

# Arts-based education between inclusion and liberalization: a comparative overview of Europe<sup>1</sup>

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*In recent years, there has been a weakening of the role played by public institutions in the development of educational and cultural policies aimed at addressing social inclusion (Dubet 2002; Sennet 1999; Touraine 2010). Their emancipatory potential has increasingly given way to neoliberal logics of merit, competition, and quantification (Sandel, 2020; Grimaldi et al., 2016). On the one side, governance has shifted from centralized State models to decentralized networks involving civil society, private actors, and public-private partnerships (Mulcahy 2006; Bonet, Négrier 2018; Belfiore 2022). While this diversification has fostered innovation and plurality, it often risks reinforcing inequalities and weakening coherent strategies (O'Brien 2014).*

*On the other side, at the European level, education and culture have been increasingly framed as means for economic development and innovation, strongly shaped by neoliberal paradigms that emphasize competitiveness and labor market adaptability (O'Connor 2024). Strategic frameworks such as the New European Agenda for Culture (European Commission 2018) and the Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 have stressed the development of soft skills through arts-based education (ABE), cultural participation, and non-formal learning.*

*This paper critically examines national and EU cultural and educational programs, focusing on the tension between inclusion and liberalization. Drawing on comparative research from the Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE) project aimed at analyzing arts-based education policies and programs across various European countries, we highlight the contrasts between countries with strong traditions of public cultural welfare and others, such as Italy (Bodo, Bodo 2019), where fragmented policies and a reliance on the Third sector have limited the role of arts-based education in fostering social inclusion.*

## *Introduction*

Recent years have witnessed a weakening of the role played by the State and public institutions in the development of educational and cultural policies aimed at addressing educational poverty and social inclusion (Dubet 2002; Sennet 1999; Touraine 2010). The emancipatory and democratic potential of educational institutions appears to have yielded to a neoliberal market logic focused on merit, competition, and quantification (Sandel 2020; Grimaldi et al. 2016). The result is a general weakening of these institutions' ability to drive social change.

On the one hand, a shift from centralized State models toward more decentralized, networked governance structures involving civil society, private actors, and public-private partnerships has emerged (Mulcahy 2006; Bonet, Négrier 2018; Belfiore 2022).

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While this pluralization of players can foster innovation and flexibility, it also raises concerns about equity, access, and the coherence of long-term policy strategies and the consequent risks of reinforcing inequalities and social exclusion and failing to counteract educational poverty (O'Brien 2014; Belfiore 2022).

On the other hand, decentralization have undermined the importance of national governments in addressing cultural and educational policies (Sassatelli 2006). At the European level, there has been an increasing emphasis on positioning education and culture as strategic tools for economic growth, social inclusion, and innovation. This shift has been strongly influenced by neoliberal paradigms shaping policies (O'Connor 2024) which frame education not only as a public good but also as a means to enhance individual competitiveness and labor market adaptability. Central to this agenda, as reflected in strategic frameworks such as the New European Agenda for Culture (European Commission 2018) and the Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026, is an emphasis on the development of soft skills often promoted through arts-based education (from now on ABE).

This paper discusses this controversial framework, shedding light on its implications for social inclusion for young people and children in Europe. The article focuses on the complex funding system and on public governance. It highlights significant differences between European countries. While Nordic and Eastern European countries seem to be able to guarantee social inclusion, though on the basis of different political traditions, the Italian case, as an example of the Mediterranean area, reproduces mechanisms of social inequality from early childhood onwards.

Firstly, the paper presents the theoretical debate and examines national and EU cultural and educational programs. It then considers the tensions between inclusion and instrumentalization in current policy orientations, starting from an analysis of ABE policies in European countries. It draws on the comparative research conducted as part of the Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE) project, which analyzed ABE policies and programs addressed to children and young people across various European countries. The paper compares national contexts with stronger traditions of welfare and publicly led policies to those, such as the Italian one (Bodo & Bodo 2019), where the Third sector plays a prominent role and where educational and cultural policies have often lacked continuity and coordination, as well as an effective role in fostering social inclusion.

The paper also allows for the identification of a plurality of welfare arrangements in which the state and the Third sector jointly contribute to the provision of arts-based education programmes. Within these configurations, the Third sector may play a pivotal role in processes of co-creation and civic participation, operating in partnership with public bodies. From this perspective, ABE can be situated within the broader debate on plural welfare and social citizenship (Pesenti, Lodigiani 2015). Contemporary welfare systems can be understood as hybrid configurations in which public institutions, market actors and third-sector organisations jointly contribute to the production of social goods. Within this framework, culture and education are not merely policy domains, but constitute key dimensions of citizenship and substantive equality (Ferrera 2013; Zamagni 2015).

The paper concludes by presenting some critical challenges that need to be addressed in order to foster social inclusion through ABE and comments on the role that public and private bodies can jointly play.

