



Cultural awareness and expression: A powerful, yet endangered competence for social cohesion

Policy brief on the capacity of the educational system to support learners in developing CAE through the arts

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How to cite: Masson, M. Stašulāne, A. Vilaseca, H., Arias, R. (2026). Cultural awareness and expression: A powerful, yet endangered competence for social cohesion. *Deliverable 3.2 Policy brief on the capacity of the educational system to support learners in developing CAE through the arts*. PULSE-ART (Horizon Europe Grant Agreement n°101178988).



**Funded by
the European Union**

This project has received funding from the Horizon Europe Programme of the European Union under the Grant Agreement N° 101178988. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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INTRODUCTION

Recognised as Key Competence for Lifelong Learning (KC8) since 2006¹, Cultural Awareness and Expression (CAE) remains largely invisible in practice. Decision-makers and educators still lack adequate resources to effectively develop and monitor this competence, which is particularly critical in an era marked by exponential polarisation, declining trust in institutions and growing challenges to information reliability. This brief exposes systemic gaps and calls for a critical integration of the arts into the heart of a resilient European society: our Education.

KEY GAPS ★

- **Fragmented Ecosystems:** A profound lack of cross-sectoral synergy and shared tools between and within institutions and society prevents the formation of a unified cultural and educational ecosystem.
- **Stagnant Curricular Transversality:** The absence of cross-disciplinary integration leads to outdated educational content that no longer aligns with the needs of contemporary society, trainers and students.
- **Marginalization of Arts:** The systemic failure to integrate arts and culture across the educational spectrum hinders the development of essential competencies for democratic dialogue and social participation.

Cultural diversity is not merely a heritage, but a structural pillar of the European Union (EU), guaranteed by its Treaties² and the shared commitment of its Member States. This milestone has been renewed in charts³ and declarations from the EU and its Member States⁴, and to which they adhere at international level. Placing Culture and Cultural Diversity at the very heart of society by recognizing its value as public good⁵ requires more than declaratory commitments. It calls for coherent policy action, sustained budgetary allocations, and structural policy follow-up at all governance levels.

MONDIACULT 2025 demonstrated not only the possibility of reaching consensus among more than 150 ministers of culture, but also that the concrete recognition of culture and education as strategic and transversal policy domains remains a shared challenge for all stakeholders involved.

The consultation activities led by the European Commission to support the development of the Culture Compass for Europe revealed crucial insights into the needs of the Member States and civil society⁶. While an overwhelming majority of respondents (92% of EU governments and sector respondents) identify the promotion and preservation of cultural diversity as a priority, only 33% of member states report that culture is well integrated into EU education and youth policies.

The simultaneous publication of the Cultural Compass and the Democracy Shield for Europe, alongside the launch of the new Agora EU programme, demonstrates growing awareness of the interdependencies of both fields⁷: Democracy and Culture. However, their foundational connection, the Cultural Awareness and Expression (CAE) competence, is not explicitly addressed. CAE is also absent from the Union of Skills and correlative Basic Skills⁸ Action Plan, both adopted in 2025.

If safeguarding and advancing the European cohesion, resilience, independence and identity depends on effectively fostering comprehensive lifelong learning rooted in EU values from an early age, the “evident bridge” between culture, education and democracy still doesn’t appear as explicit as it could be, despite repeated references in EU and Member States declarations and EU-level research⁹.

This situation resonates with the gaps and barriers identified by the PULSE-ART research, highlighting the urgent need for a robust and transversal policy response to shape, together with younger generations, the Europe we aspire to live in tomorrow.

What is the Cultural Awareness and Expression Competence?

Cultural Awareness and Expression refers to the capacity to recognise, reflect on, and critically engage with diverse cultural identities while possessing the ability to shape, communicate, and innovate culture through symbolic, artistic, and linguistic forms. This competence encompasses an understanding of how shared beliefs, values, and practices – influenced by history, geography, and social dynamics – shape human interaction, while actively recognizing the power relations that determine cultural visibility. It integrates artistic creation, rituals, and everyday practices as essential tools for individuals and communities to understand, navigate, and transform the world.

CONTEXT AND SOURCES

This EU-level policy brief synthesizes findings from a comprehensive cross-national report. The methodology integrates desk research on formal, non-formal, and informal education systems and policies spanning seven countries (France, Greece, Latvia, Malta, Morocco, Spain, and the Netherlands), the EU level and the international level, with qualitative insights from co-creation sessions involving 125 key stakeholders from the quadruple helix in the cultural and educational sectors (at Local/National Level through the local transectorial hubs, named MOSAIC HUBs in the PULSE-ART project). A consortium co-creation workshop validated the preliminary conclusions in November 2025.

