CHAPTER 6

Failing the Participant

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, we considered failures in cultural participation from the perspective of those who work as professionals within the cultural sector, whether that be those who fund these types of projects (Chap. 4) or those who work at the frontlines of delivery (Chap. 5). Within wider public policy literature, academics have shown how the meaning of participation assumes that the participant is not just the receiver or consumer of services, but instead has agency in making decisions concerning and evaluating the public services for which they are the intended beneficiary (Ostrom, 1996; Dryzek & List, 2003; Bevir & Rhodes, 2010). Therefore, any consideration of either the successes or failures in participation must also consider the perspective of the participant themselves.

Within cultural policy, both as a practice and as an academic discipline, while there has been growing acknowledgement that the participants' (or public) viewpoint is important, there is also recognition that it is too often overlooked (Holden, 2006; Keaney, 2006). To address this, bodies such as Arts Council England and Creative Scotland have conducted public value surveys to test public opinion about the direction of cultural policy (see for example ICM Unlimited, 2015). Arts Council England also created a quality metrics framework for organisations which aimed to move beyond the tendency to self-report successes and failures, discussed in the

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previous two chapters, to include the perspectives of both peers and the public (Bunting & Knell, 2014). Many local authorities have also consulted their residents when developing cultural strategies, for example, Leeds City Council whose 2017–2030 strategy claims to be their "first co-produced strategy" (https://leedsculturestrategy.co.uk) or Glasgow City Council who employed community engagement specialists to help inform the consultation on the draft (https://www.glasgowcultureplan.com/draft-culture-plan.html). Despite these admirable intentions, the national surveys have been shown to have failed to inform policy change (Lee et al., 2011; Jancovich, 2017), and, in the case of the co-produced cultural strategy in Leeds, several people we interviewed questioned what was different as a result of the process. In terms of the quality metrics framework, while it allows peers to submit open responses, public feedback is reduced to tick box answers to pre-set questions. We argue therefore that most of the approaches that have been adopted to increase wider engagement in cultural policy constitute consultation exercises rather than processes that might allow for participatory decision making. As such, they do little more than help policymakers change the language of their communication.

Likewise, in previous chapters we showed how practitioners are increasingly conscious of trying to provide more agency to their participants, whether that be through decisions on programming within Creative People and Places in Chap. 4 or providing resources for people to deliver their own cultural activities, for example, at Slung Low in Chap. 5. We found little evidence, however, that either of these cases involve participants in defining the organisational purpose or evaluating the project from their own perspectives. What feedback practitioners do capture from participants is largely through either satisfaction surveys, the structure of which encourage positive responses, or through informal and ad hoc means. The voice of participants is used to support narratives relating to the transformation of individual lives, and to celebrate the success of initiatives, rather than to reflect on what might be learnt from hearing alternative points of view that dissent from these core narratives. Among our wider sample, there were few examples where the participants' perspective was allowed to truly challenge that of the professional. Without this potential for dialogue between alternative perspectives, it is difficult to see how the participant might influence judgements about the relative success or failure of participatory activities, let alone the policies and strategies that underpin the goal of increasing equity in the cultural sector.

Despite recent research into everyday participation (Belfiore & Gibson, 2020) and cultural democracy (Gross & Wilson, 2018) (highlighted throughout this book) that demonstrates the range of amateur- or volunteer-led cultural activities in which people are actively engaged, the majority of academic and policy literature still focuses on professional practice, leaving a significant research gap in relation to participatory activities that are volunteer-led. We also argue that the literature which does consider voluntary or amateur arts activities, while making an important contribution to demonstrating the value of such work, tends to demonstrate the same problem as that which is focused on the professional sector: it often makes the case for work of this kind rather than critically examining its successes and failures in practice.

This chapter therefore aims to challenge the narratives that are predominantly employed by both academics and professionals seeking to evidence and defend the "value" of participation by considering how participation is defined by participants themselves and their perspective on the relative successes and failures of both professional and non-professional cultural activities.

In differentiating the participant from the professional, we draw on the definition provided by individuals based on workshops for which they signed up and how they described themselves in interviews. From this, we noted that, as one practitioner said, "[…] the vast majority of organisations, funders, commissioners [and artists] will not or don't feel that they should also participate in the project, everyone else should do the participation".

In other words, the participant is seen as separate from the professional, and this embeds a power relationship between policymakers and practitioners, who we will refer to as professionals throughout this chapter. This was demonstrated by our sample of professionals, who discussed their role in "developing active citizenship" or creating "a change of habit or change of attitude" among their participants rather than seeing a duty for themselves, as a professional, to participate as an active citizen or to question their own habits or attitudes. In contrast, many of those who led cultural activities in a voluntary capacity, such as the makers of Fun Palaces (https://funpalaces.co.uk/about-fun-palaces/) or the community activists within the Big Local (https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/) and Creative Civic Change (https://localtrust.org.uk/other-programmes/creative-civic-change/), saw themselves as participants in much the same way as those who turned up to participate in activities on the day.