1. *The role of cultural and educational policies, from welfare to public-private partnership*

A critical debate has emerged in recent years around the change in the role played by public bodies in addressing policy strategies in education and culture. Such a shift marks a departure from the traditional role of the public sector as a provider of universal services. Public policies have been whittled down both in terms of their strategic view but also in terms of providing funding. This change can be seen at the local (Banks, Oakley 2024; Minetto, Tarassi 2024), regional, national (Frederickson, Smith 2003), and even European level (O'Connor 2024). It has been generated by the decline of public power, the fragmentation of institutional authority, and especially the diminished role of public bodies in addressing the common good. Public entities have been ever more obliged to answer not only for their public mission but also for their economic sustainability. The lack of financial and human resources has increasingly pushed public actors to guarantee financial sustainability and balance their budgets. The principle of the balanced budget, once a technical administrative requirement, has become a driver able to reshape policies and practices (Turrini 2019): public funds are justified less in terms of social value and more in relation to economic sustainability and measurable returns. This principle reflects a pragmatic response to austerity following the economic crisis and marks a deeper transformation of the public mission. Public bodies must redesign their missions as organizations that are forced to “do more with less,” following the principles of efficiency and cost-benefit analysis (Osborne, Gaebler 1992; Harvey 1989).

This dynamic has been described as reflecting an entrepreneurial logic in which governments act less as traditional providers of welfare and more as entrepreneurial actors (Harvey 1989; 2007; Osborne, Gaebler 1992). In this model, public authorities adopt practices borrowed from the private sector, such as performance management, marketing (Harvey 1989) and need to behave like market-oriented enterprises, seeking alternative funding sources, working on a project-oriented basis instead of long term strategies, and developing private partnerships to be sustainable. The public sector is thus becoming more entrepreneurial and privatized, while private organizations are responding to a public mission and to social responsibility, thus becoming more public. This inversion is making the provision of public services under models of public-private governance more common. A transition from public management toward more decentralized, networked governance models involving civil society, private actors, and public-private partnerships has therefore emerged (Mulcahy 2006; Bonet, Négrier 2018; Belfiore 2022).

This transition can also be interpreted through the lens of plural welfare regimes and differentiated welfare cultures, often described as forms of “liberal neo-welfarism” (Ferrera 2013). Rather than representing a withdrawal of public authorities, the growing reliance on public-private partnerships reflects a reconfiguration of welfare provision in which responsibility for cultural and educational rights is redistributed across public institutions, market actors and community-based organisations. From

this perspective, the Third sector assumes a structurally ambivalent role within what has been defined as “civic welfare” (Zamagni 2015): on the one hand, it may compensate for public retrenchment and cost-cutting; on the other, it can operate as a key arena for civic co-production, depending on the regulatory, institutional and financial frameworks in place.

In this framework, there has been a shift from government, in terms of the direct administration of services, to governance, understood as the management of networks of relationships (Rodes 1996; Peters, Pierre 1998). In a model of government, there is a direct control over cultural and educational services which are funded, designed and implemented by public institutions, while in networked governance, the role of the public sector has become less about direct provision and more about mediating among a plurality of actors, including private foundations, NGOs, cultural associations, universities, and community groups to deliver cultural and educational programs (Peters, Pierre 1998; Turrini 2019). In this model, public institutions no longer operate as unique providers but also as facilitators, mobilizing resources, mediating interests, and building partnerships.

This shift towards the privatization of public bodies has also been affected by neoliberal approaches where “human well-being can be best advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2007, 22). Neoliberal ideology is based on the belief that markets function as self-regulating systems capable of producing outcomes more effectively than public intervention (Harvey 2005). According to neoliberal discourse, it is assumed that the individualized and deregulated private sphere, instead of the public sphere, represents the most efficient way to organize social and economic life, displacing the legitimacy of public forms of governance (Lipman 2011). In this framework, policies and programs directly managed by the public sphere are portrayed as inefficient, bureaucratic. Such narratives also serve to legitimize the privatization of services in education and culture, shifting responsibility toward the entrepreneurial capacities of individuals. The diminishing role played by public bodies is also a consequence of this neoliberalist turn as public entities are considered bureaucratic and resistant to change. This process has brought about a privatization of public services in the fields of education and of culture, with philanthropic organizations absolving themselves of their public mission and provision of public services while private organizations develop educational and cultural activities under public commission or concession, or under public-private partnerships or sponsorships. Education is increasingly populated by a third space constituted by philanthropists and non-profits (Reckhow, Snyder 2014; Tobiasson 2019).

As proposed within the “Third Way” framework (Lewis, Surender 2004), civil society, public authorities and market actors should be understood as mutually interdependent in the provision of welfare services such ABE. Within this approach, public-private partnerships are conceived not merely as instruments of service delivery, but as governance arrangements aimed at safeguarding a public mission and ensuring the provision of public goods.

