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# Arts & Cultural Provision for Special Educational Needs Learners in London.

A research report for  
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“It allows you to express yourself and show  
the true you.”

**Pupil, Phoenix School.**

“The arts are part of what make us human.  
To have an education system without the  
arts is not to have an education system. [...] They should not be an optional extra for any person let alone for any school.”

**Kevin McDonnell, Head Teacher,  
Stormont House School.**

“I’m starting to get a bit bored that all of  
this great work [in SEN arts & cultural  
provision] is happening in the shadows, in  
the dark corners, because there is a lot of  
exciting work going on.”

**Daryl Beeton, London Regional  
Programme Manager, Drake Music.**

“Rather than complaining about things not  
progressing [...] we need to be celebrating  
the small victories, the examples of good  
work going on for SEN, is the only way to  
push forward.”

**Anne Ogazi, SEND Programme  
Coordinator, V&A Museum of  
Childhood.**

# Executive Summary

**This research seeks to capture a ‘snapshot’ of examples of good practice in the provision of arts & cultural activities for SEN learners in London and offers an overview of conversations with representatives from 14 arts & cultural organisations, 8 SEN schools and a select group of parents and pupils that formed the research sample. Illustrating our learning so far about the tremendous opportunities, and threats to provision in the future, it represents what we hope is just the start of a meaningful and ongoing dialogue between SEN schools and arts & cultural organisations.**

## Access

**Justifying arts & culture as access to learning.** Arts & cultural activities are often a creative route in for SEN learners to access both their broader learning objectives and curricular aims. They offer a way for learners to express themselves and develop a sense of identity whilst increasing their awareness and engagement with the world outside their daily classroom routine. SEN Schools value activities that offer learners the opportunity to generalise their learning, interact with new people and to develop their own cultural taste. Whilst SEN teachers like activities that provide a hook for other curriculum opportunities, there is widespread agreement that arts & cultural provision should be more open-ended rather than directly dictated by specific curriculum goals.

**Shaping activities to provide access to learning.** The disadvantage faced by SEN learners in accessing arts & culture is sometimes overlooked. There are various barriers to access that

need to be considered when planning and implementing arts & cultural activities for SEN learners. These include both physical barriers to access, as well as cognitive & emotional barriers, and should be considered the joint responsibility of arts & cultural organisations and SEN schools. The limitations of inaccessible travel and transportation arrangements can frequently be a deal breaker, with a lack of facilities such as wheelchair ramps and lifts also presenting challenges. Whilst SEN Schools strive to offer their learners activities both in and outside of the school environment, some find the physical barriers are so great that an off-site visit may simply be unfeasible. In terms of overcoming the cognitive and emotional barriers to access, interviewees identified six main ‘tools of access’ to develop inclusive practice, namely;

- creating a safe space
- pre-project familiarisation
- using sensory resources and visual aids
- allowing a suitable timeframe for activities
- focus on the holistic experience
- flexibility & adaptability.

Nonetheless, it must be stressed that meaningful inclusion for one learner may look very different from meaningful inclusion for another, and these ‘tools’ need continual adaptation to the different needs of different learners.

## Capital

**Exploiting schools’ internal and external resources.** ‘In-house Cultural Capital’ describes the cultural resources and expertise that schools already have within their own communities. Indeed, schools are increasingly using teachers’, parents’ and learners’ own creativity to create their own in-house arts & cultural programmes. ‘External Social Capital’ describes the network of external contacts that schools have at their disposal to assist them with their arts & cultural provision, such as links with external networks, advisory groups, school governors and nearby neighbours.

## Investing

**Resourcing arts & cultural activities.** Arts & cultural activities for SEN learners are more dependent on financial, staff and time resources than such provision for mainstream. It is widely felt that provision does not necessarily have to be expensive to have a significant and lasting impact. Nonetheless, schools particularly value, and invest significantly in, organisations that can provide something that schools can't offer of their own accord, and projects that leave a legacy of professional development with their staff. Most often the costs of an arts & cultural activity are met by organisations' core or project-specific funding, together with a contribution from SEN schools. In addition to pupil premium, schools are increasingly applying to external trusts, foundations or other organisations to meet this need on top of more traditional fundraising initiatives. Alarming, many interviewees reported that footfall is an issue when working with external funders, who prefer, and prioritise, the larger mainstream class sizes to smaller SEN groups. More work is needed to defend the case for working on high-impact projects with smaller class sizes in SEN arts & cultural provision. Schools also need to carefully consider how they invest in staffing their arts & cultural programme, with some taking staff with creative responsibilities off-timetable, sometimes for several days a week. Very much valued by arts & cultural organisations many schools also invest in Teaching Assistants with creative backgrounds for more one-to-one interaction during activities.

