

# An Equal Stage

## -Political strategies and activism in performing arts for young audiences

Essay on "Equal access to performing arts in schools"

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*"Kulturen - och konsten i mer avgränsad mening - är en central arena för maktspillet i samhället, både för de dominerande och för dem som är underkastad makt. Hur skapas och vidmakthålls dessa maktstrukturer?"*

*"Culture - and art in a more limited sense - is a central arena for the play of power in society, both for those who dominate and for those who are subjected to power. How are these power structures created and maintained?"*

Sven Nilsson: "Kulturens vägar", 1999

### 1.1. Introduction

One of the most pressing political challenges facing my practice within the performing arts field today is the growing inequality in access to professional performing arts among children and young people. Despite explicit cultural policy goals in Sweden that highlight every child's right to culture, research and reports by ASSITEJ Sweden show that access to performance experiences is highly dependent on socio-economic and geographic factors. In practice, what should be a right becomes a privilege - revealing a fundamental democratic deficit.

As executive director at ASSITEJ Sweden, I am directly involved in the intersection of artistic practice and political strategy. These examples reflect the organization's broader effort to use art as a democratic tool - not only by presenting performances but by reshaping systems of production, curation, and access.

### 1.2. Aim and research questions

In this essay, I will explore how this political challenge is being addressed through political and strategic work within the field of contemporary performance art for young audiences. I aim to analyse what artistic and cultural-political strategies are used to promote accessibility and equality - and how these relate to concepts of artistic freedom, co-creation, and democracy.



### 1.3. Selected practices and case studies

The essay will focus on the political and structural work in gaining equal access to performing arts in schools, based on and including:

1. The reports *Spelar mindre roll?* and *Kom Scenkonst*, which reveal systemic inequities and advocate for reforms including a centralized school performance model for school performances.
2. International outlook, particularly the Norwegian model *Den Kulturelle Skolesekken* (DKS), which ensures every child sees multiple professional performances during their school years.

These practices demonstrate how artistic and political strategies can be merged to drive structural change and promote inclusive cultural policy. I am especially interested in how political actions contribute to shaping society not just through content, but through process, participation, and infrastructure.

### 1.4. Key questions to be addressed

1. How can performative practices serve as tools for cultural and political equity?
2. In what ways can children and youth be active agents rather than passive audiences?
3. What can be learned from international models like Norway's DKS?
4. How can the arts act as democratic arenas in increasingly polarized societies?

## 2.1. The political landscape of performing arts for young audiences

In many democratic societies, the arts are celebrated as both a mirror and a motor of social transformation—a space where collective identity is explored, diversity is expressed, and dialogue is made possible. In Sweden, this is especially true when it comes to children and young people. National cultural policy clearly states that all individuals should have the opportunity to participate in cultural life, and that *special attention should be given to children and young people*. The country has also integrated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into national law, thereby affirming children's right to participate in artistic and cultural life as both audience and creators.

Yet, despite this strong policy framework, the reality on the ground tells a different story. In practice, access to professional performing arts remains highly unequal across Sweden. Structural gaps, regional disparities, and unclear responsibilities mean that many children—especially those in rural areas or in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts—seldom experience theatre, dance, or circus as part of their education. The promise of cultural participation is not being fulfilled.

In this chapter, I explore this disconnect between policy and practice. Drawing on ASSITEJ Sverige's reports *Spelar mindre roll?* (2022) and *Kom Scenkonst* (2023), I analyse how the Swedish cultural landscape currently fails to deliver on its commitments to young audiences. I argue that this is not simply a cultural oversight, but a political failure with democratic consequences.



## 2.2. Cultural policy and the right to culture

Sweden's national cultural policy, established in 1974 and revised in 2009, emphasizes that "everyone shall have the opportunity to participate in cultural life" and that children and young people are to be given special attention in all cultural efforts. Complementing this is *Skapande skola*, a major state-funded initiative meant to ensure that schoolchildren are exposed to professional artists and cultural experiences during their education.

On the international level, Sweden is party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which in Article 31 affirms the right of every child to rest, leisure, play, and participation in cultural and artistic life. Since 2020, the Convention has been Swedish law—further strengthening the notion that access to culture is not merely a goal, but a legal obligation.

In principle, then, the foundations for a strong, inclusive cultural infrastructure are in place. But are these policies truly being implemented in a way that ensures equal access?