However, while the pluralization of private and public players may enrich ABE by drawing on diverse expertise and leveraging additional resources, it also introduces

challenges: pluralization of players raises concerns about equity, coherence of long-term policy strategies and risks reinforcing inequalities as decision-making becomes fragmented among multiple actors whose priorities may not coincide with the public interest and with a strategic view (Rhodes 1996; Jessop 2002).

From this point of view, the critical analysis of the privatization of ABE is however relevant because it raises concerns regarding the accessibility and equity of educational opportunities and the risk of weakening the public mission of culture in favor of economic returns (Giroux 2014).

## *2. The policy approach considering culture and education as commodities*

The need to consider the economic return of cultural and educational activities rather than their value as public goods has been strongly affected by neoliberalist approaches to policy making in recent decades. This change began when culture was perceived as a means of economic development for cities facing a post-industrial crisis (Oakley, O'Connor 2015).

The culture and creative industries policy approach (Hesmondhalgh 2019), which was later adopted at the European as well as national levels, has affected our understanding of culture as an industry and as a commodity to be consumed rather a public good to be shared. This approach affected our understanding of culture, but also of education and, in particular, ABE (O'Connor 2025) and in the provision of public services. At first, the shift from a welfare state providing public services to an entrepreneurial state meant systematic cuts to cultural and educational services which were not considered as valuable as the ones having a direct economic return.

The economic view of culture risks transforming culture into a commodified product, framing it in terms of economic impact and ability to generate economic development and urban regeneration. Such an approach marginalizes the intrinsic value of culture as “art for art’s sake” and its contribution to producing collective identities, social cohesion, civic participation. Culture and ABE are regarded as exclusive goods, as discretionary luxury products to be individually consumed rather than a common good which should be commonly accessible. Indeed, it has been argued that, “as art and culture are cut from education, or made prohibitively expensive,” it is “effectively privatizing whatever remains of the system of public goods” (Mazzucato, O'Connor, Bennett 2025, 9). The consequences of adopting an economically-focused approach to culture result in culture being considered solely as an industry, privileging its economic sustainability rather than the need to guarantee the widest possible access. O'Connor’s critique highlights the need to move beyond a narrow economic evaluation of culture and to embrace a holistic approach that recognizes its educational and transformative potential, considering art and culture as part of livability (Calafati *et al.* 2023), as a “foundational” human right as outlined in the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which states that “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”

The need to consider culture as a common good changes the perspective in which to consider public policies, not just as a matter of public subsidies but also of building up an infrastructure, including regulations, capacity building, legal frameworks, and legal-regulatory infrastructure. In this view, the primary role of cultural policy is to

find ways of sustaining and expanding the production of and participation in culture by the widest possible range of people. The question of culture as a public good is about the right to full participation on the one hand, and on the other, about how to ensure the continued functioning of the interconnected public and private system of art and culture (Mazzucato, O'Connor, Bennett 2025, 7).

On the contrary, policy landscape dominated by a neoliberal logic that privileges competitiveness and measurable outcomes also significantly impacts our understanding of culture and education, especially regarding the kinds of skills that education should provide. This approach has profound implications in the management of cultural organizations as well as educational institutions such as universities and schools.

The paradigm of the entrepreneurial public entity, already consolidated in urban policies (Harvey 1989; Jessop 2002), has extended to educational and cultural organizations. In a context marked by a scarcity of resources and increasing competition, schools, universities, and cultural institutions have been asked to be self-sustainable, entrepreneurial, and accountable (Ball 2012; Olssen, Peters 2005), and to reorient their activities toward generating economic revenue.

According to many authors (Bennett 1995; Sandel 2020), economic sustainability should be counterbalanced by the safeguard of civic mission in order to avoid increasing inequalities in access to cultural literacy. When educational cultural activities are treated primarily as commodities, they risk becoming exclusive services available only to those who can afford them, thus contradicting the very idea of culture as a public good (Biesta 2017; Giroux 2014). This approach affects educational institutions, which are increasingly influenced by a broader marketization of education (Brancaleone, O'Brien 2011), namely by market logics, performance metrics, individual responsibility and employability (Ball 2012; Brown 2015; Davies, Bansel 2007). Within schools, this entrepreneurial approach also translates into competition for visibility and prestige: schools are pressured to adopt managerial models of governance that prioritize performance metrics over meaningful learning experiences. Educational programs are pressured to demonstrate impacts through measurable outcomes such as student employability or rankings (Anholt 2007; Gray 2008). According to Apple and Au (2009), education has been reframed, with schools considered as competitive enterprises, learning as an economic investment, students as “disimagination machines” (Giroux 2014), entrepreneurial subjects, as self-managing agents responsible for maximizing their own human capital (Bröckling 2016). In this critical debate, the use of high-stakes standardized tests has become a way of defining school and student competition as the data produced by the tests can then be used as the metrics for competition in the educational marketplace (Apple 2006). As Au states (2016), these rankings, even though promoted as being meritocratic, in fact promote and exacerbate structural and racialized inequalities. Consequently, educational institutions tend to increase stratification and exclusion, reproducing social hierarchies through mechanisms of testing, ranking, and accountability (Apple 2004; Au 2016). While a number of projects have been put in play at the policy level to avoid the risk of marginalization and exclusion in education and ABE, according to the authors (Apple 2004; Au 2016), they risk remaining fragmented efforts without a structured strategy. According to Ball (2003), the system

of accountability explains education through inputs, outputs, outcomes to assess performance, thus cutting out any form of aesthetic or social value.

