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# Opening Up Opportunities: Trainee Teachers Experiences of Teaching Pupils with Visual Impairment

**Harriet Dunn**

## Abstract

Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) secondary art and design trainees facilitated an art education project for pupils at a specialist school for visual impairment (VI) in the Northwest of England. This paper focuses on the ways in which the art education project was designed to better prepare PGCE trainees for working with pupils with VI. There is an exploration of a series of reflections at the end of the art education project and again upon completion of the PGCE course. Feedback provided by PGCE trainees indicated the ways they were able to transfer the skills learnt regarding teaching pupils with VI into practice, as they embark upon their careers. Existing literature highlights variation across initial teacher training (ITT) in relation to what is taught regarding special educational needs, this is generally due to time constraints on one year ITT courses. The findings indicate these experiences have implications for practice. through following their journey, initially PGCE trainees were apprehensive about working with pupils with VI. However, facilitating the art education project enabled PGCE trainees to become more confident working with pupils. PGCE trainees were able to develop as teachers.

## Introduction

An exploration is presented of Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) secondary art and design trainees' experiences of facilitating an art education project

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for visual impairment (VI) pupils. The driving force behind this was based on findings of the Newly Qualified Teachers' Annual Survey 2016 (NCTL 2016), which indicates PGCE trainees are often less secure about their capability to develop appropriate learning opportunities for pupils with SEN. In addition, there is a national average of '14.9 per cent of pupils with SEND being educated in mainstream schools' (DfE 2019a, 4) and '1.3 per cent of these are identified as having VI' (DfE 2019a, 5). However, the expectation is that trainees will gain experience of and become better prepared in providing appropriate support to pupils with SEND (Carter 2015). A PGCE tutor at one Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the Northwest of England recognised a group project could enhance trainees' capabilities, preparing them to meet a broader range of pupils' needs within their careers. This paper draws on trainees' reflections at the end of the project and on completion of the PGCE course, demonstrating development on their journey towards becoming teachers.

## Research aims

This research explores the different attitudes demonstrated by PGCE trainees towards working with VI pupils, and the ways in which their teaching practice developed as a result of the opportunity to facilitate an art education project for VI pupils.

These aims are informed by personal experiences, recognising art education can provide opportunities to understand own identities (Penketh 2014). I am relatively informed and knowledgeable regarding participation in art education as an individual with VI. Despite limited vision, I enjoy demonstrating my own personality via art and craft. However, the reality of the third-floor art rooms at high school was very different. Drawing from observation is a key component of the Art and Design assessment process (AQA 2015). During taught sessions we were expected to draw from observation, as found objects were placed in the centre of the room. This was an area where I stood out from my peers, due to my eye conditions I lack depth of perception and the ability to see in 3D. During this time, educators were unsure how to implement reasonable adjustments to support my engagement in the subject, which had an impact on my learning experience. Despite this, I used my eye condition as the basis for an assessment piece, which was well received by examiners. These personal experiences are the driving force to make a difference to the training received by art educators at the beginning of their careers, when working with VI pupils. The literature around initial teacher training (ITT) and SEND will now be reviewed.

## Exploring the literature

My research grows out of existing literature. Firstly, ITT in the UK context is contextualised. Discussion then centres on the benefits of SEND placements in improving PGCE trainees' practice, before drawing upon disparities in gaining SEND experiences during ITT in the UK.

## Contextualising ITT

In England, a common route to becoming a teacher is successful completion of a PGCE course (DfE 2021) offered by HEI providers. Trainees must be provided

adequate time to engage with school-based placements (DfE 2021). The programme takes one year to complete, and providers have responsibility to structure the programme (DfE 2021).

### Impact of SEND placements on practice

PGCE trainees are expected to gain knowledge and skills to become educators of all pupils, including those with SEND (Carter 2015; Coates *et al.* 2020). Thus, ITT is considered an important time to develop this understanding (Robinson 2017; DfE 2019b). While providers of ITT courses are expected to ensure trainees develop requisite skills to support pupils with SEND (Coates *et al.* 2020; DfE 2021), there is no compulsory requirement to undertake SEND placements. This is at the discretion of ITT providers. However, the ITT Core Content Framework (DfE 2019b) assists trainees in developing as educators. This aims to enhance trainees' knowledge and understanding of SEND (DfE 2021) on a theoretical and practical basis (Hodkinson 2009; DfE 2021), having the most value and impact in becoming educators for a range of learners (Penketh 2014; Coates *et al.* 2020; DfE 2021), before embarking upon their careers.