## 2.3. The gap between policy and practice

According to ASSITEJ Sverige's 2022 report *Spelar mindre roll?*, there is a significant discrepancy between national cultural goals and actual outcomes. Based on a national survey of all Swedish municipalities and regions, the report revealed that:

- One in four municipalities reported that children in their schools rarely or never experienced professional performing arts during school hours.
- No national system exists to track, coordinate, or guarantee access to cultural experiences.
- Many cultural plans and guarantees exist only on paper, with limited follow-up or evaluation.

This problem was further explored in *Kom Scenkonst* (2023), a qualitative study based on interviews with cultural coordinators, producers, and regional officers. The findings confirmed that the current distribution of performing arts in schools is fragmented and inconsistent. In the absence of national standards or infrastructure, access is determined by local resources, personal networks, and chance. In some municipalities, schools themselves are expected to book performances—a model that often excludes schools with lower administrative or financial capacity.

As the report concludes: "Current distribution models do not ensure all children and young people's right to culture, despite the fact that they are the only group explicitly prioritized in national cultural policy."

## 2.4. Political and democratic consequences

The persistent gap between Sweden's cultural policy goals and the lived experience of children across the country is not merely a logistical or bureaucratic issue—it is fundamentally political. When rights are codified in law but not realized in practice, it reflects a failure of implementation and accountability. In the case of cultural access for



young audiences, this failure undermines one of the pillars of democratic society: equal opportunity for participation.

## 2.5. When rights are promised but unequally delivered

The assumption behind cultural policy is that access to the arts contributes to personal development, social inclusion, and democratic education. Performing arts in particular offer a space for shared experience, reflection, and emotional expression—critical skills in a time of societal fragmentation and polarization.

Yet, as *Spelar mindre roll?* and *Kom Scenkonst* clearly show, access to these experiences is not equitably distributed. Access becomes a matter of geographical location or socio-economic background. This means that the very children who would most benefit from the transformative and bridging potential of the arts are the ones who are excluded.

This disconnect turns culture from a right into a privilege—a benefit for some, but not for all. As such, it creates a symbolic divide in society between those who are seen, heard, and reflected in cultural life, and those who are not.

## 2.6. A failure of democratic responsibility

In Sweden, where the welfare state is built on principles of equality and inclusion, this failure carries significant weight. If the state proclaims a commitment to the cultural rights of children but does not build the infrastructure to realize those rights, it risks eroding trust and legitimacy.

Moreover, the lack of national coordination, statistics, or enforcement mechanisms means that municipalities and schools are left to navigate this terrain on their own resulting in fragmentation, inefficiency, and unequal outcomes. As stated in *Kom Scenkonst*:

*"There is a need for comprehensive structural solutions that all parties understand and support."*

Without such solutions, the policy goals remain aspirational rather than operational. The system relies on good will and individual engagement rather than rights-based mechanisms - a model that cannot ensure fairness.

## 2.7. Cultural exclusion as a threat to democratic inclusion

At its core, democracy is not only about voting or laws—it is about participation in society's shared narratives, symbols, and imaginaries. Performing arts provide a public forum where social issues can be explored, identities negotiated, and diverse perspectives encountered. If only some children are granted access to this forum, society misses a critical opportunity to build mutual understanding and resilience.

Exclusion from culture is, therefore, not only a loss for the individual child, but a weakening of the social fabric. It means that the stage—literal and metaphorical—becomes a space of separation rather than solidarity.



## 2.8. Conclusion of the chapter

Sweden's cultural policy for children and young people is progressive in principle, but patchy and insufficient in practice. The research presented in *Spelar mindre roll?* and *Kom Scenkonst* makes it clear that without a national framework for equitable access to performing arts in schools, the cultural rights of children remain largely dependent on geography, local politics, and institutional luck.

This failure is not just a matter of missed artistic opportunities—it is a political failure with democratic consequences. Addressing it requires moving from intention to implementation: from policy to infrastructure, and from privilege to guaranteed rights.

In the next chapter, I will explore how organizations like ASSITEJ Sweden, along with models such as Norway's *Den Kulturelle Skolesekken*, attempt to fill this gap through innovative political and artistic strategies. These initiatives point toward possible futures where cultural democracy is not merely a slogan - but a lived reality.

## **3.1. Strategies toward cultural equity - from policy to practice**

In addressing the structural gaps in Sweden's cultural policy for young audiences, one cannot ignore the relevance and success of Norway's *Den Kulturelle Skolesekken* (The Cultural Schoolbag - DKS). As both a policy tool and an operational infrastructure, DKS has become an internationally recognized model for ensuring that all school children, regardless of geography or socio-economic status, have access to high-quality arts and cultural experiences during their education.