The use of standardized and quantitative metrics has favored scientific subjects and inhibited the integration of the arts into education. As Aróstegui (2019) argues, this unidimensional approach to evaluation in which only what is measured counts, values the STEM subjects rather than the Arts and Humanities as “the nature of the artistic reality is beyond the nature of the measurement tools” (Aróstegui 2019, 8). This approach is contained in the report *Art for Art’s Sake? The Impact of Arts Education* (OECD 2013), which underlines that there are insufficient data proving the relation between ABE and the development of skills in students and that “evidence of any impact of arts learning on creativity and critical thinking, remains largely inconclusive, partly because of an insufficient volume of experimental research on these matters and also because of the difficulty of adequately measuring these skills” (OECD 2013, 258). In this and other reports and declarations, ABE, even though it is theoretically valued, is not implemented within school curricula because it cannot be measured. There are attempts to evaluate the arts in the school curricula from a qualitative point of view, but they not integrated into a measurement system (Horsley 2009).

In some cases, the intrinsic value of the arts is located in developing “artistic skills” and “artistic habits of mind” (OECD 2013, 18-19), though the impact of ABE is not really seen as related to the development of other skills, technical and social skills, even though these are often promoted through ABE, as reflected in other documents at the European level such as the *New European Agenda for Culture* (European Commission 2018) and the *Council Conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026*. The development of creative skills is seen to be a good thing at the economic level (Craft 2002), and ABE is linked to objectives of economic growth, social innovation, and employability, as a means of enhancing individual competitiveness and labor market adaptability (Ranczakowska 2025). This framework can also be seen in the report *Education at a Glance 2025* (OECD 2025) where, among the outputs, it is valued according to question “how does educational attainment affect participation in the labour market.” Biesta (2017) warns that, when the arts are valued solely for their instrumental benefits, the potential of the arts to educate about critical engagement, aesthetic judgment is weakened. Although ABE recognized, its value and potential are rarely central in policy making, with the arts long occupying a weak position in educational curricula (Horsley 2009; Shaw 2018). ABE is widely recognized as a critical component of holistic learning, yet it is largely underfunded, undervalued, and inconsistently implemented in educational programs (Sanz-Camarero *et al.* 2025). Systemic barriers ranging from financial constraints to the dominance of standardized testing, have led to the marginalization of ABE in public systems. There commitment is symbolic and there are several challenges for the integration of ABE, as the instrumentalization of the arts, undervaluing of the arts, poor teacher training, and neglected assessment. These challenges depend upon the different policy approaches adopted in each context, thus requiring a comparative approach.

The following section explores how these diverse political and cultural traditions shape distinct policy approaches, producing different balances between instrumentalization and inclusion. The comparison made among European countries looks at the different

educational and cultural policies in play in different national contexts which have an impact on the implementation of ABE.

### *3. Comparative analysis of ABE across Europe: funding logics and policy traditions*

ABE in Europe reproduces the broader tensions between neoliberal policy agendas and traditions of welfare-based cultural democracy, therefore providing a lens through which different political models can mitigate the pressures of neo-liberalisation. Even though it can be assumed that a general process of privatization, entrepreneurialism, and decreasing public funds can be found in all countries, the ways in which each country responds to these challenges significantly changes.

The development of ABE across European countries shows how different governance arrangements can influence the accessibility and meaning of the arts in education. These traditions shape the ways in which ABE is valued as a public good or as an economic instrument, to be evaluated in terms of efficiency, competitiveness, and measurable outcomes (Harvey 2005; Ball 2012; Brown 2015).

While EU frameworks emphasize culture and education as strategic resources for economic development, employability, and innovation (European Commission 2018), the ways in which individual States translate these priorities into practice vary widely, reflecting institutional legacies.

As shown by the research presented here, countries have started adopting the recommendations of UNESCO and the EU, with slower or faster implementation, and have established national curriculum reforms and defined national plans for the arts that present a comprehensive approach to ABE.

From a methodological point of view, this study builds upon the comparative research framework developed within the Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE) project, which examined ABE policies and programs targeting children and young people in seven European countries (Finland, Germany, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Poland and Italy). The comparative analysis was grounded in the systematic review of seven national reports, each independently produced by the project partners. Each national report was developed through desk research following shared overarching guidelines. All reports had to include a policy review addressing regulatory frameworks, governance models, funding schemes, the organisation of school systems and a mapping of ABE initiatives implemented in formal and informal settings.

Partners applied context-sensitive strategies in identifying sources and collecting data, reflecting the diversity of national information systems and inherent limitations of available data.