Unveiling the barriers to Cultural Awareness and Expression development through education

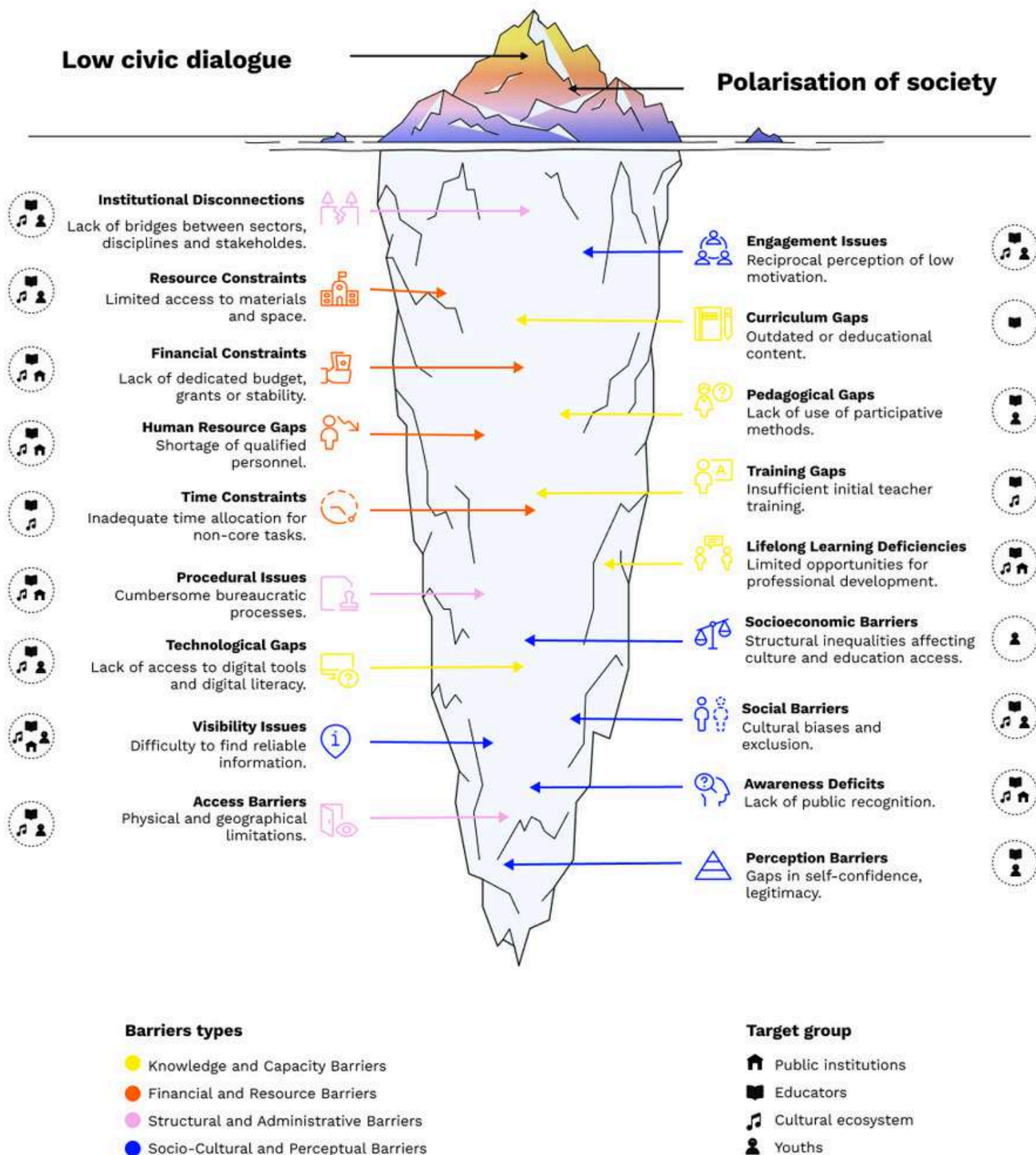


Image 1. Infographic displaying the barriers to Cultural Awareness and Expression development through education as concluded in PULSE-ART MOSAIC Hubs and co-creation workshops.

1. Structural and Administrative Barriers

Structural gaps stem from the organization of institutions and the nature of their interactions. A primary issue lies in institutional and sectoral disconnection, evidenced by a **lack of collaboration** across sectors, disciplines, and target groups, thereby generating a persistent **silos effect**, for example between **formal and non-formal education** (in which CAE is well developed). These gaps are often exacerbated by cumbersome **bureaucratic processes** that hinder the efficient execution of procedural tasks. Additionally, **access barriers** create inequality, as **physical constraints** and the **uneven geographical** distribution of infrastructure prevent certain populations from engaging with cultural and educational opportunities.

FOCUS: In Spain, The White Book on Art, Science, and Technology¹⁰ criticizes the lack of cross-sector collaboration and proposes an integrated model to foster educational and cultural innovation.

2. Financial and Resource Barriers

The sustainability of innovative cultural and/or educational initiatives is compromised by **fragmented funding models** and a critical **absence of dedicated, long-term budgetary** commitments. Beyond financial capital, operational capacity is hindered by **time poverty** among staff and a **scarcity of adequate physical infrastructure**, particularly in underserved territories. These constraints, such as limited access to materials and appropriate creative spaces, further constrain the ability to implement cultural programmes.

