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Opening up opportunities

– gaining experience and skills for pupils with visual impairment

As a PhD researcher in the Faculty of Arts, Professional and Social Studies at Liverpool John Moores University, Harriet Dunn explores PGCE secondary art and design trainees’ experiences of facilitating an art education project for pupils with visual impairment (VI) at a specialist school in the northwest of England. She shares the learning and outcomes gained by trainee teachers

In the academic year 2017/18, an art project took place at a specialist school for visual impairment (VI). The project was first shared in AD Magazine¹ by Sinead Dowdall and Charlotte Ball, students attending the PGCE in Art and Design, and came about as a result of a conversation between the PGCE tutor at Liverpool Hope University and Dr John Patterson, the headteacher at a specialist school for VI who invited trainees to facilitate a session for his pupils. My PhD research involves an examination of the project, based upon the focus group and the perspectives offered by the trainees.

The purpose of this opportunity was to provide a group project that could enhance trainees’ knowledge and experience. Sinead, Charlotte and the PGCE cohort as a whole described how they felt less secure in their capability to develop appropriate learning opportunities for pupils with VI. It was anticipated that trainees would become better prepared to meet a broader range of pupils’ needs in their subsequent teaching practice placements, but also within

their future careers. The PGCE tutor knew that working with pupils with VI would be a challenge and something trainees would initially be nervous about doing. Mainstream teaching practice placements would not necessarily provide trainees with the most appropriate advice and guidance in working with pupils with VI.

Prior to facilitating the art education project, PGCE trainees’ initial understanding and training in special educational needs and disability (SEND) took the form of a workshop provided by the Disability Studies head of department at Liverpool Hope University. To generate insights into the relationship between art education and special educational needs, there were opportunities for discussion and group work among PGCE trainees, who were encouraged to explore how these ideas might further their own teaching practice. The Carter Review of ITT (2015) indicated that this perspective is not generally offered to PGCE trainees, since time constraints on PGCE courses often mean there is little opportunity to address SEND issues. In addition, the review noted that there is much variability across Initial Teacher Training programmes in what is covered on SEND. However, there is an expectation that trainees should gain experience of and become better prepared in providing appropriate support to pupils with SEND.

Trainees were also required to participate in a VI awareness training session organised by the VI rehabilitation centre linked to the school. This provided a way of gaining experience of the appropriate sighted guiding techniques when working with pupils with VI. A key aspect of this training involved wearing simulation glasses, which aimed to imitate common eye conditions.



‘Mainstream teaching practice placements would not necessarily provide trainees with the most appropriate advice and guidance in working with pupils with VI’

Following the project, I undertook a focus group with thirteen PGCE trainees – two male and 11 female. This was scheduled for a day when trainees were attending a university-based session. It was commented that the VI awareness training session provided an overview in which trainees could gain experience, albeit ‘superficial experience’, but noted that VI awareness training could not provide a genuine, lived experience. Despite this, trainees highlighted the ways they would put the skills learnt into practice. In essence, this enhanced trainees’ knowledge and they were able to develop greater empathy and understanding of the pupils’ perspectives.

The principles of universal design for learning (UDL) were used to underpin trainees’ planning for the art education project to ensure it was accessible to all pupils. The art education project involved a small group of secondary pupils with VI. Trainees were required to expand upon a project already started by the school in relation to World War II.

Discussion took place between trainees regarding the ability levels of pupils and the different materials they may be able to work with. As trainees were unsure of pupils’ capabilities, it was decided that the project must include an element of sculpture, thus providing what Sinead and Charlotte describe as a ‘fully sensory, tactile experience’. Modroc parachutes would incorporate a new material for pupils to work with. In addition to making and painting parachutes, pupils were given the opportunity to write keywords and poems in response to a soundscape based on the war. Many pupils were keen to share their poems with the group, which were hung from the parachutes in the form of an installation.

As trainees began to reflect upon their experiences at the end of the art education project, they explained that they were more comfortable about developing working relationships with pupils with VI. In turn, this meant trainees were able to ascertain how pupils’ needs could be met, thus helping them make progress with their education. Trainees also commented that this opportunity enabled them to think differently about working with pupils and that they now had greater expectations in terms of learning outcomes for pupils with VI and/or other needs. Importantly, trainees have been able to think about planning learning experiences from different educational approaches. This opportunity has enabled trainees to learn new skills, bringing a fresh perspective to the dominant practices inherent within education. ■

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¹S. Dowdall and C. Ball (2019) *Becoming Inclusive Teachers* in AD Magazine: NSEAD (2019), Issue 24

- 1** A pupil types their poem based on the soundscape of war, using a Perkins Braille
- 2** Applying Modroc to the balloons – the first stage of creating the parachutes
- 3** Painting the Modroc parachutes with colours the pupils associate with the war