In terms of case selection, all ABE programmes and policies included in the analysis were targeted to children and young people (aged between 10 and 16 years old), and were explicitly integrating artistic or cultural practices within educational aims. Within these selection criteria, each country mapped initiatives operating at national, regional, or local levels, acknowledging that the heterogeneity of ABE landscapes across Europe makes exhaustive coverage difficult, particularly in the informal sector. Data collection procedures varied across countries according to the structure of their institutional ecosystems. For instance, in Germany data were mainly retrieved from

institutional and official sources such as government web portals and national or regional statistical platforms, allowing for the compilation of a more comprehensive dataset. In contrast, in countries where information on informal ABE provision is less centralised, mapping required consulting a wide range of non-institutional sources. In these cases, information was often gathered through the analysis of websites of arts organisations, cultural associations, foundations, and third-sector bodies, whose initiatives are typically not systematised within public repositories. These asymmetries in source availability represent an intrinsic limitation of the comparative exercise and influence the degree of detail and consistency achievable across national contexts. Following the preparation of the national reports, a cross-country comparative analysis was conducted. This process involved identifying convergences and divergences in policy approaches, funding models and ABE initiatives across the seven countries. The comparison aimed not only to highlight structural differences but also to interpret how each system positions ABE as a public good in itself or as an instrumental tool and the implications of these orientations for issues of inclusion.

Overall, while all States formally acknowledge the role of culture and education as universal rights, the comparative analysis reveals substantial variations in the ways these principles are translated into concrete programmes.

The differences in approach can be found in policy strategies, funding streams, mapping and range from welfare-oriented models to fragmented, project-based systems. Among this dichotomy there is, in fact, a continuum of approaches applied to different degrees. It is therefore not just a matter of comparing funding provision but also the policies, laws, strategies in play which are made up of a diverse range of practices, such as building the infrastructure to foster ABE, data and analysis in the field, spaces and cultural centers, representative bodies, associations, networks, communities of practices, training for teachers and educators in the field, promotion, and communications. The analysis looks at the different funding models adopted by these countries to find similarities and differences in the policy making strategies being adopted. It later considers how different funding models can also be related to different policy strategies.

As the comparative analysis shows, countries with larger public support are also the ones having integrated strategic programs and policy frameworks recognizing the role of the arts for education to foster inclusion. Conversely, the countries with smaller public support are also the ones with a fragmented approach to ABE in terms of recognition, regulation, and infrastructure, and thus inhibit equal access for all to cultural and educational opportunities.

### *3.1 Funding logics and the risks of privatisation and exclusion*

The comparative analysis maps the funding architectures underpinning ABE across seven European countries involved in the CLiViE project. The comparisons among these countries reveal divergences in the ways ABE is supported, reflecting not only the availability of resources but also the political traditions and governance models shaping cultural and educational systems.

While public support systems align more closely with the ideal of ABE as a public good and as a means to foster social inclusion, even they are not immune to neoliberal pressures. Across all contexts, declining public resources and the privatization of

social and educational services have pushed institutions to adopt innovative fundraising strategies, develop public-private partnerships, and diversify their revenue streams.

Across these diverse systems, a common pattern emerges: all countries are increasingly compelled to diversify their funding mix strategies. The funding mix varies according to the different traditions and policy strategies adopted by each partner country and can be divided into four main categories of funds and revenues provided by different organizations: the EU; national, federal, regional and local governments; private donors, foundations, philanthropies, and private sponsors; membership fees and ticket sales.

Considering European funds for the support of arts-education projects, these have been adopted especially by Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic. European programs do not have a specific funding scheme directed to ABE; however, ABE initiatives and projects are included within other programs supporting the cultural and creative industries, such as the Creative Europe and Erasmus+ programs.

It is also intended to favor cross-collaborations among organizations in different European countries. However, organizations applying for European funds are required to be entrepreneurial and to operate according to criteria of efficiency and accountability, to reorient their activities toward being self-sustainable. The Creative Europe program encourages organizations to develop entrepreneurial skills and cross-sector partnerships, thereby emphasizing the market-oriented framing of cultural and educational activities (European Commission 2018). The funds function on a project-based approach and on a short-term basis, thus not allowing for long term programs and initiatives in the field.

In terms of the support and direct intervention provided by public bodies at the national, regional and local level, in all the analysed countries, formal ABE in lower and upper secondary schools is directly managed and financed by the Ministry of Education which organizes the school system and determines the amount of teaching in arts domains. Formal education is provided through large-scale ABE projects and programs at different degrees of intervention and structure. Instead, significant differences can be found when it comes to informal ABE initiatives provided through bottom-up and community-led non-formal projects, and programs organized by a wider network of non-formal organizations in the arts field and in the Third sector through public-private partnerships with schools, cultural and educational organizations. Public bodies increasingly collaborate with cultural organizations, and NGOs to deliver educational and cultural initiatives, though with different degrees of public coordination or fragmentation. In other cases, non-formal ABE initiatives are nationally supported and rely on locally-driven initiatives. Federal States or municipalities may directly develop specific local programs in the cultural field or may support cultural and social organizations which are active in the field. Local authorities supporting cultural initiatives or directly providing cultural services (such as libraries or civic museums) also include ABE initiatives, though without directly intervening in school activities.