### 3.2. A national system for cultural equity

Launched in the early 2000s, *Den Kulturelle Skolesekken* is a state-funded program that guarantees all children in Norway at least three cultural experiences per school year. It is a joint initiative between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, and is administered nationally by *Kulturtanken*, a state body specifically tasked with managing and developing the program in collaboration with regional and municipal authorities. What makes DKS notable is that it is not just a funding mechanism or a cultural initiative—it is a political infrastructure. It is embedded in the governance of education and culture, backed by national legislation, and resourced to ensure long-term stability.

The system includes:

- A curated national repertoire of professional performances across all art forms (including theatre, dance, music, visual art, and literature).
- Regional and local coordinators who adapt the program to local needs and logistics.
- A digital platform for managing programming, feedback, and communication across the country.
- External reference groups (including students and teachers) involved in curatorial and evaluative processes.

The impact is clear: every Norwegian child, regardless of whether they attend school in urban Oslo or a remote town in Nordland, is offered regular and consistent exposure to



professional culture during school hours. As ASSITEJ Sverige notes in their article series “Om Norge kan, varför kan inte vi?” (2024), this system has created national cultural cohesion and reduced the dependence on individual school engagement or municipal initiative.

### 3.3. State responsibility and cultural rights

What DKS reveals—most fundamentally—is the role of the state as guarantor of cultural rights. In contrast to Sweden, where responsibility for cultural access in schools is largely delegated to municipalities and often fragmented, Norway has embraced a centralized approach that frames culture not just as a policy aspiration, but as a democratic obligation.

This shift is political: it demonstrates that equitable access to culture cannot rely solely on project funding, goodwill, or isolated efforts. Instead, it must be systematized, resourced, and built into the national fabric of education and governance.

Moreover, DKS has created a sustainable ecosystem for both audiences and artists. As seen, the system supports long-term planning, consistent touring, and creative collaboration between schools and cultural workers. It not only delivers culture—it enables participatory and relational models, such as workshops and dialogue formats.

### 3.4. Implications for Sweden

For Sweden, the Norwegian model offers more than inspiration—it offers a concrete policy blueprint. The key takeaway is that policy without infrastructure is insufficient. Cultural rights must be tied to mechanisms of delivery, monitoring, and evaluation.

ASSITEJ Sverige’s call for a similar national system in *Spelar mindre roll?* and *Kom Scenkonst* echoes this logic. They propose a coordinated framework between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, supported by a national competence center and standardized data collection. These suggestions directly mirror the architecture of DKS—and highlight what is politically possible when cultural equity is treated as a non-negotiable element of public life.

Yet beyond structural reform lies an even deeper question: What role can the performing arts themselves play in enacting the democracy that policy aims to support?

## 4.1. Performing arts as democratic practice

At its core, democracy is not only about voting or formal rights—it is about participation in society’s shared narratives, symbols, and imaginaries. Performing arts, especially when accessed regularly and collaboratively, offer a unique public forum where social issues are explored, identities negotiated, and plural perspectives encountered. This role is particularly vital in times of polarization, disinformation, and fragmentation.

Yet when access to such cultural spaces is unequally distributed children and young people are excluded not only from artistic experiences, but from essential opportunities



to participate in the civic life of culture itself. The loss is not merely aesthetic. It is democratic.

Importantly, performing arts are not only about presenting stories—they are about practicing democracy. In their most engaged forms, they become spaces of co-creation, dialogue, and dissent. Processes such as collaborative rehearsals, participatory dramaturgy, or student-curated programs model democratic principles: negotiation, inclusion, shared authorship, and critical reflection. When young people take part in these processes, they are not just watching democracy—they are rehearsing it.

Exclusion from such processes reinforces inequality and disempowerment. Conversely, inclusion fosters not only cultural fluency but civic agency. This reframes the performing arts not as enrichment or entertainment, but as infrastructures of democratic life.

#### 4.2. The political vacuum: Culture without political ideology

One of the more striking observations in the current Swedish cultural policy landscape is the absence of explicit political ideology when it comes to implementing the cultural rights of children and young people. While all major parties formally uphold the goals of the national cultural policy—emphasizing access, inclusion, and attention to young audiences—very few translate these commitments into clear political mandates or binding frameworks. Instead, cultural policy remains largely technocratic, relying on short-term projects, municipal or regional discretion, or temporary funding programs on national level.