The participants' views expressed in this chapter therefore represent a spectrum from those actively involved in designing participatory programmes in a voluntary capacity to those taking part in that participatory activity. This includes those participating within the professional-led practices of Creative People and Places and Slung Low, which were used as illustrative examples in the previous two chapters. In this chapter, we also focus on Fun Palaces, a national programme of local, volunteer-led cultural events, to ascertain the perceived successes and failures in cultural participation within volunteer-led approaches. We spoke to national organisers, who are paid for their work, as well as local organisers, who are not.

As in the previous two chapters, all the participants to whom we spoke were asked to discuss what participation meant to them and how they defined it. We then asked them to consider "failure" both in relation to what the word evoked for them in general, but also what they saw as the failures they had experienced within the cultural sector, particularly in relation to volunteer-led work, working with professionals, and cultural policymaking in general. From this, we demonstrate points of confluence and divergence both among participants and between them and professionals, which we argue demonstrates the value in hearing a range of different perspectives. All quotes in this chapter, unless otherwise stated, come from participants. The central premise of this book is that this process of hearing alternative perspectives and narratives is an essential component in critically reflecting on success and failure with a view to avoiding the repetition of past mistakes.

Meanings of Participation

In the previous two chapters, we saw how policymakers largely define participation as a duty to provide equal opportunities to take part in cultural activities, while practitioners define it both as an issue of equity and as a creative process. While both of these groups acknowledge the everyday participation that might happen in a voluntary or amateur capacity, there remains an overriding concern with non-participation in professional-led activities and an implied deficit on the part of those who, as one practitioner said, "don't get culture" and opt not to participate. Such perspectives reflect the "public participation" model (Brodie et al., 2009) which we associated with the democratisation of culture in Chap. 2. This assumes that the aim of the participation agenda is to reduce barriers to engagement with professional arts practice, whether that be within institutions or with community artists.

Most participants in our sample agreed with the view that cultural participation is an important feature of life, the value of which is not reduced to having access to fun, social activities, but also contributes to individual well-being and community building. But, unlike professionals all adopted a "social participation" definition, which assumes a more horizontal relationship between peers in which, as demonstrated by how our sample self-selected, those organising or facilitating an activity are as much a participant as those taking part in someone else's activity. While a small number of participants did suggest that, although they were active themselves, they were aware of others who chose not to participate in these types of activities, most did not see this as the problem policymakers needed to deal with. In fact, the majority believed that regarding the place where they lived, there were "a lot of people who are doing all kinds of things" if you included volunteer-led and amateur cultural activities in the definition of cultural participation. From this perspective, the very idea of the non-participant who needs to be persuaded to participate or educated on how to do so was seen as either nonsense or insulting, and many supported some variation of the view that "people are happy here. We need more resources, more places to be. But we don't need fixing". The perspectives of the majority of participants in our sample aligned with the notion of cultural democracy, which sees the act of participation as a matter of individual choice, defined in relation to resonance (Burns, 2007), and an expression of agency. Such participation is based on finding shared interests, whether that be professionally mediated or not. It is less concerned with "equal representation" regarding who is participating with any given activity.

In terms of the resonance for participants who choose to take part in activities led by professionals, it was clear they do so for a range of reasons. Some value the social aspect of participating and meeting "like-minded people". Some talked about the creative skills they learned from professionals, while others spoke of the pride they felt in being involved in a high-profile activity. While these were important to them personally, most did not think that everyone should be persuaded to participate in such activities, nor did they believe that their participation contributed to increasing equity, the overriding aim of cultural participation policies. There was antagonism from some at the fact that they had heard themselves or the people in their area described by professionals as being "hard to reach" or "non-engaged", when in fact they took part in projects because of a pre-existing interest in the arts. Most were also already active in local amateur activities and while they valued the professional projects

they had experienced, those in our sample did not suggest that these had any greater value than the amateur activities in which they already participated, nor than what other people might choose to participate in instead.

The resonance for those who organise or take part in voluntary or amateur activities, in contrast to those that were led professionally, was also often socially oriented, and they equally demonstrated a sense of pride. This, however, related more to the pride they felt about participating in, or contributing to, their local geographic community rather than the profile of the activity or the prestige of the organisation or artist delivering it. As a result, for some, there was a stronger focus on reaching out beyond those with similar interests to their own. Several said the aim of these types of activities was to connect the different people who make up their community, though this appears to be less about representing the whole community and more about skills and perspective sharing. Instead of the "duty to involve", which was the focus for policymakers in Chap. 4, for participants, the desire to involve seemed to come from a belief in the different expertise that people with varying perspectives could bring to bear on any project. This relates to an asset-based approach to participation, which recognises and values the skills and interests that people already have (Lloyd & Reynolds, 2020), something that is central to the concept of cultural democracy.