Moreover, there is a substantial presence of philanthropies developing specific programs and funding schemes in ABE. Private foundations often support specific projects in organizations active in the cultural and educational field and in the Third

sector which have to meet the objectives of the call, the mission of the organizations, and the requirements of funding schemes where the need to guarantee self-sustainability and to cover part of the costs is asked. As for EU funds, private funding schemes favor a mechanism of very fragmented project-based activities. ABE initiatives can also be fee-based, requiring an admission ticket. Many organizations adopt an approach that reframes their services, including educational ones, not as part of their mission as instruments of social inclusion, but as opportunities for revenue. In this model, workshops, guided tours, and ABE programs are treated as commodified services, priced according to market dynamics rather than made accessible as public goods. The need to depend upon a pay-for-performance model thus leaves the cost of the activities to families who are asked to pay high fees for cultural-educational programs, making these educational programs exclusive and inaccessible to the general public.

The analysis of these four funding streams enables us to outline three different models of support developed in the seven countries with a larger public, mixed or private support to ABE.

In contexts such as Finland, Germany, and the Czech Republic, with strong traditions of cultural and educational welfare, ABE is rooted within long-term strategies and sustained through public investment. Here, national and federal governments support various ABE initiatives through funding and programs and mobilize considerable resources, meaning ABE is treated as a right and a vehicle for participation. In these cases, initiatives are funded and supported by legislation and are provided for free. In particular, in Finland, the legal framework for culture is reinforced by an innovative funding model that allocates gambling revenues to the arts, enabling municipalities to sustain cultural organizations, music and arts schools accessible to all at low cost. In Finland, art and music schools receive State subsidies that allow them to provide ABE at a minimal cost to families.

In Germany, the *Culture Makes You Strong (Kultur macht stark)* program, launched in 2013, is financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and aims to fund local partnerships between schools, civil society organizations to ensure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can access free arts activities (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2022). The Czech Republic also combines national and local funding with EU funds, such as Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and the National Recovery Plan and NextGenerationEU, showing a multi-level system with public investment.

In countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland, there are instead mixed support systems as the sustainability of ABE relies on a hybrid funding mix. Thus, these countries have a multi-source funding structure for ABE, combining State, municipal, private, and EU contributions. While ABE in schools is mostly managed by ministries of education, informal initiatives depend on EU resources, private foundations, and sponsors and, in some cases, on tickets sale and private contribution of families. The responsibility for ABE is dispersed across networks of actors. Being mostly based upon external and private funding schemes, it creates a project-based, fragmented environment in which sustainability and continuity are at risk. In this project-based approach, organizations struggle to maintain programs once external funds finish, thus preventing the development of a long-term strategy for ABE. This dependence on

external resources may therefore favor a fragmented, project-based environment with little continuity, relying upon temporary funding cycles even though it is partly integrated with public support.

For example, a scheme developed in Lithuania provides children with state-funded vouchers covering various ABE programs, like access to theater performances, concerts, and museum visits, while summer camp programs and non-formal education vouchers supplement access to the arts (Lithuanian Ministry of Culture 2019).

The most fragile model is visible in countries with weak public support, notably Italy. Here, ABE depends heavily on philanthropic foundations, charities, and third-sector organizations and mostly on families contributing to the costs of these activities. These countries have a less comprehensive approach to ABE, which is less guaranteed for all age groups and thus do not foster policy strategies enhancing access for all. While regions and municipalities promote specific initiatives, the lack of a national framework means provision is fragmented and project-based. Programs supported by banking foundations, such as Fondazione Cariplo in Lombardy, have expanded access to arts for schools and communities, but these remain unevenly distributed and are not very widespread experiences so they cannot promote a long-term impact.

Moreover, in the Italian case, public institutions often outsource ABE initiatives and services to external private operators. These private or semi-private providers often work on short-term contracts and create programs on a short term basis according to the economic availability and bureaucratic constraints of the schools and of institutions. This contributes to making the offer of ABE initiatives very fragmented reducing the long-term impact on students. In other cases, these educational services are outsourced to private operators, thus setting participation fees according to market logics. As a result, didactic activities are often offered at high costs, effectively transforming them into revenue-generating services rather than inclusive public programs. This weak public support has led to a reliance on fee-based programs which can restrict access to ABE due to high costs, impacting inclusion and accessibility. ABE is mostly developed in out-of-school activities or in informal activities which are not free. In practice, this means that ABE initiatives are exclusive, and their accessibility depends upon geographical location, the cultural and educational offer, and also upon the social, economic and cultural backgrounds of families. In the absence of public or private support for these activities, organizations have to set participation fees according to market forces which risks reinforcing inequalities.

