

If pupils can't go to a museum, bring the museum to them



Young people with special educational needs and disability can face huge barriers to accessing cultural experiences through school trips. **Miranda Millward** and **Tom Procter-Legg** explain how a programme in Oxford is opening up opportunities

School trips to London to tour Shakespeare's Globe Theatre or see the Parthenon Marbles at the British Museum are often viewed as little more than a bit of a "jolly". But research suggests that accessing arts and cultural education actually counts for far more than that.

Participation in structured arts activities has been proven to boost children's cognitive ability, increase their employability and make them 20 per cent more likely to vote in later life, according to the Cultural Learning Alliance. There even appear to be physical benefits, with people involved in the arts being 38 per cent more likely to report good health.

However, providing access to the cultural and arts opportunities that benefit children is easier for some schools than others. Statistics show that "non-disabled children and young people aged 11-15 are twice as likely to visit a museum with their school than their disabled

peers, with special schools less likely to visit cultural venues" (bit.ly/Everychild).

According to the charity Children and the Arts, young people with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and their families already face greater barriers to accessing cultural opportunities and creative experiences outside school. This is because "the emotional, medical and logistical challenges they face seem insurmountable and they don't know if arts venues are accessible and welcoming".

School may therefore provide the only opportunities for some pupils with SEND to experience the benefits of arts education.

So, what can schools do to make sure that all pupils get equal access to the arts and culture? One possible solution is a project being pioneered by Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums, part-funded by Arts Council England (ACE).

Under the Artsmark umbrella, the group has designed a programme of events co-curated by SEND teachers, arts specialists, academics and museum staff. The project

links some of the country's most prestigious curators and learning specialists directly with the young people who are statistically least likely to attend the museums.

How does the programme work? It starts by addressing some of the less obvious issues involved with accessing a museum or gallery.

Imposing edifice

Let's take the example of the History of Science Museum, in Oxford, which is situated in the world's oldest surviving purpose-built museum building (pictured, above). To enter, one must climb stone steps to the imposing front door. Many thousands of visitors do this every year and, while this entrance is enormously impressive, it is not inviting to all young people. Children with sensory perception difficulties, anxiety or low levels of self-esteem could find these conditions extremely challenging.

These pupils won't look any different from any other mainstream child; they don't need a wheelchair ramp or to use a hearing loop to access the collections. What they need is

support from people who can familiarise them with their surroundings, help them to understand expectations, and explain to them how the imposing buildings and cultural artefacts relate to them.

The Oxford University Museums project has used ACE funding to do just this. A dedicated arts coordinator has been appointed to manage the programme, and spends time in schools, building relationships with key people. This helps the children to recognise and trust her while at the same time giving her the opportunity to develop knowledge of their particular needs.

She also acts as the conduit between the schools and a culturally diverse group of artists, curators and academics, who are introduced to pupils through targeted SEND-specific interventions, conducted via Skype calls, small-group or one-to-one sessions within the school setting.

The idea is to first "bring the museums to the school", by sharing images, bringing objects into the classroom or showing virtual walkthroughs of galleries. These simple strategies reduce anxiety and meet the diverse needs of the pupils by familiarising them with museums in an accessible way.

Only after these introductions have taken place do young people participate in physical visits. In this way, entering the History of

Science Museum – a once-intimidating building – soon becomes a familiar and well-rehearsed experience.

Further steps are also taken to improve accessibility during the eventual visits. For instance, some spaces involved in the project (such as the Weston Library, part of the Bodleian, one of the UK's oldest libraries) have been able to open early, allowing pupils to visit before the public arrive and to experience the collections without unnecessary sensory disruption.

Visits are guided by staff who have spent time in schools getting to know pupils. As a result, children view the staff as "their people". They feel welcomed rather than shut out.

Equal experience

Importantly, the often complex and academic displays are not "dumbed down" for young people with SEND; this is not an "alternative" offer that misses out things neurotypical pupils would have access to.

Following visits, the links to the museum are maintained back at school. Young people hold their own exhibitions, documenting the process and displaying their learning outcomes. They then organise "private views", which are attended by senior museum staff, headteachers and influential names from the local arts community.

Pupils also work towards Arts Award qualifications through this project work – exactly the same qualifications that their mainstream peers would receive.

The project has already spawned many success stories. We could talk here about the data: the progress of learners in spoken word and creativity; the improved attendance of persistent absentees; the reductions in the number of exclusions.

But perhaps the best indication of success is seeing the effects on the young people themselves. Watch, for example, a pupil like Paul – a 12-year-old boy with communication and interaction difficulties – as he talks to Christopher Parkin, lead learning officer at the History of Science Museum. The pair are discussing camera obscuras (forerunners to the modern camera). Parkin is not imparting knowledge or imposing the museum's cultural values. Instead, the pair are engaged in mutual conversation and are learning from each other.

For Paul, museums are no longer inaccessible or intimidating; they have become spaces where he is welcome. And this is a lesson that he can carry with him for many years to come. **Tom Procter-Legg is headteacher at the Iffley Academy, Oxfordshire. Miranda Millward is arts coordinator at the Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums**