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Break down barriers to the arts for pupils with SEND

SEND pupils often don't get the access to the arts that they deserve – here's how schools can open up opportunities

By Tom Procter-Legg and Miranda Millward
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Over the years, evidence has been growing that engaging in creative practices has many benefits: for example, trips to the theatre can improve [communication skills and emotional wellbeing](#). However, it's also well-known that those needing this stimulus the most are often the least likely to experience it.

An [Arts Council report](#) notes that, regarding students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), there are “very different levels of access to different art forms or cultural experiences among disabled and non-disabled students and young people”.

Indeed, the [Durham Commission, led by Sir Nicholas Serota](#), published in October 2019, said it was vital that this issue be addressed. “The commission believes that it is short-sighted and morally wrong not to take advantage of the diversity of perspectives... everyone has the potential to contribute to the cultural capital of the nation and our recommendations draw attention to the need to develop the strengths that diversity can bring to society as a whole.”

These recommendations are extensive and draw on a wide range of research from eminent educationalists. Many of the ideas are summarised by the commission into “the conditions for creativity”, which seek to determine what characterises creative thinking in schools and how this can be adopted by others to ensure that all pupils have the chance to engage in creative experiences and the opportunities they provide.

So, what are these conditions?

SEND: The 'conditions for creativity' in schools

Ensure the learner is recognised

It's essential that there's a belief that every child can think creatively and a recognition of the individual's agency. At the Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) department at the University of Oxford, for example, there is a focus on recognising that all young people with SEND are individuals and a priority that their learning requirements should be central to any event.

Indeed, GLAM believes students with SEND are some of [their most important stakeholders](#). This is consistently demonstrated through meaningful engagement and priority access for some of the most prestigious events. In 2019 the [Bodleian](#), one of the oldest libraries in Europe, held a private opening of its Tolkien exhibition specifically for students with SEND.

Establish the learning environment

Schools also need to establish an environment in which students can “fail without fear” and develop their resilience in a system that rewards creativity. John Watson School, a 2-19 community special school in Oxford, has been doing just that through a programme of experimentation and new experiences. Recent initiatives have included a series of recitals by the celebrated Senegalese [griot \(African storyteller\) Jali Fily Cissokho](#) and from John Lubbock (OBE), founder and conductor of the Orchestra of St John's.

Headteacher Stephen Passey says: “We invite local musicians to give regular recitals, including most recently a cellist from the National Youth Orchestra, who allowed students to play his old beginner's instrument, feeling the vibrations of the strings and the motion of the bow.”

Such activities embody the idea of new experiences and developing resilience through experimentation.

Maximise the learning experience

Turning creative arts projects into daily interventions can also prove an effective way of maximising learning experiences, as it allows students to generalise skills.

Sarah Marrion, deputy head at [Wirral Hospitals' School](#), a therapeutic alternative setting for young people aged 11-16, explains how by working with an artist in residence, they have enabled better independent travel outcomes.

“We created a project that responded to digital media and broke down the concept of ‘high art’. Students worked with iPhones and ‘spoke’ of their world through visual images – becoming ‘other’ through the lenses has built confidence and brought some of our most vulnerable students out of social isolation,” she says.

Embedding this work has significantly improved students' travel training programme, as photo walks and visits to galleries became opportunities for trips on trains and buses, too. With the focus on the photography and not the travelling, the students gained independence skills and explored new parts of their community without thinking about the travel.



Oxford University / Claire Williams

Resources, resource, resources...

Funding is, of course, essential to provide high-quality resources and professional creative experiences, but schools can find opportunities for investment in arts activities for SEND students in a variety of places.

Thanks to funding from the [Helen Hamlyn Trust](#), students from Iffley Academy, in Oxford, worked with the artist Dario Utreras Obando to create their own Riso prints, inspired by the Tolkien exhibition's magical stories of Middle-Earth. But these weren't created in the classroom, these prints were facilitated through the Oxford University team, with students accessing high-quality support and materials while using the Riso machines and then finishing their work using the intricate art of letter press.

Working in collaboration with local museums, galleries and other arts organisations also means schools can benefit from the close connections and opportunities these can provide. [Northway School, in Barnet](#), North London, is a great example of this, having linked with the [Tate](#) for several projects.

“This past year we've been involved in the [Steve McQueen Tate Year 3 Project](#) – an exciting project that showcases children being the future, through the medium of child photographs,” says headteacher Danielle Barker. “Our students took part in a specially adapted workshop with staff from the Tate before having their photo taken”.

The students were then part of the billboard exhibition, promoting the project with their class photo on billboards right across the capital. This high-profile project links to recognition of the individual and their agency and promotes diversity at a national level.

Invest in staff

Lastly, good quality CPD for teachers is essential. The collaboration between GLAM and Iffley Academy included extensive teacher training, CPD and opportunities for museum staff to engage with SEND professionals. This included accessing training with Iffley's lead practitioner for SEND. They also discussed ideas around sensory processing, autism and what needs to be

It's clear that there are plenty of ways to engage students with SEND in the benefits – and enjoyment – that the arts can provide. Teachers should do their utmost to facilitate this. As Sir Nicholas Serota summed up in his foreword to the Durham Commission: “Children born in the UK [...] are likely to witness immense change and face great challenges. An education that stimulates their creativity can help them thrive, enjoy and achieve in their lives, and shape a better future for themselves, as well as for the nation as a whole.”

Tom Procter-Legg is headteacher of Iffley Academy in Oxford and Miranda Millward is an arts engagement officer at the Gardens, Libraries and Museums (GLAM) department at the University of Oxford



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