The similarities and differences in funding approaches across the seven European countries have significant impacts on the accessibility of ABE. Where public investment is strong and complemented by coordinated strategies, ABE is situated as a tool for social inclusion, providing equal opportunities for children and young people regardless of their backgrounds. By contrast, in contexts where public support is limited, ABE risks reinforcing rather than counteracting inequalities, as participation depends upon the financial capacity as well as the cultural capital of families, thus becoming a privileged and exclusive services and individualized commodity.

As the paper will now show, inclusive or exclusive funding mechanisms are also strongly linked to public frameworks and strategies.

### *3.2 Policy structures, political traditions and governance arrangements*

Across these diverse systems, public, mixed and private, all countries appear to be increasingly obliged to diversify their funding structures. However, disparities are based on the strength or fragility of public governance, which leads to diverse public arrangements.

Therefore, these three funding models (public, mixed, and private) bring about three different policy frameworks in which recognition, investment, policy regulation, and infrastructure for ABE is guaranteed or not.

First, there are national contexts, namely Finland, Germany and partly the Czech Republic, with welfare-based traditions and with strong policy frameworks. These countries also have a more strategic and comprehensive approach to ABE and culture. Their ABE is embedded in long-term public strategies with a long tradition, often integrated into national curricula and supported by dedicated funding streams and by public-private partnerships. These systems reflect traditions of welfare where access to the arts is safeguarded as a universal right and as means to foster social inclusion and equal access.

These countries have developed programs meant to combine formal and informal education, favoring ABE activities through specific funded schemes, and guaranteeing free access.

In the case of Finland, the incorporation of education and culture in the same Ministry has facilitated the development of comprehensive ABE policies and programs. Here, the arts are embedded within national curricula from the earliest stages of education, supported by sustained public funding at both the State and municipal level.

In particular, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education includes music, visual arts, crafts, and drama, integrating the arts into everyday schooling. Finland can also boast of a diverse network of associations and representative bodies institutionally recognizing the role-played by ABE such as the Association of Finnish Children's Cultural Centers which also releases guidelines like the *Quality Manual for Children's Arts and Culture* (2022). Finland exemplifies how welfare traditions, good infrastructure together with a good network of organizations, can mitigate neoliberal pressures, maintaining the arts as public goods and reinforcing their role supporting social inclusion and participation.

In Germany, culture is formalized and universally recognized; there is a will to foster ABE through partnerships between schools, institutions, and associations, backed by federal and regional programs with the aim of fostering social inclusion and equal access to quality education for all. There is a strong commitment to reaching diverse communities, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, through specific programs like the previously mentioned *Culture Makes You Strong (Kultur macht stark)* project.

In Eastern European contexts, such as Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, the history of education and ABE is linked to political history: for those countries affected by the fall of the Berlin Wall, changing from a centrally planned economy to a capitalist (market-driven) system, the period following the 1990s was characterized by national reforms, including those of the educational system. These changes also impacted ABE. While arts subjects are included in national curricula, public support is limited, and non-formal ABE is often dependent on EU and private funds. However, in these

countries, there is still an idea of a unified and public school system with the aim of guaranteeing access to basic education, and for this reasons there are specific programs overcoming financial and personal barriers to participating in culture, especially among those threatened with social exclusion. In these contexts, a framework based on a hybrid governance model and on project dependence can be found where there is still a commitment to guaranteeing common access to ABE. Within this multi-source funding system, these countries still have a policy strategy for ABE, as in Poland's *Very Young Culture* program (*Bardzo Młoda Kultura*), which connects schools, institutions, and NGOs to strengthen participation.

Conversely, the Italian case highlights the challenges of weak public leadership and fragmented governance. Italian cultural and educational policies have historically been characterized by lack of continuity and coordination in terms of regulations, funding, infrastructure, with the Third sector, (Bodo, Bodo 2019) replacing this public shortcoming. In Italy, the absence of a secure public framework has brought about a privatization of services, a mix of fragmented initiatives, frequently dependent on project-based funding, philanthropic interventions, and participant fees. Here, ABE risks reproducing rather than reducing inequalities, as access is conditioned by geographic location and socio-economic status (Camozi, Simonella, Tarassi 2025). Divergences may be found not only across families and students with different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, but they also strongly depend upon geographical provenience. Cities and peripheral areas having diverse cultural and educational offerings with diverse public and private support may differently foster or inhibit inclusion and exclusion in absence of a national strategic framework. Countries having a national strategic framework may, conversely, better counteract these geographical disparities.