## Framing

**Marketing arts & cultural activities in a SEN context.** Arts & cultural organisations have very different approaches to marketing their provision for SEN learners. Some market their work specifically under the 'SEN' label, highlighting the bespoke consideration of SEN learners' needs. Oppositely, others regard their Schools' programme as being suitably adaptive to all learners' needs and so reject the 'SEN' label. Whilst neither approach is at all better than the other, so as not to miss out on any valuable opportunities, SEN schools should be aware that organisations market their programmes in these different ways.

## Packaging arts & cultural activities for learners, parents, funders, accreditation and Ofsted.

It is important to frame arts & cultural activities for learners, with pre- and post- project lessons and evaluations providing them with suitable context, and celebrations of their work in order to recognise their achievements. Whilst there is no question that activities should always be designed primarily about learners' needs, it is fruitful for schools to retrospectively 'frame' activities to the priorities of parents, funders, accreditation boards and Ofsted. Engaging families in the arts & cultural activity through regular communication, submitting photographic evidence to funders, demonstrating criterion required for Artsmark accreditation, and linking arts & cultural provision to SMSC (Spiritual, Moral, Social, Cultural) Ofsted requirements are all incredibly useful endeavours.

## Partnerships

**Fostering good partnership practice.** A tremendous variety of different partnerships between arts & cultural organisations and SEN schools exist. These are often born out of teachers' own experiences and interests, as well as through word-of-mouth recommendations and online research. Successful partnership practice is forged through organisations' awareness of inclusive practice, the adaptability and flexibility of both parties, pre-project co-planning and good communication. Having built-in points for formal communication is fundamental to the process, as is having clearly defined roles and responsibilities that recognise each other's areas of expertise. Schools and organisations have a shared responsibility to challenge each other's, and the learners', expectations of what the project can achieve. Nevertheless, in working on collaborative projects it is especially important to acknowledge the constraints under which the other party is operating, such as limited finance and staff time.

## Networking

**Developing collaboration.** Greater collaboration between arts & cultural organisations and SEN schools would be mutually beneficial. There is an increasing awareness of the need to include the voices of SEN learners in this process. There was a call for networks such as A New

Direction to take a leadership role in continuing the dialogue around the arts & cultural provision for SEN learners, as well as brokering and advocating for partnerships between organisations and Schools. Networking events that allow for face-to-face collaboration would be useful, in addition to better publicity about the full range of available arts & cultural opportunities. It is widely felt that it is only by bringing together arts & cultural professionals and SEN teachers that threats to future provision can be adequately addressed. Key threats identified, include;

- funding
- changing educational structures that are devaluing the role of the arts in schools
- SEN learners in mainstream schools who are falling through the gaps
- the lack of training for practitioners
- the lack of arts & cultural programming after learners leave school.

## Visibility

**Raising SEN awareness through arts & culture.** There is widespread agreement that arts & cultural provision for SEN learners should be made more visible and celebrated more widely, both within the sector and in the public eye. As many of the recommendations for good practice are universal, equally relevant to SEN and mainstream, there could be more opportunities for mainstream colleagues to learn from SEN practice. It is, for instance, becoming increasingly common to use arts & cultural activities for integration projects between mainstream and SEN learners. Many also called for greater visibility and representation of role models and mentors who themselves have SEN. Others highlighted how arts & cultural activities sometimes lead to SEN learners themselves finding greater visibility and integration into their local communities through interaction with members of the public on trips and celebration of their work in art exhibitions, for instance.

## Moving Forwards

The increasing SEN presence on the agenda of the arts & cultural sector is, many believe, a reflection of slowly changing attitudes in society towards inclusion. It is clear that inclusive arts & cultural provision for SEN learners has a role

in challenging public perceptions and attitudes to SEN and inclusion. We are optimistic that, in moving forwards, the fostering of good partnership practice between organisations and schools can improve SEN learners' access to arts & culture and, in doing so, can play a part in influencing and shaping societal attitudes to SEN. As such, the emerging possibilities for greater collaboration and dialogue between arts & cultural organisations and SEN schools hold both great opportunities and responsibilities in the future.

**Schools interested in joining the SEN Network can contact [schools@anewdirection.org.uk](mailto:schools@anewdirection.org.uk)**