### Structuring SEND placements

When considering SEND placements, attention must be given to the structure, location and content (DfE 2021), exposing trainees to different pedagogies and practises (Robinson 2017) to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. School staff with specific experience and qualifications in SEND should deliver this aspect of training (NASUWT 2008). Trainees can be introduced to ways of accessing and working with the multidisciplinary team providing specialist support for pupils with SEND (Carter 2015; DfE 2021). Additionally, mentors with SEND school experience can offer valuable insights into training and development, encouraging trainees' mastery in a variety of techniques (DfE 2021, 2023), which can be put into practice during trainees' careers.

### Learning from others

Strong partnerships must exist between universities and schools (Moran 2007; DfE 2023) regarding delivery of the SEND aspect. SEND schools may offer placements or shorter experiences, particularly for those wishing to teach in SEND schools upon completion of their training (DfE 2023) thus, mentors within SEND and mainstream schools are encouraged to collaborate, sharing knowledge and expertise (DfE 2023). A model of clinical practice (Beauchamp *et al.* 2013) could be employed in relation to SEND. Trainees can learn from experts in the field, trialling and reflecting on a range of teaching approaches (Carter 2015; Robinson 2017), which could be incorporated within their own teaching practice. This can enable trainees to 'work within established communities of practice' (Burn & Mutton 2015, 219), developing an understanding of the different needs of pupils and the implications of adaptations when put into practice in the classroom.

### Critically reflecting

Links exist between gaining experience in SEND schools, coupled with opportunities for critical reflection (Mullaney 2017). This can develop trainees' attitudes

(Hodkinson 2020) and markedly improve their perspectives (Richards & Clough 2004; NASUWT 2008). It may also increase trainees' confidence (Richards 2010; Carter 2015; Coates *et al.* 2020), which can have an impact on self-efficacy (Ekins *et al.* 2016). Consequently, trainees could experience a greater belief in their ability to teach pupils with SEND (Coates *et al.* 2020). The degree to which trainees' experiences in SEND has an impact on their practice is linked with the general aspects learnt (Lawson *et al.* 2013) in relation to teaching.

## Disparities in learning about SEND

Disparities exist regarding what trainees learn about SEND during their training (Richards 2010), largely due to time constraints, in terms of what must be achieved during 1-year ITT courses (Carter 2015). This can result in 'incidental learning' (McIntyre 2009, 606) experiences, rather than thorough consideration of the planning and preparation required to meet the needs of pupils. A lack of experience during training can present barriers in trainees' preparation to teach pupils with SEND (Coates *et al.* 2020). Thus, there may be 'misconception and misunderstanding' (Golder *et al.* 2009, 188) among trainees, leading to apprehension (Hodkinson 2009; Florian & Rouse 2010), as they embark upon their careers and meet with key professionals involved in the education of pupils identified as having SEND.

Having discussed the literature regarding benefits of SEND placements during ITT and recognising disparities may exist, an overview is now provided of the project.

## Overview of the art education project

A PGCE tutor at one HEI in the Northwest of England knew working with VI pupils would be challenging for trainees, something they would initially be nervous about doing. Mainstream teaching practice placements would not necessarily give the most appropriate guidance in working with SEND pupils. Therefore, the headteacher at a specialist school for VI in the Northwest of England invited PGCE trainees into school as part of their training, to facilitate an art education project for pupils. A small intake of art and design trainees on the ITT programme meant this opportunity was bespoke to the course and the university (Figure 1).

The project involved a small group of secondary VI pupils. Trainees extended a project started by the school in relation to World War II. During the planning process, trainees discussed pupils' ability levels and recognised the importance of providing a rich sensory experience, including an element of sculpture/ installation-based work (Dowdall & Ball 2019), offering a fully tactile experience. Trainees decided ModRoc parachutes would offer an interesting material for pupils to work with. In addition to making and painting parachutes, pupils were given an opportunity to write keywords in response to a soundscape based on the War. Pupils were keen to share their poems with the group, which were then hung from the parachutes in the form of an installation (Figures 2 and 3).