In Italy, there have been some attempts to overcome this fragmentation, such as *Plan for the Arts (Piano delle Arti)* (2017), but its implementation is still weak within the Italian school system and lacks coordination and monitoring to show a real impact. Italy, with a school system focused on the Humanities, is thus not promoting ABE as a mean to foster inclusion and is not leveraging diverse educational backgrounds which are, in fact, increasing. Individual efforts by civic society are made, but there is not a structural approach in public policy. The Italian case clearly shows how, when public institutions are weakened, cultural and educational initiatives are depending upon the individual consumption and accessibility of each school or family, thus limiting inclusion, reinforcing a recognition of culture and ABE as a commodity rather than a public good.

As the comparative analysis has shown, when national governments continue to sustain a robust framework of cultural, social, and educational welfare, as in the cases presented of Finland or Germany, culture and ABE can still be defended as public goods. Where governance is fragmented and weak, as in Italy, ABE risks becoming commodified, reinforcing rather than reducing social inequalities.

### *Conclusion*

The complex and varied development of ABE in Europe is rooted in distinct funding systems, political traditions, plural welfare regimes (Pesenti, Lodigiani 2015), and governance structures that mitigate the economic pressures imposed by

neoliberalism and entrepreneurial public bodies (Harvey 1989; 2007). While EU institutions increasingly view culture and education as strategic resources for growth, employability, and social inclusion (O'Connor 2016; Belfiore 2012), national public bodies differ in their implementation and balancing of these objectives within the contemporary neoliberal framework. These divergences demonstrate the dependence of neoliberal and entrepreneurial approaches on traditions of public governance and cultural policy.

From the perspective of social citizenship, the comparative findings suggest that ABE constitutes a critical testing ground for contemporary plural welfare regimes and differentiated welfare cultures embedded in diverse national contexts (Pesenti, Lodigiani 2015). Where welfare is embedded in robust public frameworks and supported by coherent and coordinated governance structures, ABE contributes to substantive equality and to collective access to cultural resources. By contrast, in contexts where welfare provision relies predominantly on fragmented, project-based and market-oriented mechanisms, ABE tends to become increasingly individualized and selective, thereby reinforcing rather than mitigating existing social inequalities.

In particular, our study, based on the *Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe* (CLiViE) project, illustrates how neoliberal and entrepreneurial logics are mediated differently across Europe. In Nordic and Central European countries, welfare systems guarantee ABE to be accessible for all. In Eastern Europe, reliance on EU funds and governance networks produces fragile, project-based provision, even though a public vision is still present. The Italian case represents an emblematic example of what has been described as “strong civic welfare” (Zamagni 2015), grounded in the principle of subsidiarity (Pesenti, Lodigiani 2015). In this context, the provision of cultural and educational services relies heavily on Third-sector organisations and local initiatives, making Italy a particularly illustrative case for examining both the potential and the limits of civic welfare arrangements. Paradoxically, weak State leadership and reliance on fragmented, uncoordinated third-sector initiatives, together with the absence of strong public support, have been shown to foster social exclusion instead of combatting it. ABE initiatives, which are mostly supported by private donors or individuals, are strictly interconnected with two processes: the marketization of these initiatives and the individualization of access to them. In the first case, ABE seems tailored to specific social groups who are able to access it economically; in the second case, ABE initiatives seem responsive to the need of privileged social groups to differentiate themselves socially from other social groups.

These considerations of the different implications of ABE in Europe raise issues about the role and meaning of the arts and culture and their recognition in different national contexts. The arts and culture are not monolithic categories but encompass practices with different symbolic weight (Griswold 2008; Mangset 2012). Recognizing these disparities helps to clarify how certain forms of art resonate more strongly with cultural traditions and affect differently policy strategies and social legitimization.

The shift from a discourse of high culture to that of creative industries (Hesmondhalgh 2019) complicates definitions, with policy often instrumentalizing some art forms from an economic point of view (O'Connor 2024) or seeing them as instruments to foster social inclusion.

In this framework, it is interesting to consider how ABE can be placed at the intersection of two logics: the autonomous value of art as aesthetic practice (“art for art’s sake”), recognizing its intrinsic values, and the instrumental goals of “education” as a structured system of knowledge and skills to be quantified. Reflecting upon this distinction helps us to understand to what extent ABE should keep its artistic integrity while fulfilling educational goals. Indeed, the comparative picture shows that ABE is not a neutral field but a site of tension among two different visions of culture. These tensions are not uniformly developed across Europe but are mediated by historical legacies and political traditions. Where public governance is strong, the arts maintain a public mission. Where governance is fragmented, ABE risks becoming a commodified and individualized service.

One final point seems relevant to us. It concerns the timeframe of ABE projects. When public support and strategy are lacking and a fragile funding system is used, “project-based” initiatives take hold, which are risky in terms of duration, evaluation, and replicability. This combination of “short-termism” in projects and access that is not always universal only serves to exacerbate the system of inequalities in access to ABE initiatives. Institutions at the national and European level that promote these initiatives should take into account the direct impact that short-term project-based funding mechanisms and economic criteria have on the effective role of ABE in promoting social inclusion and access for all. A key factor for the future of ABE in Europe lies in how the arts are supported as public goods rather than commodified services (O’Connor 2025).

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