This lack of ideological engagement from political leadership has left a vacuum where cultural rights are treated as symbolic rather than structural. It reflects a deeper issue: the reluctance of political parties to claim culture as a site of democratic formation and civic agency. Despite growing evidence—such as that presented in *Spelar mindre roll?* and *Kom Scenkonst*—that access to performing arts is unequally distributed and dependent on local initiative, few parties have proposed national systems to correct these disparities. Cultural policy debates in Sweden tend to remain peripheral in parliamentary discourse, disconnected from wider discussions about justice, education, or welfare.

By not articulating a clear political ideology around culture, decision-makers risk depoliticizing a field that is inherently about values, voice, and visibility. Culture is not neutral. It shapes how societies imagine themselves, who is heard, and who is excluded. When political leadership fails to integrate cultural equity into its broader agenda, it surrenders the terrain to market forces, administrative fragmentation, and symbolic gestures.

To move forward, cultural democracy must be reclaimed as a political project. This means that cultural policy cannot be seen as separate from questions of class, migration, rural access, or youth empowerment. Instead, it must be embedded in the democratic mission of the welfare state—actively resourced, legislated, and led by politicians who recognize that access to culture is access to citizenship.



### 4.3. From access to democratic participation

Sweden's cultural policy for children and young people is progressive in its vision, but remains structurally uneven in its execution. As the reports by ASSITEJ Sverige clearly show, without national coordination and embedded systems, cultural access remains a matter of local resources and discretion. This creates deep inequities in who gets to see, experience, and participate in cultural life.

But to address this failure, it is not enough to focus solely on distribution. We must also consider the quality of engagement. What kind of access are we enabling? Is it transactional, or is it transformational? Are young people simply consuming culture - or are they being invited to shape it?

True cultural democracy requires both equal access and participatory processes. It means viewing performing arts not only as objects of policy, but as practices of freedom, inclusion, and collective meaning-making. When performance is understood as a civic tool—as a rehearsal space for democracy—it becomes indispensable to both cultural and political life.

What is at stake, then, is not only a more equitable cultural system, but a more inclusive and imaginative democracy.

## **5. 1. Conclusion**

This essay has explored the intersection of politics, policy, and practice within the field of performing arts for young audiences, with a focus on Sweden's cultural infrastructure and its democratic implications. Drawing on research and policy analysis from ASSITEJ Sverige's reports *Spelar mindre roll?* and *Kom Scenkonst*, it has become evident that a major political challenge today lies in the gap between the cultural rights that are promised and the realities that are delivered. Despite Sweden's progressive cultural policy and legal frameworks affirming the right of every child to access cultural life, access to performing arts remains fragmented, inconsistent, and deeply unequal.

This discrepancy is not merely an issue of logistics or resource allocation - it is a political and democratic concern. When some children consistently lack access to cultural expression, they are excluded not only from artistic enrichment but from a space where identities are formed, perspectives are negotiated, and participation in public life is rehearsed. In this sense, cultural exclusion becomes a form of civic exclusion.

However, as the case of Norway's *Den Kulturelle Skolesekken* illustrates, it is possible to build national systems that embed cultural rights into public education through coordinated infrastructure and sustained political will. Such systems show that equitable access to the arts is not a utopian ideal but a realizable democratic responsibility.

The analysis also underscores that performing arts must be understood not only as content to be distributed, but as a democratic practice in themselves. In their most engaged and inclusive forms, artistic processes—such as participatory dramaturgy, co-creation, and dialogic encounters - enable young people to experience democracy in



action. They foster critical thinking, empathy, and shared ownership, transforming spectators into active cultural citizens.

Future strategies in cultural policy and performance should therefore shift from a transactional model of access to a transformational model of participation. This requires structural change: national coordination, cross-sector collaboration, and frameworks that embed youth agency at every level. But it also requires a reimagining of the role of the arts in society - not as peripheral to democracy, but as central to it.

As a cultural worker, this inquiry has deepened my conviction that cultural policy must be shaped not only by ideals, but by lived realities. It has also strengthened my belief in the power of performance as a civic space—where young people can be seen, heard, and empowered. In an increasingly fragmented world, the stage has the potential to be a site of repair, dialogue, and solidarity. An equal stage is not only about what is shown - but about who is invited to participate in shaping what is possible.

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