An Asset-Based Approach to Participation

Fun Palaces was cited by a number of people in our sample, both professionals and participants, as a model of success in volunteer-led cultural participation that takes an asset-based approach by "sharing and celebrating the genius in everyone" (https://funpalaces.co.uk/about-fun-palaces/). It operates both as "a campaign for cultural democracy", lobbying for greater recognition of everyday participation, and as a facilitator of locally run events that take place over one weekend a year in locations across the country. Their purpose is to create something that is "more than the sum of their parts" and thereby has the same profile as professionally run activities. For many, the nature of its success was defined in relation to the profile it has achieved rather than in relation to either the activities delivered or the levels of participation at the events they produced.

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Significantly, while Fun Palaces describe their process as "by the people, for the people, with the people", they do not define who the people are, nor claim that everyone should participate in a Fun Palace or that every neighbourhood should have one. As such, they define participation in relation to the concept of resonance described above, encouraging activism rather than a concern with achieving representative equality at their events. Some of the participants from Fun Palaces said the process was about "getting people in a room who wouldn't ordinarily be in a room together from different sectors with different motivations, different backgrounds, different experiences".

However, Fun Palaces evaluations suggest that their participants are more diverse than is the norm in the professional cultural sector (https://funpalaces.co.uk/about-fun-palaces/evaluations-2014-2019/), a fact that our own research corroborated as the participants from Fun Palaces were also more culturally and economically diverse than the participants who took part in the professionally led initiatives we have considered as part of this research. This diversity was therefore also cited as an indicator of success by the founders of Fun Palaces and its funders.

Yet it was notable that many of the local organisers we spoke to expressed a resentment towards the expectation present in the national evaluation to measure their success in relation to the diversity of who takes part. It was said that actively seeking to increase cultural equity in an area takes more time and resources than is possible for an activity that only happens one weekend per year and that they as volunteers were not able to put in the development work needed for this year-round. As a result, some questioned the honesty of the data presented in the evaluations and claimed that simply putting on an event is a success in itself, without the need for other expectations to be laid on top.

An asset-based approach that acknowledges these different perspectives is central to conceptions of participation that define it not just in relation to the activities in which people participate, but in relation to their involvement in decision-making processes. Many participants supported the view that cultural policymakers "need to hear what I've got to say otherwise

what are they basing decisions on?" The idea of "cultural rights" expressed by professionals as the right to take part in their work was therefore seen by the participants we spoke to, both those who engaged in professional activities and those who did not, as a right to decide which activities they wanted to undertake and to have them resourced accordingly. This might or might not involve cultural professionals.

Such an approach to participation shifts the focus of policymaking from a centralised process primarily conducted by cultural "experts" and professionals to a devolved, dialogical process that involves beneficiaries as well as deliverers. Therefore, for most participants, a significant component of judging the success or failure of any cultural participation project or policy was in relation to the level of power they had in the decision-making processes and/or the outcomes of the decisions taken through this process. This stands in contrast to professionals whose criteria for success and failure were more commonly based on the quality of the activity they deliver or the diversity of participation in these projects.

As the focus of this book is to consider what might be learnt from reflecting on the different facets of failure, the following section examines the attitudes to talking about failure from participants before then considering the nature of the failures they perceive to be occurring most often.

Attitudes to Failure

In Chap. 3, we demonstrated a resistance to talking about failure across public policy, and in Chaps. 4 and 5, some professionals suggested a fear of acknowledging failure is prevalent in the cultural sector. At first glance, however, our participants demonstrated a desire to talk about failure, at least in theory. In some cases, there was joyful laughter as they recounted a disaster on a project in which they were involved. In other examples there was defiance against situations where they felt work had been imposed on them which failed to take their interests or skills into account. Most supported the view that "anyone who says they've managed their work perfectly…. they're a liar", and all felt that being honest about failures was a valuable part of the process.

Several participants did, however, recognise that the education system can "instil a strong paradigm of failure equals bad", which in turn creates a fear of failure, fostering a culture that "does not encourage learning but

rewards success and punishes failure". In our sample, this appeared to be most evident among those who would traditionally be understood as having been successful in education and felt a pressure to maintain a self-image of themselves as someone who succeeds. Those that said they had "failed" at school were instead more likely to reflect on how learning from that experience facilitated other successes in life. A number said that they were open to the value of learning from failure in everything they did and enjoyed the opportunity to do so with us. Some participants suggested that as professionals also face the pressure of managing their reputation, participants are "better placed to recognise failure" when it occurs in cultural participation projects. This supports the findings outlined in Chaps. 4 and 5 where we discuss how professionals do indeed fear the reputational damage of talking openly about failure and feel pressured to celebrate their successes instead. We argue this contributes to the "self-reporting" of successes which too often squeeze out participant perspectives from evaluations, especially those that run counter to the official narrative the organisers of the project seek to portray.