Discussion with the PGCE tutor upon completion of the project highlighted PGCE trainees engaged well and interacted appropriately with pupils. It was



**Figure 1**

PGCE Trainees and Pupils Preparing for the Project. Photo Credit: Dr. Harriet Dunn, Picture Taken on 10th December 2017.



**Figure 2**

PGCE Trainees Supporting Pupils' Participation in the Project. Photo Credit: Dr. Harriet Dunn, Picture Taken on 10th December 2017.

commented trainees should be given similar opportunities in future years to learn new skills, plan learning experiences from a different educational approach, bringing a fresh perspective to dominant practices in mainstream education.





**Figure 3**

Pupils Painting Their ModRoc Parachutes. Photo Credit: Dr. Harriet Dunn, picture taken on 10th December 2017.

Additionally, all trainees, not just in art and design, should be involved in critical discussion about different pedagogical approaches. The PGCE tutor recognised tutors and trainees always have something to learn, particularly in relation to SEND, they are not necessarily going to know all the answers when approaching their own teaching practice. This opportunity offered a challenge to their current perspectives.

## Defining phenomenography – methodology

I adopt a phenomenographic approach to the research. It is an approach to research in its own right, encompassing the whole research, from deciding upon research questions, through to the representation of findings. Phenomenography is broad in methodology thus, data can be 'collected more generally' (Marton & Booth 1997, 129), providing freedom in terms of methods. Data collection is informed by research questions. A phenomenographic approach is concerned with identifying and understanding specific research questions, relevant to learning, gaining knowledge and understanding in education settings (Marton & Booth 1997). It focuses on experiences from the perspective of groups of people, demonstrating complexity of experience in education settings, producing beneficial conclusions regarding the impact of facilitating the project on teaching practice. There are variations in approach. I implement Bowden and Walsh's (2000, 3) 'developmental phenomenography' research is undertaken with the purpose of creating change.

## Sample description

Participants consisted of 22 PGCE secondary art and design trainees (3 male and 19 female) from one university in the Northwest of England. This was a purposive sample (Denscombe 2010), the cohort of PGCE trainees already existed. I was signposted to the PGCE secondary art and design tutor by a colleague within the university. Trainees were recruited during their initial university-based session, at the beginning of the academic year.

## Collection of data

PGCE trainees participated in a focus group upon completion of the project and at the end of the PGCE course, lasting approximately 90 min. These were scheduled to take place alongside university-based sessions. Focus groups brought together a purposefully chosen (Krueger & Casey 2009) group of trainees to engage in discussion. This allowed an understanding to be gained of the impact of facilitating the project on trainees' teaching practice and ways they developed as educators. I now summarise a key feature of the phenomenographic approach – categories of experience.

## Categories of experience

A key feature of the phenomenographic approach is the ways categories of experience are used to describe and represent experiences of a phenomenon. These are an 'internal relationship between persons and phenomena' (Marton & Booth 1997, 122), depicting variation in experiences, describing how the phenomenon is experienced. Trainees' experiences are organised into two distinct but interrelated categories (Marton 1986; Orgill 2002), allowing their perspectives to be heard. The terms employed to define the categories already exist and are extended, demonstrating a shift in trainees' experiences. The categories are empathy and advocacy. I now demonstrate how they are manifest.

## Considering the data

### Phenomenon

PGCE trainees experiences teaching VI pupils.

