative, set up by the DCMS in partnership with the DfE, it brought local artists into schools in 36 of the most deprived areas in England. It was designed to bring artists, organisations and schools together in sustainable relationships, in order to change the approach and attitudes of teachers, the practice of creative individuals and organisations and the aspiration and performance of young people. Creative Partnerships aimed to "demonstrate the pivotal role creativity and creative people can play in transforming education in every curriculum subject for children of all ages and abilities".⁵

Creative practitioners (including writers, environmental designers, entrepreneurs, artists and performers) worked in schools to bring the curriculum alive by working practically and teaching in new ways. Set up in 2002, Creative Partnerships had worked with 2500 schools and 3500 arts

⁴ *The Guardian*, [How the world's best teacher taught the Tories a lesson on the arts](#), 4 April 2021.

⁵ *Lessons in Learning*, Creative Partnerships, 2006.

professionals and had shared practice with a further 5000 schools by 2006. Additionally, Creative Partnerships had provided training for over 6,200 artists and individuals from the creative and cultural sector to enable them to work with schools. The funding to the programme was cut in 2010, with activity in schools ending in 2011.

Evaluation reports found that Creative Partnerships helped pupils develop personal and social skills, with teachers seeing a change in attitudes and behaviours. Also noted were changes in approaches towards creative work, and that the programmes were effective in helping the development of creative skills such as: an ability to improvise, take risks, show resilience, and collaborate with others. Improvements in literacy and speaking as well as an improved ability to apply creative concepts to non-arts subjects were apparent. Creative Partnerships also had a positive impact upon pupil attendance.⁶ Notably, for some pupils, the Creative Partnerships represented a 'fresh start' and opportunities to work in the creative industry bolstered aspirations for the future.

Teachers felt they had developed confidence in their own creative skills and ability to inspire creativity in others.

Full reports

- For the creative practitioners involved in the scheme, there was a positive economic impact. A full report on the economic impact of the initiative can be found here: <https://static.a-n.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/4175594.pdf>
- A full report on impact upon students and teachers can be read here: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/6312/1/Creative%20Partnerships%20initiative%20and%20impact%20%28PDF%20format%29.pdf>

⁶ Parker, David. *Creative Partnerships in Practice: Developing Creative Learners*, Bloomsbury: London, 2013.

The Precedent: Twinned Towns

In 1920, Keighley in West Yorkshire made history as the first UK town to 'twin' with another. Soldiers who had been stationed in Poix-du-Nord, France, during the First World War, horrified by the devastation they saw there, urged Keighley council to draw up a town twinning agreement as an official gesture of solidarity. The Town Twinning initiative grew in popularity after the horrors of the Second World War, when mayors and citizens across Europe saw an opportunity to bring communities together, promoting peace and intercultural exchange. One of the most famous twinning examples is between Coventry, UK and Dresden, Germany, which both suffered ruinous bombing during WWII.

Twinned towns organise intercultural activities and visits, which can boost the exchange of skills and support for the local economy.

If we apply this precedent to schools and arts organisations, the result could be a transformative network of collaborations that enhances education, creativity, and understanding. It is also simple to badge, and the degree of 'twinning' can be led by the participants' resources and aspirations.

Summary

Advantages:

- **Cross-cultural exchange** facilitating joint projects and shared activities.
- **Collaborative teaching and learning across the curriculum** engendering new skills and deeper understanding of each other's worlds and careers.

- **Cultural immersive experiences** giving every child access to potentially life-changing encounters.
- **Co-production** developing performances/exhibitions etc.
- **Residencies and exchanges** leading to cross-pollination of ideas.
- **Shared digital platforms** creating virtual exhibition/show-and-tell spaces showcasing each other's work.
- **Community engagement and outreach** by twinning in another region or part of town.
- **Stimulating lifelong learning and passions and providing inspiring 'mentors'.**

Best Practice:

- **Strategic pairing** between schools and arts and cultural organisations should be based on complementary strengths and shared values, rather than just geographical diversity.
- **Funding and institutional support** could follow, with governments, cultural foundations, and educational bodies providing grants and incentives to sustain or grow partnerships.
- **Technology as a bridge** with virtual exchanges, shared platforms, and online workshops to help maintain engagement beyond occasional visits.
- **Community involvement** allowing the wider community to be engaged, ensuring that twinning extends beyond institutions and into broader civic life.

Ofsted Assessment

Twinning schemes should be integral to schools' standards and assessment processes, and the significance of their impact should be recognised in Ofsted reports. For example, London East AP, was marked 'outstanding' by Ofsted due to the impressive quality of its arts and the fruits of its unique embedded partnership with Chisenhale Gallery. The Superpower of Looking programme, already introduced by Art UK into 9 percent of primary schools across the country as part of a national roll-out, has also attracted the attention of Ofsted's HMI and their Lead in Art and Design, contributing positively to Ofsted inspections. There are many such examples that could be assembled from existing partnerships and interventions in schools where overall standards have been driven up.

Conclusion

Adapting the town 'twinning' model to schools and arts and cultural organisations could create a more interconnected, culturally enriched nation that thrives on shared learning and creative opportunity. The idea of 'twinning' is also simple to explain and can be given impactful visible expression – as a starter for ten.

With thanks to Flora Dodd for her contribution to this paper.

Key Contacts

Please feel free to [Contact Us](#) with any questions

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She is also a writer, journalist and art historian, having completed postgraduate study at The Warburg Institute, London. Her books include 'Michelangelo: The Taddei Tondo' (2017) and 'Italian Renaissance Courts: Art, Pleasure and Power' (2016).

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Nathan is Senior Researcher at The Cultural Policy Unit, having previously served as Senior Researcher in the Arts and Creative Industries Policy Unit, hosted by the Fabian Society. Prior to that, he was a Political Researcher at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, briefing Sir Tony for political engagements and co-authoring reports across multiple policy areas, including health, defence and energy. He also worked as a researcher for Lord Andrew Adonis and supported the writing of Ernest Bevin: Labour's Churchill, a biography of Clement Attlee's Foreign Secretary.

As a writer, he has also contributed to Labour Together reports and published political commentary in The New European. He was trained as a playwright at the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, from which he has maintained a keen interest in policymaking within the arts and cultural sector.

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