For some participants, the narratives that are often told by professionals actually perpetuates problems of cultural participation and reinforces inequities. Several talked about how policymakers often stigmatise the places where they live, presenting them, and by inference the people who live there, as failures. They felt that the categorisation of certain places as being "in need" of the intervention of cultural professionals makes people "feel like failures pretty permanently" and cited this as a reason why people become disengaged. Many participants said that it was not surprising that repeated policy interventions had failed to change patterns of cultural participation, because they were built on a "deficit" approach that treated them as failures to be "fixed". Other participants said they either rejected the definitions of success imposed on them by policymakers or chose to "embrace failure" and challenge dominant narratives. Either way, most participants we interviewed instinctively recognised that success and failure may be perceived differently by different people. As one participant said, "it's not the word that is the problem, it's what people associate with failure". This also presents problems in determining how to learn from success and failure, for if they are entirely contingent on personal perspectives, then it becomes impossible to undertake comparative analysis.

The Plurality of Definitions of Success and Failure

Fun Palaces was described as a response to what is seen by the organisers to be a failed policy discourse that defines certain places as failing and the people within them as cultural non-participants. Its aim is to challenge these narratives by putting on events that foreground the skills that exist within all communities but are often invisible. As such, its purpose is to reject the implicit and explicit definitions of failure imposed by others and "champion cultural democracy" as an alternative narrative.

All agreed that definitions of success and failure must be "tied to the things that I'm trying to change within our local context" and not what others decide. As a result, many recognised that "what might be a success for one, might not be for another". For example, some of the organisers saw the numbers who turned up to their Fun Palace event as a measure of success or failure, while others did not. Some saw the quality of the event they delivered as important, while others focused on the level of "community development" that happens in the process of planning the event throughout the year.

For some, the acceptance of this plurality of approaches was itself a measure of success, praised for giving real power to local participants to create work that "expands into whatever space and capacity people have". Others, however, voiced concerns that the variety of approaches meant "a lot of people are failing on the same thing or perhaps running into issues that other areas have overcome". While some participants thought it was vital that people were allowed to make their own mistakes, others claimed that this perpetuated a failure to learn, which presented some with "a challenge [in] having clarity over what I'm trying to do".

It was also clear that while participants in Fun Palaces appeared comfortable when talking about the systemic failures which led to the creation of the initiative, they still showed some discomfort discussing failures within the programme itself. They were particularly uncomfortable calling out the failures of others, as this was seen as undermining the hard, voluntary work people put into organising the events. Despite having annual peer learning events, most participants of Fun Palaces agreed that "everybody wants to be, you know,

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yeah, be nice to each other and get on" which they believed would be undermined by discussing failure. We argue this reticence makes it even more difficult to share learning between places. As a result, some participants felt that Fun Palaces was falling into the same trap as the professional cultural sector of "lobbying not learning" at these peer learning events, reducing the potential that the initiative could develop and improve, and meaning that Fun Palaces was increasingly becoming "cleverly branded but superficial".

For most participants in our sample, despite an openness to thinking about failure in theory, it was uncommon for them to be provided with opportunities to do so in practice. In a small number of examples, participants described processes of reflection based on a shared responsibility for learning, where a funder, cultural organisation, or their peers demonstrated a desire to review their actions with a view to changing things in future. In most cases, however, participants said that whatever they might think personally, when it came to evaluations, they felt pressured to portray the event positively and to "give [the organiser] what they want to hear".

Many said this was particularly the case when working with cultural professionals, who many described as being "too sensitive" to speak honestly with or as having "a lot of self-doubt [so] they don't like talking about failure". It was also common for participants to perceive a "politeness" in the cultural sector that made them more reticent to discuss failure than they would be in other contexts. We found, however, that it is not only professionals who can appear sensitive or defensive: the same relationship appears to exist between the participants who organise voluntary activities and their peers who take part in what they have organised. There was greater openness to talking about the failures that may have occurred at these events from those whose involvement was limited to participation compared to those who also had some degree of organisational responsibility. This suggests that the fear of talking about failure might have more to do with the level of responsibility one has rather than their identity as a cultural professional, for it was felt that "it's more difficult [to talk about failure] where it has consequences".