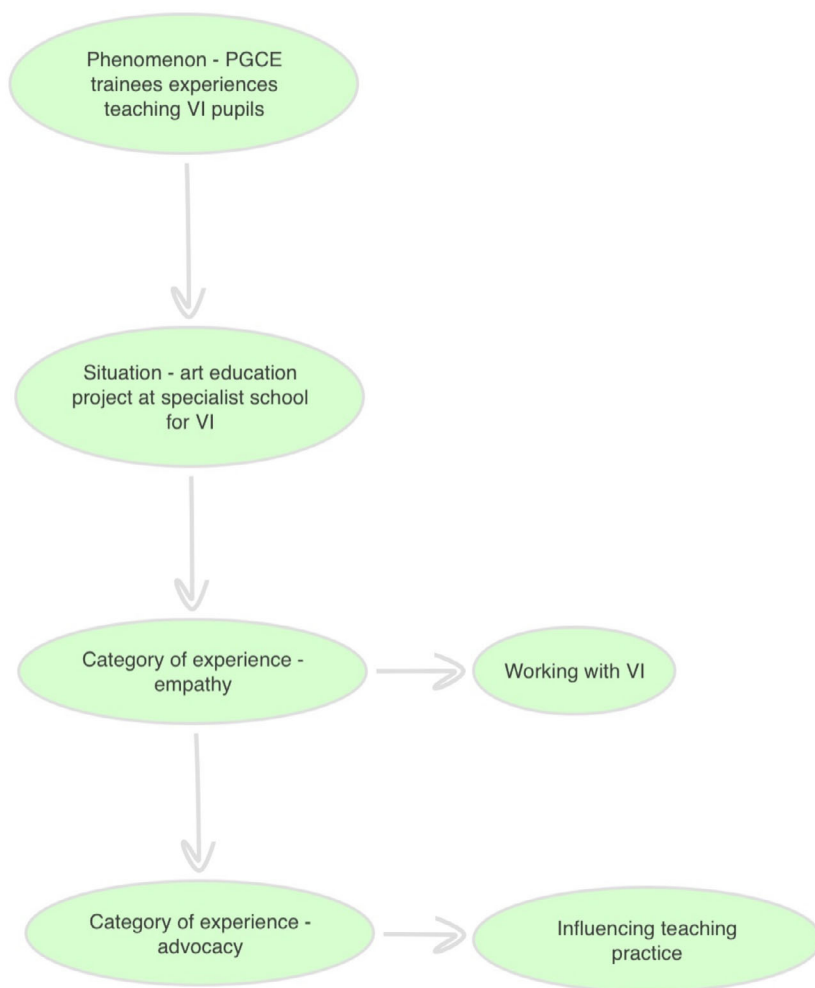
### Situation

Art education project at specialist school for VI.

### Category of experience – empathy

Empathy is evoked in relation to PGCE trainees developing flexibility when preparing for and facilitating the project. This involves demonstrating attitudinal change and becoming more receptive to the individual needs of VI pupils (Figure 4).





**Figure 4**

Diagram of categories of experience and key themes. Photo credit: Dr. Harriet Dunn, picture taken on 10th December 2017.

## Working with VI

When reflecting on the preparation and early stages of delivering the project, trainees discussed how their lesson preparation skills had been tested when adopting a flexible approach to meeting individual pupils' needs:

So if you'd set up a painting thing in the project, they'd all have to paint a picture and then you got there and they may be were not able to do that and you haven't got anything to fall back on ... definitely testing flexibility.  
(PGCE trainee 15)

There were concerns pupils may not be able to engage in the task. This was a worry, since trainees had not provided an alternative task for pupils, it would be testing for them in terms of developing flexibility. A deeper level of empathy was

manifest when trainees commented on feeling nervous and fearful about constructing their interactions when beginning to work with pupils:

You automatically assumed they're going to be blind or not be able to see almost completely. So trying to teach a subject that's quite visual to a group of students that are quite visually challenged ... you know at first it was quite nerve wracking and fearful to think how am I going to do this, you know? (PGCE trainee 2)

An assumption was made VI pupils must have little or no useful vision. Trainees reflected they would be teaching a subject to a group of 'visually challenged' pupils. This was considered a 'nerve wracking' process and trainees began to question how they would be able to facilitate the project. As the discussion continued, further reflection was provided by trainees in terms of their initial reaction.

It's that fear, we don't want to overstep the line, you don't want to say something that's wrong. The first time we met them we were all petrified because you don't want to offend anyone, but once you get started that all goes out the window because you're working with people who have been like this their whole lives, so they're the more confident ones in the room. (PGCE trainee 9)

A heightened level of anxiety was initially present when required to work with pupils. Trainees were conscious about what they were saying when working with the pupils in case it was inappropriate. This level of anxiety was also apparent when trainees met the pupils for the first time, there was an awareness they did not wish to 'offend anyone'. However, there was a shift in thinking and these initial apprehensions were deemed unnecessary since the pupils have lived with VI 'their whole lives'. It was recognised pupils had a higher level of confidence than expected. Further discussion was offered, in which initial perspectives about working with VI pupils were expressed:

So it's nerve wracking ... having to take cues from them as the project progressed as to what they were comfortable with. When we started that fear, really, really, nerve wracking. When we were planning the project we were like, oh my gosh we can do this, can we not do this, is this okay, is this going to be an issue. (PGCE trainee 17)

In the beginning it was 'nerve wracking' when responding to the interactions of VI pupils. As the project progressed empathy was present when trainees followed by example from pupils, engaging with the visual language pupils were comfortable employing. To trainees, it was important to think about their initial anxieties when planning the project and how these were overcome.

To move from empathy to advocacy, it is vital trainees overcome their initial anxieties when working with pupils with a range of needs within the classroom.

### ***Category of experience – advocacy***

Advocacy is demonstrated when reflecting upon the project, in terms of future careers. This involves upholding effective communication skills, maintaining

appropriate teacher–pupil boundaries and adapting tasks for pupils. It ensures successful learning opportunities can take place (Figure 4).

### ***Influencing teaching practice***

Upon completion of the PGCE course, trainees explained they now began to recognise boundaries that could hinder pupils' learning:

I think it [art project] makes you consider more as well, like what possible boundaries there could be for children's learning and making sure that you do accommodate that in appropriate ways. (PGCE trainee 2)

Consideration was given to the issues and barriers that could restrict pupils' learning. It was important to 'accommodate' the needs of all pupils, by employing suitable methods and approaches. This was further explained in terms of trainees' teaching practice and meeting pupils' needs:

It helped us with our confidence. It taught me not to assume things, like we know that in school anyway not to assume what kids know or don't know. But for me it was about working with VI pupils ... you're gaining confidence and asking them what was their ability and working to help them... (PGCE trainee 7)

It was reiterated facilitating the project had an impact on the ways trainees thought about working with pupils, particularly in terms of not making assumptions about their capabilities. Trainees learnt how to construct a dialogue, identifying pupils' abilities and supporting their needs. As the conversation concluded, the benefit of facilitating the art project was highlighted in more detail:

It had a big impact on everything really – being more positive and about being comfortable to just, you know, as the pupils what they need ... if they know you're comfortable, then they may feel more comfortable. (PGCE trainee 22)

This opportunity had an 'impact' on trainees' approach to teaching, particularly in terms of being at ease when asking pupils about the support they required. By making pupils aware they were 'comfortable', trainees' body language communicated a reassuring perspective to pupils. Trainees then discussed the extent to which facilitating the project enabled the development of skills to adapt their approaches to teaching, in terms of their remaining time on the course:

It's about making disability access automatically part of your planning rather than having to plan a lesson and then go, oh well ... I forgot to add this in, it just naturally becomes part of the planning in general ... planning for VI pupils is not something that is put on the side as an extra, like it is at the moment. (PGCE trainee 4)

It was highlighted 'disability access' should be integrated into lesson planning, rather than an afterthought. Trainees recognised, planning for the needs of VI pupils should not be seen as an optional extra in the way it is currently. Changes that could be made to the PGCE course were identified:

The PGCE course could be more tailored around developing flexibility ... in the way that we teach. The project ... we didn't know what level of skill they had, you didn't know what you were going to be faced with, whether they could even hold a paintbrush to paint, or if they'd be like ... brilliant at everything. So it was ... a task everyone could access. (PGCE trainee 9)

It was suggested PGCE courses should embed within the content skills to prepare trainees to develop a flexible approach to teaching. As trainees were not aware of pupils' skill and ability levels, they had to consider what pupils would be able to do, such as whether they would be able to 'hold a paintbrush', or whether they would be working at a greater ability level. Trainees recognised they were required to provide a task accessible to all pupils. This perspective extended to subsequent teaching practice placements:

It was ongoing throughout that we were having to be flexible and having to think ... okay that's not worked ... we're going to scrap that and going to do this and try different things. So it was definitely gradual inbuilt flexibility that we had to learn. (PGCE trainee 6)

Adapting teaching was an 'ongoing' process within trainees' subsequent teaching practice placements. They realised, if one approach to teaching had not worked as anticipated, they could try different approaches. Learning how to make adaptations and have 'inbuilt flexibility' in their teaching practice was a gradual process for trainees. As the conversation concluded, trainees were thinking differently about applying for jobs in the teaching sector:

I'm more open to applying for jobs like that, originally I would have been under prepared, but seeing as how we've done that ... it opened up doors and actually, maybe that's something I could go and do. (PGCE trainee 3)

Trainees considered applying for jobs in SEND schools. Recalling their perspectives prior to facilitating the project, trainees felt they were unprepared to work with pupils with SEND. This opportunity provided an insight into different perspectives on teaching, perceptions began to change, thus becoming more receptive to different teaching opportunities.