FOCUS: In Greece, Vasilopoulou¹¹ demonstrates how arts-based practices can foster intercultural dialogue and inclusion in early childhood education; however, such outcomes are typically achieved through isolated initiatives in the absence of system-wide support.

3. Knowledge and Capacity Deficits

Current educational frameworks are constrained by **rigid curricula** and a lack of **cross-disciplinary integration**, which collectively hinder the development of transversal competences. These structural gaps in education are compounded by substantial **deficiencies in training**, notably a lack of sufficient initial teacher training in participatory and creative methods and limited access to ongoing professional development opportunities. Furthermore, **technological gaps** such as low digital literacy and restricted access to digital tools create additional layers of exclusion.

FOCUS: In Malta, Vassallo¹² highlights cultural mismatches between educators and increasingly diverse classrooms, calling for the adoption of culturally responsive pedagogical frameworks and the development of professional diagnostic tools.

4. Socio-Cultural and Perceptual Barriers

Deep-seated **socio-economic inequalities** and **cultural biases** create intangible social dynamics and internalized perceptions that discourage broad public participation in cultural and educational practices. A widespread **"legitimacy gap"** persists, where individuals from marginalized backgrounds experience exclusion from formal cultural or educational spaces due to perceived elitism or a lack of self-confidence. Social barriers, such as cultural biases, interact with awareness deficits – a general **lack of public recognition of the value of culture** – to keep these initiatives invisible, when they advocate for community ownership and the universal right to cultural expression.

FOCUS: In France, Fabrice Raffin¹³ argues that institutional frameworks often perpetuate cultural hierarchies by privileging certain "legitimate" art forms while marginalizing popular or minority practices.

WHERE TO START? PULSE-ART PRELIMINARY DIRECTIONS AT EU POLICY LEVEL

PULSE-ART aims to inform decision-makers at all policy levels, ranging from the European level to national level based on the outcomes of our research and local specificities. Beyond the final recommendations (to be published in 2027), this brief presents key directions intended to bridge (some of) the gaps identified above.

- **Promote multi-level collaboration and Bottom-Up Participation:** Current systemic fragmentation hinders societal growth. It is critical to dismantle the "siloes" governance that separates culture from other fields, particularly education, while promoting participatory forms of governance that **involve youth in decision-making**. Overcoming this gap requires well-funded and supported collaborative tools, such as a **permanent Education/Culture Community of Practice at EU, national and local levels, enabling** public and private institutions, civil society and citizens to function as a unified ecosystem.

*"MondiaYouth represents a global commitment from policy makers to acknowledge youth as political agents. Looking ahead to MONDIACULT 2029: **let us voice our opinions in the same rooms in which you speak**."*¹⁴

- **Foster Resilience and Innovation through Transversality:** To prevent the erosion of curricular relevance, CAE must be integrated across all disciplines. Art education plays a central role in this process, alongside the application of participatory and creative methods throughout the curriculum. To achieve this objective, Education and Lifelong Learning Policies should systematically **integrate the "A" (Arts) into STEAM action plans**, starting from the Union of Skills and with particular emphasis on the **initial training for educators and teachers**.
- **Recognise the Value of Culture as a Civic Necessity:** To address the CAE's "Competence Recognition Gap", it is crucial to formally **acknowledge culture and education as pillars of our societies**. Confronting the perceptual and socio-cultural barriers' causes is only possible by fostering CAE as a central component across all policy areas in democratic states. To achieve this goal, it is essential to promote a **comprehensive vision of Culture**, grounded in the Cultural Rights¹⁵, especially in the development of Culture and Education policies. Integrate public participation and promotion of Cultural diversity – not solely as specialized policy domains, but as foundational mechanisms to foster democratic dialogue and ensure active participation in a resilient European society.

WHAT IS COMING NEXT?

PULSE-ART implements seven case studies to gather evidence on the impact of arts in education to foster CAE in France, Greece, Latvia, Malta, Morocco, Spain, and the Netherlands. Drawing from these results, the project will co-create National Action Plans with policy makers and key stakeholders in the seven countries, which will feed into final EU Recommendations in 2026 and 2027.

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INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE WITHIN THE DELIVERABLE 3.2 - Policy Brief

This document seeks to adopt an inclusive and critical perspective on the gender and power dynamics often reflected in language. We understand gender as a social construct shaped by cultural, historical, and individual experiences. Our approach aims to respect and reflect diverse identities beyond a binary framework, recognizing that societal norms and language are in a constant state of evolution.

We acknowledge that established structures and categories often reproduce dominant narratives, overlooking voices and knowledge systems that have been historically marginalized.

While we strive for inclusivity, we recognize that current formal English lacks a standardized gender-neutral grammar and can mirror established power dynamics across gender, race, age, culture and nationality. We view our commitment to inclusive language as an ongoing process of learning and reflection, and we work continuously to adapt our communication to be as equitable and welcoming as possible.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This deliverable contains original unpublished work except where clearly indicated otherwise. Acknowledgement of previously published material and of the work of others has been made through appropriate citation, quotation or both.