The idea of “consequences” has been a recurring theme across all our data, whether it came from a policymaker, practitioner, or participant. That idea is also reflected in the policy literature on failure discussed in Chap. 3, which suggests that a feeling of being accountable and the neo-liberal personalisation of blame (McGuigan, 2014) contributes to a climate in which public honesty becomes more difficult. It was also apparent that the extent to which different people perceive success and failure to different degrees in relation to various facets of projects or policies may also limit the potential for shared learning. If everyone defines success and failure differently, then, as we have also argued has become the case with the term participation, the words success and failure also risk losing any meaning unless these differences are acknowledged and understood in the context of a shared framework for learning. The following section therefore considers where participants locate failure in cultural participation in order to inform the framework that we present in our final chapter, Chap. 7.

Locating Failure and Learning from It

As shown throughout this book, much of the policy focus on participation stems from the statistical evidence of inequality regarding who takes part in professional cultural activities. This is despite widespread recognition among professionals and participants that such data fails to recognise high rates of everyday cultural participation. For many of the participants in our sample, the fact that narratives of cultural non-participation persist, and the extent to which they are bound to assumptions of social failure, was seen to reinforce the sense that “our stuff is not culturally valued by funders”, and without changing this perception, it was believed that cultural policy will continue to fail to address issues of equity.

Participants more commonly defined participation not in relation to who takes part in what, but in relation to the level of agency and involvement in decision making that the participant has. While professionals claim there is a policy shift towards this approach, however, very few of the participants in our sample said they could see much evidence of this in practice. Instead, most agreed that there remained a “paternalistic attitude that [professionals] are the experts and that no-one else could make a qualified decision”, even about things that affect their own lives. As a result, many said there was a breakdown of trust between the public and the professional cultural sector. Many participants supported the view that

"artists are often viewed with suspicion as they are seen to be promoting their own agendas…or working to the funders' demands rather than the communities they purport to be empowering".

Far from being open-minded, provocative, and engaged, as many of the artists we spoke to described themselves, participants often described them as having closed minds, being wedded to narrow forms of creative practice, and creating "processes that treat [participants] with disdain". This was demonstrated by examples of "so-called co-creation" or collaborations between professionals and amateurs, where the processes employed were perceived as having failed to deliver an equitable relationship between parties, because "professional artists don't want to be mixed up with amateurs". This was seen by participants as a failure on behalf of the artists to recognise the opportunity for the exchange of ideas or learning, and they said it left them less likely to want to engage with cultural professionals in the future. In this context, non-participation in professional practice was seen by some as an active choice, and it was a failure of policymakers to see it as such.

Boundaries Between Amateur and Professionals

The aim of Fun Palaces is to recognise the expertise in everyone: "the motto is everyone's an artist". In many of the locations where Fun Palaces take place, there is a blurring of the boundaries between amateur and professional. Activities take place in a range of settings, from established professional arts organisations to community venues. Similarly, these activities might be led by professional artists volunteering some of their free time to their community or by amateur creatives wanting to share their skills.

This relationship was not always an easy one. Several participants provided examples of working alongside professionals where they felt disrespected throughout the process. One told us about an instance in which they offered their expertise only to be told "you're not an artist", to which they responded, "no, but I'm an everyone, and when people concentrate on artists, they forget the word everyone". Another participant said that their local cultural organisation indicated they wanted to bring the Fun Palaces audience to them, but when they were invited to participate in the community activities happening elsewhere, they only sent leaflets and were unwilling to

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"meet, have a chat, and [find out] the sorts of things we're interested in". In another example, a participant organiser set up a "Create Night", where local creatives could meet on a regular basis to develop local practice and "break down barriers between fine artists and crafters". They described it as "a kind of show and tell thing where you sit in a circle and say this is what I've been doing this week and there might be somebody who's been doing some abstract sculpture out of cardboard boxes sat next to somebody who's been knitting, next to somebody who's been writing a piece of creative writing". While these events carried on for quite a while, the organiser found that "the people who were the professional 'fine' artists wouldn't come". The feedback from participants indicated that they got a lot out of this experience and developed their practice, but the organiser claimed that the professional artists felt "they were being taken down by being compared with amateurs", and it appeared as though they thought they had nothing new to learn.

For the participants involved in these experiences, the relationship between Fun Palaces and the professional sector was seen as replicating a failure they had experienced previously. This meant that the participants involved felt less inclined to contact professional artists or organisations, let alone try to find ways to work with them in the future. It was also seen to demonstrate the failure of many cultural professionals to demonstrate a willingness to work in different ways and to learn from doing so.

In Chap. 5, we showed that some of those who labelled themselves as participatory artists distanced themselves from what they saw as the patronising attitudes of other cultural professionals, though they stopped short of seeing themselves as participants. We argue that the growing interest in the idea that everyone is an artist (see, e.g., Fun Palaces and sixty-four million artists) rather than defining everyone as a participant, including the professional, perpetuates this problem rather than eradicate it.