## Findings

### What are the different attitudes demonstrated by PGCE trainees towards working with VI pupils?

#### Empathy

The category 'empathy' sheds light on the literature and my data. There were doubts around working with pupils when setting tasks and an apprehension about constructing interactions – being sensitive to pupils' needs. This echoes the literature in which it is acknowledged apprehensions may exist towards working with pupils with SEND, but through reflecting on practical experiences, it may be possible to have greater awareness of pupils' needs (Hodkinson 2009; Carter 2015;

Coates *et al.* 2020). Importantly, whilst initially there are worries about offending pupils, once work begins with pupils, those thoughts go 'out the window'. Hence, there is increased confidence towards working with pupils.

## **To what extent has PGCE trainees teaching practice developed as a result of the opportunity to facilitate an art education project for VI pupils?**

### **Advocacy**

The category 'advocacy sheds light on the literature and my own data, capturing what trainees should adapt' from facilitating the project, to meet the needs of pupils. An appreciation was gained of how to speak with VI pupils, understanding how their needs can be met. This echoes the literature in which it is highlighted ITT is an important time for trainees to develop knowledge and skills to teaching pupils with a range of SEND (Carter 2015; Coates *et al.* 2020; Robinson 2017). Importantly, trainees realised lessons can be made accessible for pupils with SEND as an integral part of the lesson planning process, rather than an optional extra. For trainees to be able to make lessons accessible to pupils, it was important to be comfortable in speaking with them and understanding how their needs could be met. To this end, it may be possible for PGCE courses to include in university-based teaching sessions a range of skills to enable development of flexible approaches when adapting teaching to meet the needs of a range of learners.

### **Implications for practice**

The categories – empathy and advocacy were developed and shed light on the data, tracking the journey of PGCE trainees over the duration of the PGCE course. Importantly, the categories are my own interpretation of the data when using a phenomenographic approach, these may be different should others analyse the data. Initially empathy was manifest as trainees were apprehensive about working with VI pupils. Facilitating the project allowed trainees to move through empathy, becoming more confident in understanding pupils' needs. Having gained experience trainees demonstrated advocacy, beginning to adapt their teaching practice, advocating not just for VI but for a range of SEND. Engaging in SEND opportunities during ITT can be beneficial to trainees' development. Time constraints on one-year ITT courses (Carter 2015) may present an obstacle in achieving this. Therefore, a priority for broader ITT delivery is ensuring trainees can plan for the needs of all pupils, instead of SEND being regarded as a separate aspect. Importantly, the categories move beyond trainees' experiences and are applicable to any education and learning situation. The benefit of providing SEND opportunities during ITT must not be underestimated, it can be transformational in terms of carer choices. Thus, the research could have an impact upon the development of educators at the beginning of their careers.

### **Acknowledgment**

To my amazing supervisors, to whom I was originally known as 'the girl', you'll never understand how grateful I am. You have restored my confidence and belief in myself. I've learnt so

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**Harriet Dunn**, completed PhD at LJMU in 2022, which explores PGCE secondary art and design trainees' experiences of teaching pupils with visual impairment in art education. She currently works as a Senior Lecturer on the Education Studies and SEN pathway in the School of Education at LJMU and regularly guest lecture on topics such as patient voice and effective communication in the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Medicine at Edge Hill University. I have previously worked as a paediatric Eye Clinic Liaison Officer, supporting patients and families with eye conditions and other needs when accessing health, social care and education. I have recently published a book review on Foundations of Educational Research. I have a paper under review regarding the impact of visual impairment awareness training on teacher trainees' teaching practice. Previously I have published on museum/gallery access for visual impaired visitors.

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