

## *Investing in the Young*

**Stephanie Oade (Classics teacher and Head of *Quadrivium*, Oundle School)**

This paper addresses some of the key questions around the present state and possible future of the Humanities from perspectives outside of university level study (early years through to secondary education and the UK arts and music scene), hoping to add breadth to the central concerns of the conference and highlight intersections between academia and wider society.

The youngest of children show a natural affinity with the arts, expressing themselves through mark making, music and movement; by the time they are 2 or 3, they begin to explore a world of imagination, representation, and feeling. As they talk, listen and play, they rehearse and develop ‘Theory of Mind’, the very essence of what makes us human: the ability to understand and predict another person’s mind, and therefore to move outside of our own immediate experience into complex social settings, real and imagined. With this understanding of other minds, comes empathy and the world of stories opens up: literature, theatre, opera, film; the opportunity to capture something beyond the reality of the world we live in, to move beyond the actuality of life. But then, for so many young people, this world begins to close down barely before it has opened. There is so much to be done at school, at home, with friends; there is little time for arts and culture, especially those that involve stillness, listening, looking, reading. Youngsters may be told they’re no good at music or art (nowhere does anyone say anymore that ‘if something’s worth doing, it’s worth doing badly’; rather, ‘there’s no career to be had in music’, and ‘who’d be an artist?’), and children may not find a sense of relevance or inclusion in the arts as they work to establish themselves within a world powered by social, digital, and economic concerns. Moreover, there is often a societal pressure to move away from the study of these disciplines (in some cultures more than others), for ‘success’ in life to be represented by power, wealth and progress. Arts and culture become marginalised as hobbies, not necessities of life, and the Humanities become indulgences and distractions.

This being so, the political-economic perspective must be addressed: who should fund the arts and Humanities, especially if they seems to exclude more people than they embrace, and when we live in a society struggling to meet the basic living needs of millions of people? How can the value of the Humanities and the arts more broadly be quantified, and where do we find evidence of their worth? We may argue that the Humanities are not just life enriching and life enhancing, that they are community building and personally sustaining, but if these appeals fall on deaf ears, nothing will change. If, however, we better nurture the curiosity and expressive urges of the young to create empathetic adults, engaged with the questions that surround our humanity and convinced of the benefits of a rich Humanities education, we may find a more fertile future lies ahead.