Significantly, when asking participants about different types of participatory practice, they did not tend to differentiate between them. None of

the participants we spoke to supported the view that participatory art was a practice in its own right. Instead, most believed that all art was participatory. In fact, some saw participatory art as perpetuating the problem by still being mediated by the professional, and for many this equated to middle-class interests and values. As one participant said, "[art] wasn't only created by those that were socially privileged. So why maintain it that way? Why keep it that way? I think it's unfair. I think it's really unfair".

A small number in our sample recognised that artists themselves had precarious work lives and often self-subsidised their own practice, acknowledging that "the ability to [be an artist] is a privilege that is not open to those on low incomes/without independent means". This, however, served to demonstrate the inevitability that professional artists would always come from a particular class background. Indeed, the very term "artist" was seen by some as a way of valuing differently what the primarily middle-class, white professional does from the creative activities or cultural lives of everyone else. Informed by theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984), we have written elsewhere about how the institution of the arts was established to do just this (Jancovich & Stevenson, 2019). The fact that this is legitimised by cultural policymakers primarily funding the artistic professional while claiming to be concerned with equity is what made many participants angry.

Most participants thought that policymakers should focus less on the equality of participation in professional practice and more on equitable resource distribution for everyday practices. Many supported the view that "the community buy-in is there, but we need more resources to make the things happen", whether that be about spaces, equipment to hire, or even employing professional artists. In other words, as one participant said, rather than "the artist being funded to find the community, it should be *vice versa*".

Many also supported the view that when it came to participation in activities, "people would still prefer to just stay local if they could". In practice, however, most said their lived experience is of cuts to both local authority budgets and adult education services. Many provided examples of how community cultural resources in the places they lived were diminishing, while they felt that the professional sector was being protected. This was said to be having "a massive effect on the everyday creatives for want of a better word—versus the cultural professional", meaning that the way funding was being distributed was widening rather than diminishing the gap between the two.

Because they felt that participatory work was being appropriated by practitioners who were soaking up an increasingly large amount of community funding that could have supported voluntary practices, some saw this as the failure of cultural participation. Many participants wanted policymakers to "step back and think a little bit more about whether it always needs to be mediated by [professionals]". For many participants, the benefits of funding professionals were seen to be outweighed by the cost "[…] in terms of value for money, in terms of what you're actually trying to achieve by engaging people in the arts […] the impact you're having on individuals and their health and wellbeing, then I would say, you know, actually the voluntary art stuff, the day-to-day stuff is probably having more impact on people's lives than taking them to the Royal Opera House".

In Chap. 4, we discussed how a place-based approach to funding based on providing more equitable resource to all parts of the country, with decisions on how it was spent made locally, was mooted as a policy approach within Arts Council England. Instead, when Creative People and Places (CPP) was launched, it put places in competition with each other, which we argue reinforced, rather than addressed, the existing inequities between places. Many of the participants we spoke to who had been part of CPP projects also criticised the fact it tended to result in the creation of new professional arts organisations with traditional governance structures in the successful locations rather than devolving the money to existing amateur and voluntary cultural activities.

In contrast, some participants we spoke to cited the Local Trust's Big Local Project (https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/) as being more effective at addressing inequality by distributing equal amounts of funding to all eligible areas, without the level of competition seen in Creative People and Places. Furthermore, eligibility was defined not through a lack of participation, but by a lack of investment that had previously gone into the neighbourhoods from policymakers. Many participants saw this as a positive shift in the narrative as it recognised that the failure lay in the structures of public funding rather than with them.

There were concerns from some participants that too many place-based initiatives, not only CPP and Big Local in England, but also those in Scotland and Wales, were placing too large sums of money in the hands of relatively few people in the communities that received funding. Some questioned the legitimacy of decisions made by small groups of residents who, like cultural professionals, set themselves up as self-appointed experts. It was felt by some that this could perpetuate inequalities in certain places, creating closed groups that can exclude as much as they include.

Others said that the reliance on local people, often volunteers who had varying levels of skills to deliver, engendered a caution in how money was spent due to the very fear of failure we have been exploring throughout this book. Managing such large programmes of work with large budgets, it was said, requires a further level of professionalism that detracts from the voluntary ethos it was supposed to support. As one participant said, funding too often "ties you to a map for your project" that is counter to the generative nature of participatory and community-led approaches. This demonstrates the complexity of policy design and the need to reflect on the successes and failures within processes of delivery, whether these are led by professionals or volunteers.

Funding Everyday Culture

Fun Palaces was established by two individuals who, while coming from professional arts backgrounds, initially set up the campaign in a voluntary capacity. While all local events continue to be run by volunteers, as the campaign has gained momentum, they have increased the funding they receive centrally as an organisation. This money has been spent on paying a part-time salary to the two founders to promote their national brand, recruiting a team of champions to encourage more events across Britain, and to facilitate the work of local activists by providing support and training.

However, some participants expressed real anger that the money raised centrally was not devolved to the local areas putting on events so that they could decide how it was spent. Several people commented that the lack of funding to local areas had a direct impact on the quality of work they offer and that this in turn devalued rather than celebrated local cultural projects. They felt that there would be more local benefit from spending the money on the events rather than building the profile of the initiative at a national level.

Several also supported the view that it was wrong that "other people are getting paid, but they expect me to do it for free", and some challenged the voluntary nature of the events themselves as undermining the value of both creative and participatory work. As one participant said, "one of the frustrations is the expectation for people to constantly do things for nothing." In some cases, artists who were already financially precarious said that the voluntary nature

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of Fun Palaces was encouraging more cultural institutions to think they did not need to pay creatives. Likewise, some participants said the idea that community development could be done by volunteers was not sustainable in the long term.

Conversely, some of the participants we spoke to felt it was important for the ethos of the events to stay voluntary, as being paid "does change the dynamic". Others expressed concerns that devolving all the money locally would inevitably mean that the areas or people who already had resources, capacity, or networks would benefit most, while needing it least. They valued the support and training from the national office and the paid champions. What all agreed on was that more money could be made available to help cover the direct costs of the activities. Most supported the idea of small pots of "micro funding" rather than larger pots of money that stood to distort the way they work, which they had seen happen in cases such as CPP and Big Local.

The tension about how and where money should be spent within Fun Palaces demonstrates the value of local funding, but equally the risks associated with doing so, not least in terms of how such work is sustained over the long term and how policymakers respond to varying needs, rather than simply building on success.

The greatest concern expressed not only about local, place-based initiatives, but about all policy approaches to address the participation agenda, was that they were invariably described as short-term projects or experiments. Participants criticised the fact that CPP was described as an action research programme rather than a commitment to long-term investment in places. Participants in Slung Low's *Flood* said that "the greatest failure was that it didn't keep going", and Fun Palaces was criticised for focusing too heavily on a weekend of events and not enough on the development work and activities that were seen as needing to take place year-round. Many participants said their experiences showed that policymakers were only ever willing to make a time-limited commitment to the places and people among whom they lived.

Despite some of the budgets for participatory work being comparably large for a short-term community project, they were still seen to be relatively small levels of investment compared to previous investments through

local authority community and arts development funds. Many participants therefore questioned the sustainability of cultural interventions once the funding runs out.

Many also described a growing "event culture" that pervaded the way funding was provided. Participants had countless examples of high-profile projects or initiatives that had raised the aspirations of participants and attracted large numbers of people to take part, only for "the circus to leave town". It was often suggested that this meant such initiatives were destined to fail, as everyone knew that they could not be sustained over the long term. The post-funding comedown, or "hangover", as one person called it, made participants feel much worse about their area, not better, than they had before. One participant mentioned the case of Hull City of Culture, where public surveys showed a positive increase in public attitudes during the event, both towards culture and the city, but the statistics suggest that in the following year, they were at a lower point than before the event took place. This was seen as exacerbating the feeling that "[…] things have been done to [us] […] stuff happens, and they disappear. And people like me sit here trying to keep doing it again, and we can't, we can't do it, we can't get on with it […] because the funding goes".

This kind of project mentality was also acknowledged by professionals in Chaps. 4 and 5 as a barrier to embedding long-term, sustainable change in cultural participation. While professionals seemed resigned to the inevitability of this within the constraints of funding, for participants its continuance merely demonstrated that cultural policy was continuing to "make all the same mistakes again and blame it on audiences". Participants did not want to rely on the largesse of arts organisations or constantly seek individual grants; they wanted to be able to build a sustainable cultural infrastructure in the places in which they lived.

The Failure to Sustain

In the case of Fun Palaces' annual weekend of activity, the initial aim was to organise a nationwide event which created a festival atmosphere in locations all across the country, while simultaneously increasing the profile of their campaign for cultural democracy. By linking events throughout the area together under the banner of a single weekend, the founders argued that it provided motivation for different areas to get involved and provided marketing opportunities

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to direct audiences to local activities. The aim was to increase recognition of the brand, because "from recognition follows funding, [and from funding] follows making things happen".

Several local organisers, however, said that the idea of having to limit activities to one weekend, and the fact that this weekend was prescribed by the national office, was in fact limiting opportunities when the aim should be to increase them. Some areas said that the weekend also focused attention too much on the Fun Palace "product" and detracted from the process of local people collaborating in a way that best suits them. As one participant said, "a successful Fun Palace [should be] what has been happening during the year of the making, it's not the event". Others said putting events on at the same time fostered a spirit of competition, and meant that for many, it became about "being shiny [and] about numbers, [when it should be] about that process and how we drive that process forward into the long term".

As a result, there was said to be "a lot of push back right now and I think quite rightly around why, if it is completely community led, is it on one specific weekend?" Instead, many local organisers wanted to focus their attention on sustaining activities year-round but struggled to identify ways in which they could do this without the support of the national office. Some wanted to retain the profile of the brand without the focus on events, as they felt that this would help them attract resources and retain interest from participants. Others thought that the brand would be diluted by losing the focus on the national weekend of events and wanted organisers to call their other activities something different.

Throughout this book, we have shown how the profile of participatory actions or activities are frequently the primary measure of how our sample define success. In the case of Fun Palaces, as an awareness raising campaign, profile is necessarily central to the way the organisation themselves define their success. We argue, then, that where there is too much focus on profile, it can start to define activities, as it does here, limiting Fun Palaces organisers to one weekend of activity per year. This may limit not only the opportunities to participate, but also the processes and levels of participation within such activities.

Although the failure to "shift the dial" in the participation agenda has been acknowledged by all those involved in our research, it was clear from our sample of participants that this was understood very differently by them than by professionals. While both policymakers and practitioners commonly define the problem of participation as a social one, for the participants to whom we spoke it was clearly seen as a problem stemming from cultural policy and the way decisions are made about people's cultural lives. Despite the rhetoric of providing greater support for cultural democracy, most participants felt that there were few, if any, funded initiatives that were "truly community-led", and this, many felt, meant they failed to be embedded in the communities who were the intended beneficiaries of the work. This is demonstrated both in relation to the focus on funding a narrow band of professionals and organisations at the expense of equitably resourcing everyday participation as well as the focus on funding activities that will gain a high profile, which necessitate a focus of reproducing narratives of success, that squeeze out opportunities to learn from failure.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to demonstrate the value of hearing the perspectives not only of professionals, who see themselves as delivering the participation agenda, but also of participants, who are the intended recipients and beneficiaries of such work. What was most evident from the testimonies of those we spoke with was that they did not see themselves only as beneficiaries but also as deliverers and decision makers. The failure of cultural participation policy was its inability to recognise this. Many said that being part of our research was the first time they had been asked about their views on policy, and even those who had been asked for feedback on projects they had been involved in previously questioned what had changed as a result of their contributions.

Like professionals, there was consensus among the participants in our sample that cultural participation adds value to both individuals and society, but participants challenged the assumption that a problem of non-participation even exists, instead observing a policy failure to not only recognise but also to value the everyday cultural activities in which people already participate. Many participants made a strong case for shifting the focus of cultural policy from increasing participation in professional cultural activities to increasing the resources directed towards supporting

everyday culture, evoking the principles of an asset-based approach to development. In such an approach, success and failure relate more to the processes of how people participate rather than the nature of the cultural practice in which they are participating or who chooses to participate in what is produced.

Based on our research, we argue that although the rejection of the concept of the cultural non-participant in favour of a focus on participation as an active choice may give greater recognition to the agency of any given participant, this does not always address questions about equity regarding who is allowed to participate in decision-making processes. As such, a focus on successes and failures must also remain cognisant of whose voices and narratives are heard within the planning, delivery, and, crucially, the evaluation stages of such processes.

This chapter has also shown that, in theory at least, participants placed more importance on honestly reflecting on success and failure than either group of professionals discussed in the previous two chapters. They also had a more nuanced understanding, from the outset, that success and failure are complex concepts, which mean different things to different people. They were far less likely to see success and failure in binary terms or as final judgements. We also demonstrated, however, that the fear of failure, or at least of openly sharing stories of failure, could be as present for amateurs as it was for professionals if there was a sense of responsibility for the work, as organisers often faced "consequences" if things did not go as planned. This further supports our argument throughout this book that evaluations which hold individuals or organisations accountable for what has been done must be structured so as to limit the sense that people will be personally punished if they admit failure. Instead, the focus should be on critical reflection and learning from the many facets of success and failure, and from multiple perspectives, to consider what might be done differently in the future.

As we showed through the illustrative example of Fun Palaces, most of the participants in our sample acknowledged the success of that initiative in creating a profile for everyday participation, but most also accepted that every place might have a different definition of what a successful or failed Fun Palace would mean for them. There was no consensus among participants about these meanings, nor was there a desire to find one, but there was an acknowledgement of the value of hearing contrasting perspectives and the shared learning that could arise from that process. As such, this chapter has not sought to compare the perspectives of participants with

professionals to claim that one perspective is right or wrong. Neither does it suggest that there is consensus within our different sample groups. Instead, it demonstrates the need to not only ask what the criteria of success and failure are, but also question who gets to decide how those criteria are established. The final chapter will present our failure framework, which we believe can help ensure that success and failure can be acknowledged and discussed in a way that is inclusive of different perspectives and alternative narratives.

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